

High hopes for transportation bill as legislators visit city

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Eastern Oregon officials have different ideas of how to spend state transportation funding, but they were all united in one aspect of their message to legislators visiting Hermiston last week: It is past time to update Oregon's transportation infrastructure.

"Are we embarrassed to live in a country that is this progressive, and this wealthy, and this smart and we have such backward transportation systems?" Port of Umatilla Manager Kim Puzey asked.

He testified Wednesday, June 29, at Hermiston High School in front of the Joint Interim Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives tasked with doing the groundwork for a transportation spending package lawmakers hope to pass during the 2017 legislative session.

Last year a bipartisan group of eight lawmakers hammered out a deal on a \$343.5 million transportation package that would have increased gas taxes and vehicle fees in order to pay for road and bridge repairs. But the deal fell apart after Republicans and Democrats couldn't find a compromise on whether to alter the state's newly passed clean fuel standards, which would have also raised gas prices.

The two parties plan to try again in 2017.

The joint committee was in Hermiston to hear from Eastern Oregon cities about the top spending needs in the area, followed by a two-hour bus tour through Umatilla County and Morrow County to see the areas of concern firsthand.

Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hepner, started out the meeting by thanking his colleagues for making the trip to Umatilla County. He gave examples of communities in Eastern Oregon working together and assured them that his district was ready and able to leverage any dollars that came their way into public projects that would spur private investment.

"Often communities are still fighting over what color the dugouts on the Little League field are going to be," he said. "That is not the case here."

Later, Marv Padberg, commissioner for the Port of Morrow, echoed those sentiments after giving the committee a tour. He pointed out hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of economic development, creating thousands of jobs, that have come to the Port of Morrow in the past decade in part because of the way state and federal dollars were leveraged.

"My point today, if I don't get anything else said, is that we turn this money around," Padberg said. "... Just 10 short years ago, when you came up over the overpass, none of this stuff was here. None."

As local leaders anticipate the opportunity to snag some of the hundreds of millions of dollars that will be up for grabs should a transportation package pass, here are a few projects they proposed to the joint committee June 29:

- The city of Hermiston would like to overhaul North First Place, including re-pavement, widening, sidewalks and a redesign of the intersection with Orchard Avenue next to the police station and fire department. During Wednesday's hearing, Mayor Dave Drotzmann showed legislators a picture of traffic backed up at the intersection, creating their own made-up turn lane and blocking where a fire truck or ambulance would need to pass to respond to an emergency.

The plan would take \$7 million to complete, and Drotzmann said it was just one of \$43 million worth

of needed road projects to keep up with Hermiston's growth.

"We can't fund it without your help and support," he said. "If we were going to go out and try to fund these projects on our own, it would take 143 years."

- The city of Stanfield would like to change the feel of its Main Street — which also happens to be Highway 395 — by planting trees, adding medians and creating bulb-outs where there used to be parking.

City manager Blair Larsen told the committee that the lanes of travel would be just as wide as before, but the visual cues to the driver would help prompt people to slow down and look for pedestrians. He said he watched recently as a speeding car passed an elderly woman inside a crosswalk so close by that it knocked the cane out of her hand. Some people refuse to cross the highway on foot at all, he said.

"The economic impact of having a real, walkable Main Street would be huge," he said.

- The North Highway 395 committee, made up of business owners and residents between Hermiston's urban growth boundary and Umatilla's, would like to see a traffic signal added to Baggett Lane and the road improved. The project would create a safer route for trucks from Villareal Trucking, Medelez Trucking, Reddaway Trucking, Sanitary Disposal and other companies to enter and exit the highway.

"They're going to mandate that employees use that route to get on and off 395," committee member Steve Watkins said. "And they're going to want to use it, because right now it's so dangerous to get on and off."

- The Oregon Department of Transportation would like to move the Umatilla Port of Entry, where semi-trucks pull off to be weighed after crossing into Oregon, from Umatilla to a spot on I-82 just south of the Umatilla River. The project, which would cost an estimated \$20 million, would allow trucks to continue on the interstate instead of pulling in and out of heavy traffic in Umatilla, which would reduce congestion around the interchange.

Craig Sipp, ODOT Region 5 manager, also told legislators during their tour that ODOT also wanted to improve safety conditions on Cabbage Hill, using tactics that include more chain-up areas, increased lighting and variable speed limits that adjust to the weather conditions.

