

MORROW COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR LEARNING THE ROPES

Sorte hired late last year as part of county's change in government structure

By **GEORGE PAVEN**
Staff Writer

Jerry Sorte grew up in Corvallis, but is no stranger to Eastern Oregon. As a kid, Sorte remembers long road trips to visit family in Pendleton, or go fishing at Wallowa Lake, or even head as far down as Owyhee Reservoir.

"I was fortunate to spend a lot of time recreating in Eastern Oregon," said Sorte, who on Dec. 1 became the first ever full-time administrative officer of Morrow County. "This whole area I just think is beautiful, and a great place

to be." Sorte's hiring marked the first move in a major shakeup of Morrow County government. For years, the county has had an elected judge and two part-time commissioners serve on the court. But in a 2-1 vote last September, the court decided to abolish the judge position in favor of three part-time commissioners, while hiring an administrator to provide management and oversight.

Those jobs used to be done by the county judge, who also presided over juvenile court. Judge Terry Tallman will retire after his term ends on Dec. 31, and the May election will determine who steps in as the third commissioner.

Meanwhile, Sorte said he's been working with Tallman to learn the job and start building relationships



STAFF PHOTO BY GEORGE PAVEN

Jerry Sorte was hired as Morrow County's first full-time administrative officer late last year.

with the county's 108 employees.

"I think we have a really good team in place here," Sorte said.

Sorte, 35, has nearly a decade of experience working with cities and counties. He earned his master's de-

gree in public administration from the University of Missouri before returning to Oregon, where he spent eight years working his way up to planning manager of Polk County.

Sorte headed back to Missouri for a year and a

half working with the city of Fulton before he and his family decided Oregon was truly where they wanted to be. Sorte and his wife recently bought a house in Heppner, where they live with their two children.

"One of the things we really liked about the area is how friendly people were, and how outgoing people were in Heppner," Sorte said.

As the county's administrative officer, Sorte said he supports the commissioners and helps them to put their ideas and policies into place. One thing that has clearly surfaced as a priority, he said, is infrastructure development, including roads and facilities.

The county dedicated its recently completed Bartholomew Building Friday in Heppner, and Sorte said talks are underway about

potential building renovations — or possibly a new facility — for the north end of the county. Revenue coming in from wind energy projects, as well as Portland General Electric's new Carty Generating Station, should continue helping those projects become a reality, Sorte said.

"We have wind facilities and utility facilities in this county that bring in money through strategic investment programs," he said. "That's put the county's budget in a good position."

As far as specific projects, Sorte said the commissioners and department heads continue looking into investments they feel will last. He encouraged residents to attend county court meetings to share their ideas and make their voices heard.

"We're planning for the future," he said.

County to clean up abandoned, fire-damaged property

By **JENNIFER COLTON**
Staff Writer

Umatilla County will clean up an abandoned property that has attracted squatters since it caught fire in February.

Wednesday, March 9, the Umatilla County Commissioners voted to take abatement action on a debris-scattered property off Lorraine Avenue north of Hermiston. Photos provided by code enforcement show debris, building materials and garbage scattered around the property, both inside and outside of buildings.

The house on the property caught fire Feb. 6 and did have people in it at the time, according to emergency reports. Police were also called to the abandoned home on Feb. 25 after reports of people on the property burning material.

Umatilla County code enforcement began working on the property in the summer of 2015. The county voting to abate a property is unusual, according to code enforcement coordinator Gina Miller. Miller said this is likely the fifth abatement to come from a vote in 10 years.

"This doesn't happen all that often. This is a kind of unique circumstance where the people who are on the deed are no longer living and there has been no contact from any heirs," Miller said. "This is a health hazard



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY UMATILLA COUNTY

Umatilla County will clean up this property on Lorraine Avenue near Hermiston.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY UMATILLA COUNTY

Umatilla County has started abatement proceedings on an abandoned property.

in that garbage like that attracts vermin. In the interest of public health, we're going to get that cleaned up."

In most code enforcement cases, the county works with the owners to bring the property into compliance.

"It's a matter of education. That's our first and foremost: reaching out to people and educating them on what they can and cannot do on a property, such as with solid waste," Miller said. "We're trying to do a good thing here. When we get a property cleaned up and we have a resolution, that's a really great feeling."

Because of the long process of working with landowners — often exacerbated by issues like weather and health concerns — code enforcement cases can take months to resolve.

The commissioners' vote followed a judgment through the court system for a solid waste violation. Now that the vote has been approved, the next step will be to have a representative from the Umatilla County Sheriff's



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY UMATILLA COUNTY

Debris and an abandoned pickup litter an abandoned and burned home on Lorraine Avenue.

Office post notices at the site so anyone illegally staying on the property has time to relocate.

The county will then work with Sanitary Disposal, the sheriff's office

and community corrections to remove the garbage from the property. Miller said the county hopes to have the process completed within two weeks.

More information on Umatilla County Code Enforcement — including solid waste restrictions and online complaint forms — is available at www.co.umatilla.or.us.

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