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Courthouse update shows rising costs

County seeks options to lower price tag for circuit court

By Andrea Di Salvo

At its April 16 meeting in Irrigon, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners again received some bad news about the cost of the planned new circuit court building in Heppner.

The project design team, including representatives from DLR Group, Bouton Construction, and Alliance Management, told the BOC that cost estimates had risen above the project's \$35 million cap during the schematic design phase.

However, they also assured the commissioners that this is common in large-scale construction and requested input from the board on potential cost-saving options moving forward.

The schematic design phase is the initial stage of the architectural design process in which the overall concept, layout and scope of a project are established through preliminary sketches and plans. Right now, the Morrow County Circuit Court is undergoing value engineering to get costs lower before it enters the final design phases.

According to preliminary designs, the public will enter the Heppner courthouse from the south via a bridge over Hinton Creek. The site is divided into public and staff parking areas

and includes flexible space for rodeo trailer parking during events.

The building is oriented to the south to maximize daylight and community connection, while circulation has been designed to separate public, staff and in-custody individuals.

The sloped terrain is being used to eliminate the need for an expensive holding elevator, allowing for staff and in-custody access on the north (second floor) and public entry on the south (first floor).

The building is divided into two primary gable-roofed masses—one for courtrooms and the other for support functions—joined by a central “bridge” housing a prominent staircase and lobby. The design aims to blend civic presence with a residential scale to suit the surrounding neighborhood.

The layout supports complex courthouse circulation needs, with separate entrances for judges, staff, jurors, the public, and inmates.

“Having all those people enter the courtroom from their own special doors quite tricky when you’re also giving them spaces in the building too that they need to get access to,” said DLR Group Project Architect Kelli Stewart.

The designs are impressive, but it was during the financial part of the discussion that problems arose.

The team presented a detailed breakdown of the \$35 million project budget, dividing it into soft costs (estimated at 30 percent, or \$10.5 million) and hard construction costs (the remaining 70 percent, or \$24.5 million).

Soft costs include items like design fees, permits, inspections, and project contingency. Two separate hard cost estimates were conducted—one internal and one by a third-party estimator—with results differing by about six to seven percent, though both parties agreed on the overall project scope.

Cost escalation factors such as inflation, tariffs and labor premiums were discussed, especially due to the remote site and challenging terrain, including the need to excavate basalt and build retaining walls.

To reduce cost overruns, the team identified several value engineering options, including switching from concrete to asphalt in parking areas, reducing square footage and simplifying finishes. These changes could potentially reduce the overage from around \$5.1 million to roughly \$2.5 million.

Commissioners expressed concerns about more potential cost increases due to the national economic climate, with discussions about the realistic possibility of the project reaching \$40-44 million.

“Let’s say we bite the bullet and we’ll just take a couple of things off and we’ll probably be over budget,” said Morrow County Commissioner Gus Peterson, “and given the nature of the national environment, let’s say we ended up with something that was closer to 40 million—and then tariffs, trade wars, whatever, bump costs up another 10 percent, then we’re looking at 44 million.”

“And we went from where we had a meeting where 50 million was something that this board considered to be an unacceptably high number to 35 million and then all of a sudden we’re at 44,” he added.

Peterson said he recognized that no one involved in the project could control national levels but that he wanted to know how to move forward realistically.

“How can we move forward with this in a way that makes us feel at least somewhat confident that we’re not going to just skyrocket this number? Or

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Three Mustangs selected for nine-man all-star game



L-R: Zac Brown, Jaime Cavan and Nick Wenberg have all been selected for the first nine-man all-star football game to be played in La Grande in June. -Contributed photo

The Heppner Mustangs will be well represented at the first annual nine-man all-star football game to be played in La Grande, OR on June 20. Nick Wenberg, Zac Brown and Jaime Cavan have all been selected to play in the game.

Seniors from the nine-man football schools in the state have been selected to East and West teams of 20 players. The nine-man game will be held in conjunction with the existing eight- and six-man football

all-star games.

“This is an awesome thing for small school football,” stated past coach Greg Grant. “I actually coached in the first eight-man game in 1990; it is great that they have added a nine-man game.”

Each player will be seeking sponsorship to cover the cost of the game. The players will train in La Grande June 16-20. The exact date and time of the nine-man game has yet to be determined.

Lexington to host fifth annual May Day Celebration this weekend



The Town of Lexington is gearing up for a full weekend of community fun with its fifth annual May Day Celebration, set for Friday and Saturday, May 2-3. This year’s event features a new addition: a Friday Night Kickoff Party and benefit dinner to support local fire departments.

