

Circuit court plans move forward

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The additional meetings will push back the schedule a little, but the final report should still be ready for review and adoption by the BOC by the end of August or beginning of September.

“I think that’s a good call,” said Morrow County Commissioner Gus Peterson. “Definitely push it back and get more feedback.”

The county has also been sending out surveys to residents to gather opinions.

Jensen said that, while he hadn’t attended any of the meetings fully, the results he heard were a little surprising.

“The general consensus was, we need a lot of healing. We need a lot of emphasis on unity,” he said. “And a lot of feedback that they appreciated the county for taking these steps.”

“Overall, the feedback was that is was great that we were getting together and talking about these things,” he added.

“I’ve heard positive things about this,” agreed BOC Chair David Sykes. I’m glad you’re doing this.”

In other business at the meeting, the board approved the appointment of Teiko Villegas of Boardman to the Transit Advisory Committee. Villegas is not replacing an existing member but is filling one of several empty seats on the committee.

The BOC also denied a travel request for Morrow County Planning Director Tamra Mabbott to attend a wastewater symbiosis study tour in Denmark.

Strategic plan workshop next week

The Morrow County Commissioners will hold a public workshop in Heppner next Wednesday, June 11, to receive public input regarding the county’s strategic plan. The workshop will take place at 5:30 p.m. at the Willow Street Innovation Hub, 188 West Willow St., Heppner.

A North Morrow workshop will take place June 10 at 5:30 p.m. at the Port of Morrow Riverfront Center, 2 Marine Drive, Boardman.

Morrow County receives clean audit last fiscal year

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“I consider these small, very technical errors, nothing that indicates any kind of a weakness or a breakdown in your systems,” he said.

Bingenheimer also reported no deficiencies in the county’s internal controls.

Senior manager Kathy Wilson, also from Singer-Lewak, provided additional insight into the county’s financial standing. “The county is in a pretty good position,” she said.

Morrow County’s unrestricted net position stood at \$22 million, and the county held \$76 million in net capital assets, reflecting an increase of about \$7 million. The increase includes investments in road and airport construction and large equipment purchases.

Wilson noted that long-term liabilities such as net pension liability rose by about \$1 million, but assured the board it was not alarming.

“This measures as if the county is going to pay all of this today. It’s a really big number but it’s nothing to be ultra concerned about,” she said.

The county’s total net position increased by \$15,552,917, or 15.41 percent, largely due to governmental operations. As of June 30, 2024, the net position totaled \$116,449,236. Most of this is tied up in capital assets, which are used to provide services to citizens and are not available for future spending.

Governmental fund balances also saw significant growth. The general fund increased by \$1,658,083, the road fund by \$1,726,290, the capital improvement fund by \$9,758,902, and nonmajor governmental funds combined for an increase of \$3,864,575.

Revenues came primarily from property taxes (29 percent), strategic investment program payments (22 percent), operating grants and contributions (20 percent), and charges for services (15 percent). Major expenses were for general government and

public safety, which together accounted for 62 percent of total expenses.

The full audit report is available on the Morrow County website.

Also at the meeting, BOC set a public hearing date for the possible annexation of land into the Boardman Fire Rescue District.

On May 15, the Columbia Development Authority (CDA) submitted a request to have parts of its Morrow County property added to the Boardman Fire Rescue District (BFRD). The fire district has already agreed to the request and continues to support the move.

Now that the petition has been officially received, Morrow County is required by state law to hold a public hearing on the proposal.

If approved, the land will be officially added to the fire district, meaning it will receive emergency services from BFRD.

While the request might seem straightforward, ongoing disputes between BFRD and Irrigon Rural Fire Protection District (IRFPD) have resulted in the Irrigon fire district filing a court injunction to halt the annexation. Defendants in the injunction are Morrow County, Port of Morrow, BFRD and the CDA.

IRFPD is disputing the annexation of the property into the BFRD on the grounds that the property should be annexed into its own district under a separate ORS.

However, Morrow County Administrator Matthew Jensen said the county had received what appeared to be a fully legal annexation request and that Oregon Revised Statutes requires a public hearing for such a request.

“Acknowledging the fact that there might be a legal challenge based on a separate ORS,” he said, “I believe that we are required legally to set that public hearing.”

The purpose of the hearing will be for public comment. The BOC will not make a determination at the hearing.

The hearing will take place Wednesday, June 11, at 9 a.m. at the Irrigon Government Center, 215 NE Main Ave, Irrigon.

The board of commissioners also rescinded a previous decision regarding funding for the Lower Willow Creek Groundwater Recharge Project (LWCGRP) and agreed to funding in the amount of \$20,000. The funding is for a feasibility study on the groundwater recharge project.

On September 4, 2024, the Morrow County Board of Commissioners approved \$20,000 in funding for the (LWCGRP), with the condition that affected landowners contribute an additional \$19,000.

However, when the invoice was submitted, it showed that the Port of Morrow—not local landowners—had provided the remaining funds. As a result, the payment was denied for not meeting the original condition.

LWCGRP returned to the board last month and asked the commissioners to reconsider that requirement. They argue that current market challenges have placed smaller farmers—the intended landowner contributors—at a disadvantage.

To stay on track with other funding deadlines, the group requested that the board rescind the previous motion and approve the \$20,000 in county funding without requiring matching funds from landowners at this stage.

Morrow County Commissioner Jeff Wenholz balked, saying he saw the funds as benefiting individual businesses and that he thought landowners should have some “skin in the game” in order to receive the funding.

“I have a hard time justifying to the other citizens of the county why they are subsidizing someone’s business,” said Wenholz.

Morrow County Commissioner Gus Peterson countered that it was an opportunity to affect how farming was done in that area, which could, in turn, affect taxes.

“This is a huge potential in terms of how this could change what could be done around Willow Creek,” he said. “This could be, if it plays out right, a big win for everybody involved.”

The board voted 2-1 to rescind the previous motion and approve \$20,000 in funding, with Wenholz dissenting.

In other business, the board heard from Justice of the Peace Glen Diehl that the Justice Court continues to see an increase in traffic and criminal cases. He said he thought the increase was a combination of a greater law enforcement presence and an increase in both population in the county and people passing through.

He also noted that Morrow County Circuit Court, in particular, is getting busier, which causes conflicts with the space shared by the two courts and the Morrow County District Attorney.

“I had to cancel court and had people showing up who were cited to appear who could not appear,” he said, adding a plug to “hurry up and get our new building.”

He also reported that court clerk Robin Jones will be retiring in September. He hopes to get a new clerk hired by July so they can train with Jones before she leaves.

The BOC also approved changes to contract terms with Dr. Emily Jack. She had previously contracted with the county as a public health official but been a contracted employee who provides family planning services. To simplify the arrangement and avoid IRS, BOLI, and insurance complications, the county has placed both positions under an hourly employee contract. Under the new agreement, Dr. Jack would be paid \$150 per hour with timecards tracking her work by position, replacing the current monthly stipend.

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