

THE YEAR:

continued from Page A1

Return of the watermelon giveaway

Hermiston civic leaders, business leaders and farmers revived a tradition in 2015 of taking locally grown produce, like Hermiston signature watermelons, to give away in downtown Portland.

The timing could not have been better, with Portland's growing popularity on the culinary scene, it is important for foodies to know and appreciate that all of that great food prepared by celebrated chefs has to be grown somewhere, and that rooftop gardens and backyard raised beds are not where the food that helps feed the Pacific Northwest and the world comes from. Growers right here in Umatilla and Morrow counties grow a lot of tasty, nutritious food. Efforts to identify the summer seasonal favorite watermelon crop with Hermiston have helped identify our area with the flavor of summer, but as you already know — or should if you live here — there are a lot of other foods grown here. Our desert climate, soils and access to irrigation water consistently keep our two counties near the top in crop value for Oregon. And most of that value is not watermelons. Total state production of watermelons in 2013 was \$27.7 million. Even if all the watermelons grow in the state came from here, that would only be about 2 percent of the \$969 million farmgate value in ag commodities produce in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

Marijuana legalization statewide, but not locally

Recreational marijuana use officially became legal in July, but the issue continued to appear on city council agendas frequently through the rest of 2015.

In Hermiston, city staff asked the city council to double down on its previous opposition to marijuana dispensaries and commercial grow sites within city limits. Councilors eventually decided to leave the issue up to the voters, but procedural hang-ups caused the ordinance to be voted on three times before finally making it official in November that Hermiston voters will decide the fate of marijuana dispensaries next year.

Meanwhile in Umatilla, the city council adopted a ban on marijuana dispensaries in August. The ban was originally meant to be part of a larger overhaul of the city's commercial zone codes that had been in the works since 2014, but after disagreements between the council and the city's planning commission couldn't be resolved by the time the dispensary ban ran out the council adopted the stand-alone ban.

New Hermiston School District office and district growth

The Hermiston School District started out the 2015-2016 school year with a shiny new set of offices on Orchard Avenue, signaling the district's continuing efforts to accommodate faster-than-expected student growth.

The new offices opened up a few rooms at schools across the district, which helped make space for the more than 200 extra students who enrolled this fall, bringing the district's total enrollment up to 5,531. The jump in students was more than double what the school district had predicted.

To accommodate the growth the school board approved ordering five new modular buildings in October, bringing the total of portable classrooms to 29.

By the end of the year the district had started making the rounds around town to make the case for community support of bond to pay for a new elementary school and expansion of Hermiston High School and Sandstone Middle School.



The new Hermiston School District office on Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2015.

FILE PHOTO

Civil leader deaths

The greater Hermiston community lost two leaders who have helped shape the community as it is today and helped create a foundation for the community it will become in the future. The two men, Joe Burns and Chet Prior, died within 10 days of each other in February.

Burns, who died at age 90 on Feb 5, was sometimes described as the "father of Hermiston" for his work as a business owner and helping to establish and lead the nonprofit Hermiston Development Corporation and in leadership roles on multiple civic boards, boards of directors and civic organizations.

Prior who owned Eagle Ranch in Echo, died Feb. 15 at age 78, and was known as a leader in the agriculture community and on water issues. Prior was chairman of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center board at the time of his death.

Like Burns, Prior also served on various local boards and commissions. Both men and also lead the Hermiston Development Corporation at different times and both were recognized as

Man of the Year by the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce. Both men were also pilots, with burns version as a B-24 bomber pilot during World War II.

Umatilla panhandlers/homelessness

Efforts by the city of Umatilla to tackle nuisances caused by homeless residents and panhandlers generated headlines in 2015, starting with an ordinance in May that banned the transfer of money or other items between a pedestrian and a car in the lane of travel.

Later that summer city manager Bob Ward said police efforts to cite panhandlers and educate drivers about the ordinance seemed to be working. The city followed up with an ordinance that banned tent camping within city limits and sent city staff to clean out a popular homeless camp along the Umatilla River next to Umatilla High School.

Police body cameras

Hermiston Police Department were earliest local adopters of police body cameras, which they began using in April of 2015.

Footage from the cameras, which officers can attach to their collar, shoulder or head, is uploaded after each shift and stored by the department.

At a May city council meeting Chief Jason Edmiston said the cameras helped hold officers accountable but also held citizens accountable for their actions and helped deter false allegations against officers. After a local pastor had questioned the arrest of an elderly parishioner, for example, Edmiston said reviewing the footage of the arrest helped him feel confident that the officers had acted appropriately.

Hermiston brand/livability

Hermiston entered 2015 with residents still grumbling about the new paint job spelling "You Can GROW Here" on the side of the water tower, and by the end of the year the city council had voted to not only repaint the water tower but to scrap the "You Can GROW Here" brand altogether.

The move came after some soul-searching by the city that included hiring a consultant and performing multiple surveys about Hermiston's im-

age. The results showed more than two-thirds of Hermiston residents disliked the "You Can GROW Here" brand, so the city resurrected the Hermiston's Future Branding Committee and vowed to do a better job of seeking citizen input the second time around.

The efforts to rebrand Hermiston paralleled an effort to increase the city's livability. After the city hired a consultant to run a 25-member Livability Committee and distribute surveys to the community, residents said they would like the city to focus on funding a community activity center, an indoor pool, an arts

center, revitalization of the downtown and expansion of Hermiston's parks and trails.

Unsolved murder near 11th Street and other shootings

Hermiston saw its first homicide in three years after Alonso Madrigal, 23, of Umatilla was shot and killed in the parking lot of the 11th Street Market in March.

Hermiston Police Department reported seizing a "significant amount of physical evidence" from the scene and later reported that the car be-

lieved to be involved in the incident was recovered in California. Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said law enforcement believed that the killing was the work of gang members but that Madrigal was not a gang member himself.

The department never named a suspect and has yet to make an arrest.

The murder happened less than six weeks after Giovanni Avila, 21, also of Umatilla, was shot in the chest less behind the Foxwood Apartments less than three blocks away. Avila, his younger brother and

three friends said they were attacked after getting into a disagreement with three unknown males. Avila survived the shooting, but no arrests were ever made in that case either.

Parks

Improvements to city parks was a prime focus of the city of Hermiston in 2015.

The city made improvements to Victory Square Park, including a new restroom installed in November.

A remodel of Sunset Park got underway in the fall after the city purchased property next to the park and prepared to double its size by moving the entrance to the Public Works building from North-east Fourth Street to Elm Avenue.

The parks and recreation committee met with neighbors of the Northside Playground near Pizza Hut to gather suggestions for a complete overhaul of the pocket park in 2016.

The city also set aside money to plan a new skate park, and created an ordinance that allows police to trespass people from parks for misusing the equipment.

Tired of getting exactly what you pay for on T-Mobile? Join Verizon and we'll cover your costs to switch.

If you're stuck on the wrong network, we'll pay up to \$650 for you to get out of your old contract when you trade in your phone.

New smartphone device payment activation and port-in req'd. Get up to \$650 prepaid card for installment plan balance less trade-in value (or up to \$350 prepaid for early termination fees less trade-in value). Trade-in must be in good working condition and be worth more than \$0. Line must be active for 6 mos. Limited-time offer.

Better matters.
verizon

Visa prepaid card mailed within 8 wks after receipt of claim. Activation fee/line: \$20. IMPORTANT CONSUMER INFORMATION: Subject to VZW Agmts, Calling Plan and credit approval. Offers and coverage, varying by svc, not available everywhere; see vzw.com. © 2015 Verizon Wireless.

1.866.2.JOIN.IN | vzw.com