The Friday evening event will include a catered dinner by Broken Spoke, live music and a no-host bar. The evening will take place at the Lexington Fire Hall and event area, beginning with cocktail hour at 5 p.m. Dinner will begin at 6 p.m., with live music from 7-10 p.m.

Tickets are \$40 per per-

son, with proceeds benefiting the Lexington, Heppner and Lone fire departments.

Saturday’s festivities are centered around family fun and kids’ activities. The day kicks off with the traditional May Day Parade at 11 a.m., followed by crowd favorites like the soapbox derby, axe throwing trailer, laser tag, bouncy houses, and more.

All Saturday activities are free, thanks to generous support from the Morrow County Unified Recreation District (MURD) foundation.

For more information on any of these events, contact Lexington Town Hall at 541-989-8515.

Candidates forum showcases plans for the Health District



L-R Scott Ezell, Annetta Spicer, Russ Nichols, Molly Rhea, Janet Greenup, Donna Rietmann, Laura Torres, Jason Hanna and Raymond Seastone. - Contributed Photo

By Chris Sykes

On April 23, the Gilliam Bisbee Building in Heppner became a focal point for frustrations and future plans as nine candidates for the Morrow County Health District board addressed more than 30 in-person Morrow County residents and many online viewers.

Hosted by the Heppner Chamber of Commerce and moderated by Erin Heide-man, a Gilliam County resident with deep local ties, the two-hour forum featured Raymond Seastone, Jason Hanna, Laura Torres, Donna Rietmann, Janet Greenup, Molly Rhea, Russ Nichols, Annetta Spicer and Scott Ezell. Each candidate delivered a detailed introduction, answered four key questions, responded to audience queries via notecards, and offered closing remarks, with Madison Rosenbaum timing responses and Dale Bates running the tech.

With the May 20 election approaching, the event showed the district’s challenges—leadership turnover, staff shortages, financial opacity, and a North-South divide—while showcasing plans to address these issues. Every candidate brought unique insights.

The Morrow Coun-

ty Health District, which oversees Pioneer Memorial Hospital, clinics in Heppner, Lone, Irrigon and Boardman, and services like home health and hospice, is facing serious hurdles.

Candidates described a district unsettled by a CEO resignation, accusations of widespread staff losses that have curtailed services, declining patient numbers, and budgets lacking transparency.

A divide between the industrial North, centered in Boardman, and the farming South, rooted in Heppner, has sparked tensions over resource equity, with northern tax contributions fueling perceptions of imbalance. Each candidate presented their vision, paired with pointed critiques and specific actions to rebuild the health district.

Raymond Seastone, a banker for the Bank of Eastern Oregon in Morrow County since 2017, envisions a financially stable district anchored by strong leadership. To fix the district, he proposes hiring a CEO who embraces rural Oregon’s unique needs, boosting employee morale through recognition and support, recruiting additional providers to increase revenue and expand services, rehiring local staff to restore community ties,

promoting transparent financial reporting by sharing audits publicly, and uniting the county through community outreach like health fairs to rebuild trust and reduce North-South tensions.

He disputes claims of MCHD collapse but acknowledges the district is “stuck in the past,” citing outdated board practices that erode confidence and fuel rumors.

“First hire a CEO... somebody that’s going to love rural Oregon... make the employees up there happy... we need providers,” he said. “People are saying it’s the Titanic. It’s not. I had a meeting three weeks ago with Nicole. It’s not.”

He urged, “Don’t believe everything you hear out in the public... look at the end of the year audit.”

Seastone also said, “You got to praise those people... they’re our local heroes.” He added, “The hate in the community, that needs to stop.” In his closing, he emphasized, “I find it a pleasure to... live here... me wanting to give back.”

His fixes, grounded in a recent meeting with the MCHD CFO, offer a practical, community-focused approach to reform, emphasizing financial clarity and unity.

Jason Hanna, a lifelong

resident and former volunteer firefighter and EMT, draws on his mother’s 40-year career at Pioneer Memorial.

To fix the district, he proposes a 90-180-day evaluation of interim CEO Burke to ensure competent leadership, rehiring local staff to rebuild capacity, implementing transparent practices like open board responses to public questions, balancing resources to address North-South tensions by ensuring northern tax contributions are visibly utilized, engaging the community through town halls, and reviewing past leadership decisions to prevent repeat failures.

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