



WHERE LIFE — AND ONIONS — ARE SWEET

ABOUT TOWN

Sixth graders offered free bikes for perfect attendance

Hermiston sixth graders can earn a free bicycle and helmet by having perfect attendance this year.

Roger's Toyota of Hermiston will purchase the items for any sixth grade student at Sandstone Middle School or Armand Larive Middle School who does not miss a single day of school between Sept. 19 and June 6.

One absence — excused or unexcused — or more than two instances of tardiness will disqualify the students. The challenge will be rolled out at assemblies at both schools this week.

The program is modeled after the P.A.S.S. (Perfect Attendance Spells Success) program in Lewiston, Idaho. It comes at a time when school districts and the state of Oregon have put a renewed emphasis on attendance as a way to improve student success.

Glenn Silaski, general manager of Roger's Toyota, said in a news release that the program has already helped hundreds of students in Idaho increase their attendance rates.

"The best thing about this program is the enthusiasm it generates among teachers, parents and most importantly sixth graders," he said. "These kids are in the perfect place in their school careers to be excited and motivated about an extra incentive to attend class."

Assistant superintendent Brynn Browning said in a statement that research shows attendance in sixth grade is one of the three main indicators that a student is in danger of dropping out of high school later.

"Many instances are seen as 'oh, just one here or there,'" she said. "But students are considered chronically absent even if they miss a day or two every few weeks."

She said the district was grateful to Roger's Toyota for helping make the P.A.S.S. program possible in Hermiston.

TRCI gets new superintendent

A new superintendent will soon take over at Two Rivers Correctional Institution.

On Sept. 15, Brigitte Amsberry will replace acting superintendent Steve Franke at TRCI, a minimum security prison located in Umatilla since 2000.

Amsberry has worked at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton since 2000, where she started as a prison nurse. She served as interim superintendent in 2013 before returning to assistant superintendent in 2014 when Jeri Taylor took over. Amsberry began her most recent role — assistant superintendent of security — in July of this year.



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Stefan Matheny (left), director of sales for River Point Farms, and Jonathan Miller, plant manager, talk about the Hermiston Sweets sweet onion product line at the farm's fresh pack plant near Hermiston.

HERMISTON SWEETS HIT STORES IN TIME FOR END OF SUMMER

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Staff Writer

A candy wrapper might seem like an odd logo for onions, but Stefan Matheny said it does the trick for Hermiston Sweets.

Matheny, director of sales for River Point Farms in Hermiston, said the company has marketed locally grown sweet onions for 20 years. With harvest now in full swing, the farm is scrambling to package and fill orders in time for Labor Day Weekend.

Hermiston is already famous for growing another kind of sweet treat — watermelons — but Matheny said Hermiston Sweets have also become well known among Northwest retailers and customers.

"I think the Hermiston Sweet is pretty versatile," Matheny said. "It can go on a hamburger, fresh cut, or it also sautés very well."

It's that kind of versatility that allows Hermiston Sweets to fetch a premium price on the market. Sweet onions are distinguished by their mild pungency, as measured by the amount of pyruvic acid in the produce. That's the chemical that makes people's eyes sting and water.

While Hermiston Sweets are only a small percentage of business at River Point Farms, Matheny said it's proven to be a valuable specialty market. Hermiston Sweets can be found at a number of regional and national chains, including Safeway, Costco and Fred Meyer.

"Certainly, the Columbia Basin as a whole is well-known for quality," Matheny said. "It's a good area for growing onions."



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Several varieties of onions await in bins for processing and packaging at the River Point Farm fresh pack plant near Hermiston.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY RIVER POINT FARMS.

See SWEETS, A14 Hermiston sweet onions have been marketed by River Point Farms for 20 years.

Warming Station looking for space to rent

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The Hermiston Warming Station is looking for a home.

Trish Rossell said the nonprofit, which formerly operated under the umbrella of St. John's Episcopal Church, now has its own 501(c)3 nonprofit status and is interested in renting a space somewhere in Hermiston for the winter.

In the past the temporary homeless shelter has been open only on days when the temperature dips below freezing, but Rossell said this year it will operate seven days a week during December, January and February no matter the temperature.

"We elected to do that because we thought that a consistent

schedule would be better for the people we serve," she said.

The schedule will keep the station's clients from showing up only to find that the shelter isn't open for the night, or from needing to find Internet access each day to check the shelter's Facebook page. The downside is that the shelter is only allowed to house guests for 90 days out of the season, so Hermiston's homeless population will have to weather cold days in November or March on their own.

Two years ago the Warming Station temporarily rented space downtown, but last year used the ARC of Umatilla building, which had more space but is used for other activities during the day and early evenings. Rossell said

they would prefer to rent their own space again this year but landlords have proven wary about renting to an organization that gives homeless people a place to sleep.

"They shouldn't be afraid because we have volunteers present," she said.

The nonprofit plans to schedule trainings for volunteers during October and November. She said planning for volunteers should be easier if they know exactly what nights the shelter will be open, and she hopes to see both returning volunteers and new faces. People who aren't comfortable with working directly with homeless guests can still be used to do

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