Fireworks spark fires across area

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Fireworks on the Fourth of July on Monday night caused several fires in the area.

One of the most visible fires of the night was on the Hermiston Butte, where falling embers from the city-sponsored fireworks show lit up the south side of the distinctive landmark.

The rest of the fireworks were set off as planned despite the blaze, but Umatilla Fire District 1 Chief Scott Stanton said the department was on the butte for about two hours total.

They had done a controlled burn on the north side of the butte a few days earlier, but Stanton said they didn't do the south side because as far as he could remember that side had never burned during a fireworks show before.

"Usually with the prevailing winds and the way they shoot, we're good," he said.

Stanton said there was only one truck standing by at the bottom of the butte when the fire started because District 1 was also standing by for the Stanfield fireworks show, in addition to responding to a dumpster fire and a separate



STAFF PHOTO BY DANIEL WATTENBURGER

Fireworks from Hermiston's annual Fourth of July celebration started a grass fire Monday at the Hermiston Butte.

brush fire at the same time.

In total the department responded to six fires on Monday, four of which were caused by fireworks. One not related to fireworks was a structure fire on Southwest 23rd Street early Monday morning, which

caused significant damage to the attic of a home.

Stanton said it seemed like a fairly average Fourth of July weekend.

"We've seen busier," he said.

In Ione, the fireworks show was actually cut off

mid-show due to a fire sparked by falling embers. The all-volunteer fire department couldn't be reached Tuesday, however a post on the Ione 4th of July Facebook page noted that the show was shortened due to a brush fire that started shortly after the show began, but "our volunteer firemen were on it quick and have it out."

Despite the fires, Nick Bejarano, spokesman for Good Shepherd Health Care System, said the Hermiston hospital didn't see any fireworks-related injuries in the emergency room over the weekend this year, including smoke inhalation caused by fires.

He said the hospital, urged people to carefully read the directions if they were going to set off their own fireworks.

Less than an hour after the Fourth of July weekend officially ended at midnight, firefighters from Hermiston and Pendleton were called out to a large brush fire on Highway 37 near Pendleton. Ciraulo said it grew to about 500 acres, and there was a flare-up again later in the day, but so far there was no indication that it was caused by fireworks.

Frew takes over as EOTEC general contractor

Frew will act as contractor for remaining construction, except for rodeo arena

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A special meeting of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center board on Friday, July 1, clarifies Frew Development Group's role in the project going forward.

The company will be the general contractor and construction manager for all remaining components — including barns, fencing, lighting, landscaping and food stalls — except the rodeo arena.

During the EOTEC board's June 24 emergency meeting, John Frew, president and CEO of Frew Development Group, told the

board that constant meetings with stakeholders over every detail were hindering progress to the point that the project would not be ready in time for the 2017 Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo unless changes in process were made. The board voted to give the company more direct control by changing their contract from project manager to general contractor.

On Friday, however, Frew said that further meetings with stakeholders and a promising pre-bid meeting had persuaded him that the rodeo arena should be carved out from that role, allowing the bid process for a general arena contractor to continue. He said six contractors showed up to the meeting and allowing

one of them to get started on work as soon as the bid is awarded July 29 would be just as fast as having Frew Development Group put together its own team of subcontractors.

He said it has been made clear to bidders that the arena needs to be completed by July 21, 2017 at a cost of \$3.8 million.

"\$3.8 million is the budget, and if contractors out there feel they can't do it then they're wasting their time," he said.

On Friday the board also voted to reject the two bids for the barns. Both bids came in more than \$1 million over the \$2.6 million the EOTEC authority has available, necessitating changes to the design. Frew said part of the problem was that the construction indus-

try was "very, very busy" in Eastern Oregon right now.

During the public comment section Richard Meisner, who lives on Ott Road near EOTEC, said that events held at the event center building since it opened in May have frequently violated the city's noise ordinance, running until as late as 1 a.m. He also complained about a delay in getting dust suppressant laid down on Ott Road, and about traffic after the events heading east instead of going back up Airport Road to Highway 395 as was intended.

Byron Smith, the EOTEC board chair and Hermiston city manager, said the city would investigate the noise ordinance issue.

The board's next meeting will be July 15.

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