

Growing pains at fairgrounds could be eased by EOTEC

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
Staff writer

The popularity of the Umatilla County Fair has the fairgrounds bursting at the seams each August, but some see a light at the end of the tunnel with the construction of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.

The project on Airport Road promises 55 acres of new buildings and infrastructure, parking galore and 39 acres to grow on. For this year, however, the fair is still experiencing growing pains at its location in the center of Hermiston.

“All the plumbing and sewer and electrical is so old, it’s been band-aided together,” fair manager Don Slone said.

He said he is looking forward to infrastructure that doesn’t require constant intervention and creative solutions. Another piece he said everyone is looking forward to is on-site parking. Currently most fairgoers and volunteers have to fight for parking on Orchard Avenue, Highland Avenue and side streets for blocks in every direction.

“It’s a little awkward for a lot of the homeowners,” he said.

Jillian and Corbet Weimer know about that. They live on Orchard across from the fairgrounds. They said while they support the fair and wouldn’t presume to have it shut down because of the inconvenience to neighbors, there is no denying the impact on the neighborhood. Traffic increases dramatically, late-night noise and floodlights interrupt their children’s sleeping patterns and people sometimes decide to park in front of their driveway or take smoke breaks on their lawn.

“We don’t look forward to fair week,” Jillian said. Other neighbors echoed those sentiments and said they will be happy to see the fair and rodeo move to a much less densely populated area.

Volunteers are another group looking forward to the move out of town. Wanda Alanis, who was keeping an eye on the exhibits in Price Hall on Thursday, said she is excited at the idea of an air-conditioned, enclosed space for exhibits.

“We try to keep things as clean as possible, but some years when it’s windy it gets nasty,” she said.

She and Kris Dorrn, superintendent for the canned foods exhibits, said they’re lucky if dust is all that blows in on the quilts and food. Some years rainstorms have flooded the hall as well. And Dorrn said the lack of air conditioning means the award-winning baked goods on display are often covered in mold by the end of the week.

They already know the new event center, which will house all exhibits during the fair, will take care of those problems. After spending years climbing ladders to hang quilts from the ceiling, they are hoping the new arrangement also includes a safer, more convenient way to display them.

Dorrn said it will also be nice just to have a new space that isn’t falling apart.

“There is a shelf we are not using for canned food this year because we are



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The Umatilla County Fair Court maneuvers through one of the overnight camping areas on their golf cart Thursday at the Umatilla County Fairgrounds in Hermiston.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Patrons ride the Yoyo at the Umatilla County Fair on Thursday in Hermiston.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Patrons look at photos on display in Price Hall on Thursday at the Umatilla County Fairgrounds in Hermiston.

questioning the integrity of it,” she said.

For kids showing animals through 4-H and FFA, the new fairgrounds will include new barns with more room. Kenny Nichols, whose daughter is showing a hog at the fair this year, said he hopes that the camping situation will be better as well.

His family lives outside of Hermiston and he and his wife have jobs to get to, so it’s a huge help for them to be able to camp on the fairgrounds. That allows his daughter to wake up and walk over to her 5 a.m. feeding and pen-cleaning duties. However, this year the family was originally told that even though they had applied for a spot and paid the fee before deadline, there were not enough spots for everyone and they would not be able to camp there. A couple of days before the fair, he said, they were contacted and told that a spot had been found for them after all.

Nichols said it would be nice to have more room, since RVs and tents are currently spaced about five feet apart from each other. And while water and sewer hookups are not essential, they would come in handy. “The main thing would be more camping spots,” he said.

Those attending the fair just for fun have a few upgrades they’re looking for EOTEC to provide as well. Tasha Bleyenbergh said she is looking forward to more handicapped-accessible restrooms, particularly a family restroom in the exhibitor hall.

She had a bad experience in a previous year at the fair with restrooms. She said her autistic son, who was the same size as her at the time, was having stomach problems when they were confronted with a massive line at the regular restrooms. They were forced to use a portable toilet, and Bleyenbergh said trying to cram both of them into the space for several

minutes as she tried to help him clean up in 100 degree heat was a miserable experience.

“It kind of deterred me from trying to take my son to the fair,” she said, noting that she knew of other families who were also hesitant to take disabled or special-needs family members because of the restroom issue.

Slone said the new fair and rodeo grounds at EOTEC will be up to code when it comes to accessibility, including ADA re-

strooms and a large number of handicapped-accessible parking spots near the event center and at the rodeo grounds.

He said the extra space at the new fairgrounds will mean more room and the opportunity to find the best layout for vendors, food stalls, carnival rides and other components.

“If we don’t like the layout the first year we can change the layout for the second year,” he said. “We don’t have to put it back the same way.”

OREGON OFFERS SHORT-TERM FIX FOR DECREASING RURAL HEALTH CARE COVERAGE

By **ALEXA LOUGEE**
Staff writer

The state of Oregon has sought to suture rural Oregon’s growing health care coverage wound.

The Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services announced an agreement between the state and several health insurance companies last week. As part of the agreement, some companies will continue providing coverage in counties they had originally planned to leave in 2017.

In exchange, the state will allow the carriers to increase health care premiums even more than initially planned.

Umatilla County currently has access to coverage from seven companies. Four companies, Lifewise, PacificSource, Providence and Regence, had all planned to withdraw coverage from the county and several neighboring counties next year.

The agreement with the state will see two of those companies, Providence and Regence, remain in Umatilla County along with Bridgespan, HealthNet and Moda.

The county will now have five options, instead of three, for individual health care coverage in 2017.

“We are concerned about the shrinking number of options in certain areas of the state, and we asked insurance companies to reconsider their decisions to withdraw,” said Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services. “This is a short-term solution to provide more options in 2017, but we need to focus on long-term solutions to stabilize the individual market.”

This agreement is only for one year and does not address the underlying issues causing companies to decrease coverage, such as

insufficient payments by the federal government to cover losses from high-risk customers.

The U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid paid out only 12.6 cents on the dollar to insurers under the “risk corridors” program, one of three programs designed to reduce risk and prevent loss for insurers and act as incentive for companies to insure more people. According to insurers this resulted in steep losses for several companies, causing them to raise premiums and narrow network coverage.

Bridgespan, Regence and Providence’s rates will rise from three to six percent more than indicated back in July.

“While bringing back these plans throughout the state is in the best interest of consumers, we know continued rate increases are not sustainable,” Allen said. “In the coming months, we will work with the Governor’s office, legislators, and stakeholders to develop proposals for the 2017 legislative session that address the underlying costs of health care so that Oregonians throughout the state continue to have coverage options.”

Josh Goller of Simmons Insurance in Hermiston in an email called the announcement a “positive development for our region,” but cautioned, “it will still be important to evaluate how the pricing and networks for these carriers compare for these plans for next year.”

The state of Oregon is hosting a town hall today in Hermiston from 6 to 8 p.m. at Good Shepherd Hospital in room CC2. Called Health Insurance 101, these meetings will discuss the basics of health insurance, as well as options that exist for all Oregonians.

There will also be time for audience questions.

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