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CEO resigns from health district

Roberts issues statement and parting words to community



Emily Roberts
MCHD CEO

By Andrea Di Salvo

Morrow County Health District CEO Emily Roberts is stepping down amid recent controversy surrounding the health district. The move sparks mixed feelings from the community—relief from community members who wanted Roberts gone, but anger from board members and supporters who praised Roberts's work in her time as CEO.

Her resignation was announced at the MCHD regular meeting Monday night in Lexington. Roberts issued a statement to the Gazette-Times, which is also included at the end of this article.

The MCHD board took a detour from its regular agenda and held an executive session at the beginning of the March 31 meeting.

When the board returned to open session,

health district attorney Troy Bundy announced Roberts's resignation, calling the event "regrettable."

"It's important to note that Ms. Roberts's resignation was not requested or desired by the board or anyone, but she felt that it was in her best interests and the interests of her family to step away at this time," said Bundy. "It's regrettable but understandable."

"The board will be accepting her resignation and wishes her all the best," he added.

Bundy said a severance agreement had already been prepared and would be signed by the board. However, Roberts has agreed to stay on as health district CEO for "a reasonable time" until the MCHD board can hire an interim CEO.

"She will also assist in transitioning that replacement, assuming it can be done within a reasonable period of time," Bundy said.

Unrest regarding the condition of the Morrow County Health District has been growing over the past several years.

While MCHD critics have cited several concerns over the running of the health district, much of the worst vitriol has been

directed toward Roberts as the CEO. Most recently, someone posted flyers around Heppner calling for Roberts's removal.

However, the health district board members spoke of Roberts in glowing terms.

After the announcement of Roberts's resignation, MCHD Board Chair Diane Kilkenny of Heppner shared some of the things she felt Roberts had accomplished during her time as CEO.

Those included the opening of a mobile, rural health clinic extension, improvement of productivity across the district's clinics while reducing the cost to provide care, passing of a five-year tax levy, implementing primary care behavioral health, and implementing new strategies to improve employee engagement and patient satisfaction.

"I'm sorry to see Emily go," she added. "Regrettably, I'm sorry this has come to this, and I wish her nothing but the best for the future."

Other board members also expressed regret and wished Roberts well, while some showed anger toward the community.

"I'm ashamed of what's going on," said Irrigon

board member Stephen Munkers.

Board member Scott Ezell, also of Irrigon, had the harshest criticism for the Heppner community especially, saying people's behavior was "appalling."

"This is not how the healthcare system for a local, rural area should be," he said. "I am angered by the self-righteousness of people."

"I don't have a vested interest in this good old boy club," he added. "It makes me angry that we're treating our own community members like this."

He also said he thought there is a group of people trying to get involved with the MCHD board out of "spite."

"If that's who you want directing the board and taking control of your health district, you're welcome to vote," Ezell said.

Roberts responded with gratitude.

"I love the district, and the district absolutely has my full support. We have amazing staff at the district, and they have my absolute full support and always will," she said.

The board unanimously appointed Kilkenny to sign the severance agreement and oversee any minor

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Heppner players selected for Shrine football game



(L-R) Nick Wenberg and Mason Orem.

Two Heppner High School senior football players were recently selected to play or be an alternate player for the 2025 East vs. West Shrine Hospital football game.

Nick Wenberg, son of Peter and Sheena Wenberg, was selected as a player for the East team. Nick was an all-state defensive back and running back/receiver for the Mustangs.

"He will be very versatile for the team," stated his coach, Greg Grant. "Nick will be valuable on either side of the ball."

Mason Orem, son of Eric and Brandi Orem, was selected as an alternate for the East team. Mason will be available to play if another player is injured or unable to play.

"Mason will be capable of playing quarterback or receiver on offense, and multiple defensive positions," said Grant. "I hope he is able to play. However, if he does not, he should be very proud to be selected as an alternate."

The 74th shrine game will be played in Baker City, OR on July 26.

Easter Bunny to visit Lexington



The Easter Bunny is coming to Lexington. That's right; on April 12, the Easter Bunny will be at the Holly Rebekah Lodge Hall on Main Street from 9-11 a.m. for the second annual Breakfast with The Easter Bunny.

Pancakes, two link sau-

sages, scrambled eggs and a drink will be served for only \$5 per person. Juli Kennedy will once again be taking photographs.

"So stop by, have a yummy breakfast and enjoy the fun," says a lodge spokesperson.

