

No taxi ticket price increase in Hermiston

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The Hermiston City Council voted against a proposed 25 cent price increase Monday for the taxi program that helps seniors and people with disabilities.

The city will pick up the tab for an estimated \$6,000 more per year in subsidies to the Umatilla Cab Company instead.

The one-way tickets, which qualified Hermiston residents can purchase from City Hall for rides within city limits, have been \$2 apiece since 2010. The city passes that money, along with an additional \$4.35 per ticket, on to the taxi company contracted to run the program.

Mark Morgan, assistant city manager, said the city pays about \$100,000 per year to run the program, subsidizing an average of 30,000 one-way rides.

He told the City Council Monday that in the past two decades Umatilla County's contribution to the program has dropped from \$50,000 to \$27,000 per year, increasing the city's burden. At the same time minimum wage has risen from \$8.40 an hour and effective Friday, July 1, it will increase to \$9.50 an hour, raising the cost of business for the cab company.

"This is just a situation where the Legislature was trying to help low-income workers but ended up hurting some low-income residents," Morgan said.

Jeannette Byrnes, a Hermiston resident, asked the City Council to find another way to keep the program going without raising the ticket price. For seniors living on social security checks, she said, every penny counts.

"When you're nickel-and-diming, 25 cents is a lot," she said.

She said some Hermiston residents only leave their

houses when they can afford a taxi ride, and if the community could be as generous as it is to its youth, it could surely come up with a few thousand dollars to keep the taxi program from raising its prices.

City councilors agreed with her. Doug Primmer and Manuel Gutierrez said they thought the city could find the money in its budget to help cover Umatilla Cab Company's increased costs without raising rates.

"I think if the city can afford it, we should do it," Gutierrez said.

Morgan said the city had budgeted to start a Dial-a-Ride program, which would run fewer hours and require 24-hour notice, but would also be a less costly option to make sure people could get to their doctor and other regularly scheduled appointments. He said the details were still being worked out but he believed they would be able to start offering the program starting Jan. 1, 2017 for one dollar per ride.

City Manager Byron Smith said in the meantime he didn't think one 25 cent increase in six years was unreasonable.

"The cost of this service keeps going up and I feel like it's a fair ask to ask our riders to share some of that," he said.

City councilors disagreed, however, and voted unanimously to keep the price at \$2 per ride but increase the city's subsidy from \$4.35 per ride to \$4.60.

As part of that resolution the council also adopted a set of written policies governing expectations for riders and drivers who are a part of the senior and disabled ride program.

Morgan said he worked with a committee of people involved with the program, including two regular riders,

to come up with the rules to clear up confusion that had happened when Hermiston Transit Company went out of business and Umatilla Cab Company took over the program.

"A lot of times we had folks doing things that were really unacceptable, but we didn't have a written policy in place to manage that," he said.

The new policies make it clear that riders who are part of the program cannot bring people along to ride for free. A personal care attendant or child may ride for the price of an additional ticket, and all other guests must pay full fare.

Taxi drivers will not drive to a person's place of residence for free to deliver a lost item, carry more than 25 pounds of groceries in one trip, wait outside a building for someone to complete an errand, go inside and search a facility for the passenger they are picking up, wait more than one minute for a passenger to show up, act as a moving company or serve as a personal care attendant for people not capable of completing their errands on their own.

Three no-shows over a 12-month period will result in a suspension from the program.

Morgan said the biggest complaint he hears about the taxi program is that it takes too long for a cab to arrive. He said the new policies will help drivers save time, allowing them to give more rides per day.

Rider Dale Orem, who helped craft the policies, said he thought the policies were fair and would be glad to see shorter wait times after sometimes waiting 30 minutes outside the grocery store to be picked up.

"I can't buy ice cream, for one thing," he said.



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE McDOWELL

Chassiti James, left, and Jasmine Gatewood walk laps at the Hermiston Relay for Life.

CANCER:

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Beyond supporting new cancer research, Relay for Life also provides an opportunity for survivors, current cancer patients and caregivers to make new friends who understand what they are going through.

Heidi Howard was at Relay for Life with her son and nephew for that very reason, after having a brain tumor removed about a year ago. She said it was her first time at the event, and she was looking forward to understanding what it was all about and meeting other local cancer survivors.

"I love all of the support for everyone," she said. "I even noticed some co-workers here. ... My surgery was out of Seat-

tle so I didn't get to know many people around here."

This year's grand marshals were Lou Ann and Bryan Wolfe. Lou Ann faced breast cancer a couple of years ago after being one of the Hermiston Relay for Life's original co-chairs, and Bryan was diagnosed with Stage 4 mantle cell lymphoma, which can be treated but not cured, in August 2015.

During the opening ceremonies Bryan said he was "new to this journey many of you have taken or are taking," but said he was deeply grateful for the sacrifices and research that had allowed him to continue to keep his cancer at bay.

"I'm looking forward to a lot of time left to come, a lot of memories," he said.

Lou Ann said she and

her husband were learning to let things go that used to bother them, and to say no sometimes when they needed to. She said she was grateful to the support and friendships that her involvement in Relay for Life had brought when it was her family's turn to battle cancer.

"There is always someone out there who knows where you've been, who knows where you're going and can stand alongside you and tell you it's going to be OK," she said.

She said that God's grace had allowed them to continue to find fulfillment in life even when times got tough.

"Our days are not always filled with laughter, but they are filled with joy," she said. "Joy is not dependent on sunny circumstances and good news."

FIRE:

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the district won't see those funds until this November.

Once the money is available, the district will begin hiring additional crew needed to staff Fire Station 2 on Diagonal Road around the clock. Stanton described it as a "lengthy hiring process." Potential hires have to go through a series of mental and physical evaluations as well as complete a stint at the fire academy. The fire district is aiming for a March 2016 target date to have new crew at the stations with veteran firefighters.

This week the district welcomed four summer seasonal firefighters from the resident intern program to help reduce the strain on full-time firefighters.

"They've already made a huge difference," Stanton said.

While additional permanent staff support won't be in place for awhile, other changes are moving forward.

Re-lettering of equipment has begun, new business cards have been ordered and a new website is under construction. The new district emblem will be chosen by a committee then sent off for production before it can be applied to uniforms.

On Friday, five new members of the unified fire board will be sworn in by Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfert, prior to holding their first board meeting.

Upgrades are still needed for the Diagonal station. The station has been around for 30 years, but this will be the first time in its history firefighters have been there full-time. A paging system, computers and other information technology projects are slated to begin in the near future.

Supporters of the redistricting efforts argued ad-

ditional staff members and updated equipment will help meet the demand of

a growing population and work to shorten response times.

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