

Poll shows support waning for proposed school bond

Hermiston School Board considers how to approach bond, voters

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
Staff Writer

The closer the Hermiston School District gets to committing to a campaign for a \$104 million bond, the less Hermiston residents seem interested in passing it.

On Monday, the Hermiston School Board discussed the findings of a new public survey, which collected findings from 373 registered voters between Oct. 3-7, a majority of whom were active in three or four of the last elections.

Prepared by The Nelson Report, a public opinion research firm based out of Salem, the survey revealed that 48 percent of respondents opposed the bond proposal versus 46 percent in favor.

This is a flip from a survey in May, when 47 percent of respondents supported the bond and 43 percent didn't.

Furthermore, the amount of people surveyed who were undecided dipped from 10 percent in May to 6 percent in October. The most recent survey's margin of error is 5 percent.

Despite the change in attitude, Superintendent Fred Maiocco urged the board not to be intimidated by the numbers, especially considering that surveys before a 2008 bond showed public support between 50-52 percent before it passed with more than 53 percent.

"Whether it's the presidential cycle, the state

attention to the ballots or it's this specific issue (people) are concerned about, we have a little more opposition," he said. "We have to be aware of that, but it's not out of bounds by any means."

To help accommodate the district's skyrocketing enrollment, school officials are considering asking voters to approve adding another 86 cents per assessed \$1,000 in property value to fund a number of capital projects, including a Hermiston High School expansion, a new parking lot at Sandstone Middle School, and new elementary schools at Rocky Heights, Highland Hills and the district's Theater Lane property.

Although an overwhelming majority agreed that schools were overcrowded which adversely affects the quality of education, 34 percent said they opposed the bond because taxes were already too high and 18 percent said they were opposed because the district was asking for too much money.

There are some silver linings tucked into the report for the board.

Support for the bond increased if the district emphasized that the bond would protect the community's investment, receive review from a citizen accountability committee, save the district money by making the new buildings more energy efficient, increase student safety, and be designed to ensure new residents would also contribute their tax money toward the projects.

Maiocco was also heartened that the sur-

vey showed more people were open to an 86-cent or 90-cent bond rate than were against it.

"Cost is not the issue," he said. "It's all about the reasoning for the cost."

At 63 percent, there was strong support among the respondents to replace Rocky Heights while the Highland Hills, Sandstone and high school projects had slim leads within the margin of error.

The least popular projects were a new elementary school on Theater Lane, with 47 percent saying it was a high priority and 49 percent marking it as a low priority, and only 40 percent of respondents said buying new property for future growth was a high priority.

Maiocco noted that the 47 percent of respondents who opposed the bond was significantly higher than either of the 2008 surveys and the board would have to build a "robust" political action committee to court the 6 percent of voters who could still be persuaded.

"This is by no means in the bag," he said.

Director of Operations Mike Kay also gave the board a short presentation on the status of the old fairgrounds and senior center, both of which are now owned by the district.

According to Kay, the fairgrounds should be vacated by Dec. 31, 2016 and the rodeo arena and the senior center should be vacated by June 1, 2017.

Demolition of the senior center is scheduled for July 2017 and is expected to be completed by March 1, 2018.

City to hold off on natural gas utility

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The city of Hermiston has everything it needs to start its own natural gas utility, but will wait until the right opportunity comes along.

The consensus during a work session on Monday night was that the required investment of \$4-6 million to run a transmission line out to the industrial area south of Hermiston would only be worth it if it guaranteed a major employer would set up shop in Hermiston. Unless that happens, the City Council agreed with staff, the investment would probably not be worth the risk.

"We're currently sitting in a situation where we're ready to go whenever needed," Hermiston Energy Services Superintendent Nate Rivera told the council.

He said if a large-scale natural gas user approached the city and promised to build on the Cook Industrial Site, near the intersection of SE Kelli Blvd. and Feedville Road, and invest in the municipal gas utility, it would take about a year for that user to have the natural gas at their disposal. Considering it would probably take that long for the company to construct their facility, "we're as prepared

as we can be," Rivera said.

The city first considered the idea of creating its own natural gas utility after a disagreement with Cascade Natural Gas in 2014. DuPont Pioneer had to halt a multi-million dollar expansion in Hermiston because Cascade Natural Gas told them the infrastructure needed to serve the expansion would cost \$450,000 but later came back and said there had been a mathematical error and reinforcing the pipeline would actually cost \$2.3 million.

Then-City Manager Ed Brookshier recommended at the time that the city look into forming its own natural gas utility instead of paying for upgrades to a company's infrastructure that would then be owned by that company instead of the city. The city later successfully defended its right to do so in court.

Rivera, who has been researching the option, said that the city's best option would be to connect to TransCanada's mainline that runs near Stanfield and run a transmission line of its own down Highway 395. It would also need to construct a gate station and odorizer where the city's line connected to TransCanada's line. The process would cost \$4 million

to \$6 million and not count the distribution pipes to individual industrial properties, the staff time to run the small utility and the contract with a company to respond to gas leaks.

Rivera said he has developed a request for qualifications for an engineer, identified a company that could perform maintenance and inspections, made arrangements with TransCanada and done everything else necessary to pave the way for a future Hermiston Gas Utility Department.

City Manager Byron Smith told the council that he felt it "wouldn't be wise" to just build the infrastructure and hope it attracted a future industrial user that could help with the debt payments. Instead, he said, it would be better to only go forward if it guaranteed a large employer who could help "stabilize the system" up front.

Councilor John Kirwan said even if that is the case, he was glad that the city could tell a potential developer that the natural gas could be ready in a year if they needed it.

"The time we've spent getting to this point is not wasted," he said.

Contact Jade McDowell at 541-564-4536.

IN BRIEF

Head-on crash kills two near Boardman

A Stanfield man was one of two victims killed Monday night in a head-on crash near Boardman.

The deadly wreck happened around 7:30 p.m. on Interstate 84 near milepost 167, Oregon State Police reported Tuesday, when Clifford Ammons, 77, of Reedsport, drove a 2009 Honda Ridgeline westbound in the eastbound lane and smashed head-on into a

2005 Ford Mustang.

Francisco Ramirez, 27, of Stanfield, was driving the Mustang, according to state police. Ramirez and Ammons were the only people in their vehicles and both died at the scene.

A dog, though, was in the Honda and suffered an injury. The animal was taken for treatment to the Hermiston Veterinary Clinic, 1995 S. Highway 395, Hermiston.

State authorities closed the freeway for about four-and-a-half hours so emergen-

cy workers could free the bodies and for the crash investigation and removal of debris.

State police also reported troopers think the Honda Ridgeline entered the freeway the wrong way at the Highway 730 interchange near milepost 168. The agency asked witnesses who saw the vehicle traveling the wrong way prior to the crash to contact the Oregon State Police Pendleton Area Command at 541-278-4090.



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