Wolf kills calf on Upper Rhea Creek



Another wolf depredation by the Madison Butte pack was confirmed on Upper Rhea Creek last month. -File photo

Another wolf depredation occurred on the morning of March 19 on Upper Rhea Creek. The wolves killed a two-month-old calf, eating half before being found by the owner, John Qualls, at approximately 7 a.m.

The kill occurred less than a quarter of a mile from the home of Qualls's parents, Roscoe and Kay Rene Qualls. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) confirmed the wolf kill later that morning.

"I noticed something was wrong when I went to feed the cattle, and they were all gathered in a tight group with the calves in the middle; they were very nervous," said Qualls. "After feeding the cattle, I took the four-wheeler around the small 150-acre pasture and found the half-eaten calf just up from the barn."

"As soon as I saw it, I suspected wolf," he added. "It was a terrible scene where you could see where the calf had been attacked, dragged and basically

ripped apart."

Qualls said this is the second year in a row of a wolf kill on his cattle.

"I caught the wolf in the act last year as it was attempting to drag a calf away from the cow. I wasn't as lucky this year, as it occurred in the dark," he said. "An adult wolf is very large; I've been close to them, and it surprised me how big they really are."

"I pack a gun with me when I go out now, as they don't seem to fear people," added Qualls.

On Thursday, March 20, Qualls sent an email with a picture and details of the incident to Oregon Representative Greg Smith and Oregon Senator Todd Nash. The elected officials had a joint phone call with Qualls on March 21, asking what could be done.

Sen. Nash stated he had introduced Senate Bill 777, which would enhance wolf depredation compensation for ranchers. Rep. Smith stated he would support the bill.

Qualls told them their

efforts were greatly appreciated but that he wished local ranchers could do something to protect their livestock.

Since this attack occurred on the west side of Highway 395 the wolves are protected and ranchers have limited ability to protect livestock, even if they witness wolf depredation.

Qualls is also hopeful President Trump will help with the situation.

"These attacks affect the entire cattle herd, reducing milk output, decreasing pregnancy rates and reducing the docility so that they become difficult to work and develop a hatred for dogs," said Qualls.

After they were locked up in a 10-acre parcel near the house for better protection, the cow who lost her calf to the wolves jumped the fence two days in a row to try and find her calf.

"It just breaks your heart to witness her confusion and loss. She misses her calf. I feel like a poor steward of the cattle, as I can't do anything to protect them," Qualls said.

ODFW representatives met with Qualls on March 20 and provided some non-lethal measures to implement. They provided blinking lights that randomly turn on and change color throughout the night. Qualls must move them every three to four days so that pattern is changed.

Qualls also stated that he decided after the attack last year to keep the cattle on feed throughout April to better protect them from

wolf attacks.

"This will cost me another truck load of hay, but I feel it is important to provide as much protection from the wolves as I can; I thought they were safe being so close to the house, but I guess I was wrong," he said.

There are currently two confirmed wolf packs in Morrow County. Steve Cherry of the ODFW confirmed that the wolf depredation was by the Madison Butte pack. Qualls said his cattle have been attacked by the Madison Butte pack before.

There were five confirmed work depredations by the Madison Butte pack last year. This is the first attack of 2025.

Meanwhile, Qualls isn't optimistic about the future unless laws change.

"I fear that the interactions with wolves are only going to get worse with the limited number of options ranchers have," he said.

Morrow County Public Transit expands service with three fixed routes

BOARDMAN—Morrow County Public Transit (MCPT) is expanding service with three new fare-free, deviated fixed routes: Morado, Rojo, and Amarillo. Transit supervisor Patrick Keely says these routes are designed to increase accessibility and mobility for residents, connecting communities and essential services throughout the

region.

The Amarillo Route serves approximately 19 stops within Boardman, operating on a 45-minute loop from 6:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m., completing 15 trips daily.

The Morado and Rojo routes have significantly expanded service to the Irrigon community, providing greater regional connectivity.

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Pastors invited to submit Easter messages

Area pastors are invited to submit Easter messages to the Heppner Gazette-Times for publication in the April 16 edition. The deadline for submission is 5 p.m. Monday, April 14.

Messages may be

emailed to editor@rapid-serve.net, mailed to Gazette-Times at P.O. Box 337, Heppner, OR 97836, uploaded to the website Heppner.net or brought into the Gazette-Times office, 177 N. Main in Heppner.



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