

WATERMELON



ERIC MORTENSON/EO MEDIA GROUP

Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann exults after spitting a watermelon seed more than 300 inches at the melon and potato giveaway in downtown Portland on Friday. Drotzmann finished second to Hermiston City Councilor Doug Primmer.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY MARK MORGAN

Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann finished second in the seed-spitting contest to Councilor Doug Primmer, out distancing Portland Mayor Charlie Hales, Commissioner Dan Saltzman.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY MARK MORGAN

State Rep. Greg Smith and Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann help hand out bags of potatoes Friday, July 31, in Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland. Smith and Drotzmann were part of the Eastern Oregon contingent passing out produce from local growers, including Hermiston watermelons.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY MARK MORGAN

Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann, former Hermiston Mayor Frank Harkenrider, former Portland Mayor Bud Clark and Portland Mayor Charlie Hales gather for a group photo at Pioneer Courthouse Square. Harkenrider and Clark started the tradition of handing out Hermiston melons in 1991 and Drotzmann and Hales helped bring it back this year.



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Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann oversees a watermelon and potato giveaway Friday in downtown Portland. The city renewed the exchange – and a seed spitting contest that Hermiston won – as a goodwill gesture to urban consumers.

Return to tradition

Hermiston contingent takes over Portland's living room for a sweet summer goodwill mission

By ERIC MORTENSON
EO Media Group

PORTLAND – Jokes and seed spitting contest aside, there was a polite edge to Hermiston's renewed tradition of handing out free watermelons and potatoes in downtown Portland.

This time, Hermiston's growers and civic leaders stood in Portland's Pioneer Square as representatives of Eastern Oregon's biggest and fastest growing city and one of the state's agricultural powerhouses.

As a line formed for the giveaway Friday, Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann acknowledged the two cities vary greatly in scale – Portland has about 570,000 more people – but said they share issues such as public safety, livability, transportation and water.

"Those are all common things, regardless of size," he said.

Drotzmann said he hoped the event reminded Portland residents of Hermiston's agricultural prowess. Umatilla County ranks second in the state, behind Marion County, with about \$500 million in annual gross farm and ranch sales. The region is best known for Hermiston watermelons, but grows a wide variety of irrigated vegetables as well.

"We provide the fruit and vegetables you pick up in the grocery store every day," Drotzmann said.

In his remarks to the crowd at Pioneer Square, Drotzmann said the eastern side of the state gladly extends its hand to Portland.

"We know when Portland is successful, all of Oregon is successful," he said.

The watermelon delivery and accompanying melon seed spitting contest began in 1991 with a friendship between longtime Hermiston mayor and councilor Frank Harkenrider and colorful Portland Mayor Bud Clark.

The event ran for 17 years then faded, but was renewed this year by civic leaders and the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce. Harkenrider and Clark attended Friday's renewal, and Harkenrider admitted the city slicker bested him at seed spitting. "He got me all the time," he said with a laugh.

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales said the exchange "was a good idea then and is a good idea now."

"This is what good neighbors do for each other," Hales said, "they share their bounty."

Hales presented Drotzmann with a tie embossed with a depiction of Portland's new Tilikum Crossing bridge, which opens in September and will carry light-rail trains and bikes over the Willamette River, but not cars and trucks.

The melons and potatoes, donated by Walchli Farms, Bellinger Farms and Bud-Rich Potato Inc., disappeared in about 20 minutes as a long line of pleased Portlanders took advantage.

For the record, Hermiston swept the seed spitting contest. City Councilor Doug Primmer took first, and Drotzmann was second. Both sent seeds flying more than 300 inches. Hales showed he was no slouch with a 296-inch launch, and Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman managed to spit one 126 inches.

Primmer indicated the city boys didn't have a chance against people who grew up in watermelon country.

"You live in Hermiston, you get into competition when you've got brothers," he said.



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State Rep. Greg Smith of Heppner (left) and Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith (right) happily hand out free watermelons to Portlanders Friday during a renewed a goodwill exchange of some of Eastern Oregon's best-known crops in Oregon's biggest city and export gateway.