

New Hispanic Advisory Committee chair looking forward to challenge

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Fighting addiction in the community is a passion for the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee's new chair.

Jose Garcia was chosen as the committee chair at the end of November after former chair Eddie de la Cruz moved to Texas. He is also the director of New Horizons, which serves those struggling with problems such as drug and alcohol addictions, gambling, anger management and domestic violence. He hopes to use his professional skills to help the Hispanic Advisory Committee look for ways it can assist in addressing those challenges.

"We do have some issues in the community, and I think we can work on that," he said.

Garcia said he has enjoyed getting to know city councilor Manuel Gutierrez, who acts as a council liaison to the committee. Gutierrez also works in human services through Domestic Violence Services.

"He's got a lot of ideas," Garcia said. "We've been having some preliminary talks. With his expertise and my expertise, maybe we can do some classes, educate some people."

Past board chair Eddie de la Cruz said Garcia is a "great guy" who has been in-

involved in the community for a long time, and people do not need to worry that under Garcia's watch the Hispanic Advisory Committee's efforts will flag.

"They've still got a lot of good plans. The committee is still going strong," he said.

The city council honored De La Cruz, who was a founding member of the committee, with a plaque at Monday's meeting and thanked him for his four years of service.

Past initiatives have included increasing voter registration and increasing involvement in education, and Garcia said he also wants to keep those things going, including a popular effort to partner with the Hermiston School District to provide Spanish translators for parent-teacher conferences.

He said he also wants to help Hispanic children in the community connect to more financial aid resources for pursuing higher education.

Garcia said parents come to him all the time, worried their child might be doing drugs or upset about confirmed drug use. He said when parents get involved in their child's education, grades go up and attendance improves, which helps children stay away from drugs and gangs and other harmful behaviors.

The problem, he said, is

that many Latino parents are working multiple jobs to make ends meet or give their children a less impoverished childhood than they had. They don't always have the luxury of arranging their work schedule, as Garcia has done while raising his three children, so that they can drop them off and pick them up from school each day.

"A lot of the factories and warehouses around here, they're not family-oriented," he said.

Parents feel powerless over that, he said, just like he sometimes feels powerless to help people turn their lives around when it takes four months to get someone into rehab. Garcia said he lost his own brother to addiction a few years ago for that very reason.

That feeling of powerlessness is a reason that Garcia has been drawn to Donald Trump over the last year. While many Latinos have rejected Trump for his rhetoric about building walls and mass round-ups of illegal immigrants, Garcia said he finds hope in Trump's message about fighting for everyday Americans and helping those in our own backyard.

He said he wants to help calm fears by reminding Hispanic community members that Trump needs Congress to approve many of his proposals and that he ran his candidacy on a pledge to help the working class.

"I want to educate the

Latino community to be optimistic and not have so much fear," he said.

Garcia said he also wants to help the Hispanic Advisory Committee be more connected to the city council, and to make sure the committee is helping support "great" projects like the new, free bus system in town. He said he wanted to keep fostering new leaders in the Hispanic community and encouraging them to be more actively involved.

Garcia moved to Hermiston from Yakima in 1989 and said he really appreciated the growing opportunities he had working as a drug and alcohol addiction counselor for Umatilla County when he first came to town.

"I really thank the county for the product I am today," he said.

He said people he worked with in that job always told him he needed to learn to say no, because he would say yes no matter what new project or meeting was added to his plate. But he can't help being a go-getter willing to tackle any problem, he said.

He has been frustrated by the last two Hispanic Advisory Committee meetings being canceled due to weather, but plans to take the same go-getter approach with the committee.

"They say you can be part of the problem or part of the solution," he said. "Today I can tell you I'm part of the solution."

Water, sewer rates to go up

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Water and sewer rates will increase in Hermiston starting in March.

The city council unanimously approved the rate increases Monday. Both water and sewer rates will go up 5 percent in March 2017, 5 percent in October 2017 and 4.9 percent in March 2018.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan said the increased revenue will help pay for maintenance, "remote-read" water meters and de-watering equipment for the wastewater treatment plant.

Currently the city spends \$225,000 per year, including two full-time employees, to read water meters one by one. Morgan said putting in meters that send data to the city automatically will put that down to the equivalent cost of one half-time employee. The meters are expected to pay for themselves in about 7 years but not need to be replaced for 15.

Besides saving the city money and increasing employee safety, Morgan said there will also be benefits to the customers. They will be able to track their daily water usage, which could be especially helpful for irrigators. The system will also be much faster at catching leaks or a running toilet, and users can get a notification on their phone if a sudden, prolonged spike in usage indicates a problem. Morgan said he's heard lots of stories of people being hit with an unexpectedly huge water bill because they didn't know for weeks that a pipe was leaking into the ground.

"I went on a trip to Idaho and my toilet was running and I came back and my water bill was twice what I expected it to be," he said.

On the sewer side, the extra revenue will pay for de-watering equipment that will help more efficiently take care of the solids fil-

tered out at the recycled water treatment plant. The city recently spent \$1.4 million emptying the lagoons where the solid waste goes after it is filtered out, and Morgan said with the new treatment plant's stronger filtering capabilities, that will now need to happen every three years.

"It's filling the lagoon much more quickly, and that's not something you want to overflow," he said.

The \$1.5 million equipment would reduce costs down to \$85,000 per year, meaning the investment would pay for itself in three and a half years.

The rate adjustment the council approved Monday means the average water user (at 11,220 gallons a month) will go from \$27.83 per month currently to \$29.22 in March, while the average sewer user will go from \$23.56 per month to \$24.74 in March.

City councilor Doug Smith said that while the city understands that raising rates are a hardship on people, it also has decades-old pipes that "look like Swiss cheese" and it needs to save up some money to fix them before a major incident.

"We're trying to do as much as we possibly can with as little as we possibly can," he said.

On Monday the city council also approved new parking spaces downtown. As a "pilot program" for changes in the future, the council agreed to change the parking spaces on the north side of Gladys Avenue between Second Street and Third Street from parallel parking to diagonal spaces.

The change — which Morgan said was easily reversible if people don't like it — will add four new spaces in front of the library and help address residents' aversion to parallel parking if the parking lot is full.

Rising painkiller abuse outpaces available treatment

Hermiston forum explores chronic pain and opioid abuse

By **KATHY ANEY**
Staff Writer

Dr. Chuck Hofmann helps people addicted to prescription painkillers find their way back to normal life. And he's bringing what he learned to Hermiston for two forums this week.

The Baker physician runs a clinic where he treats addicts with a medication called buprenorphine to curb cravings. Hofmann said many of his patients got hooked on prescription painkillers after surgery or injuries.

Hofmann described the recent metamorphosis of one of his patients. The young father was spending every waking hour trying to score drugs — first opioids and then heroin, which is cheaper. He lost a good job. He spent time in jail. After starting a regimen of buprenorphine, under the brand name Suboxone, and undergoing counseling, he has found himself again.

"He's got his kids back. In three months, he'll have a full-time job," Hofmann said. "From a provider's standpoint, it's the most

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Both at Good Shepherd Medical Center

rewarding thing I've ever done."

Hofmann hopes other providers can catch the vision and start offering medically assisted therapies (MAT), too. There simply aren't enough providers who offer treatment. Many opioid addicts can't easily access treatment without driving long distances. The few providers who offer treatment in Eastern Oregon are getting outpaced by the epidemic.

The numbers are disheartening. The Oregon Health Authority reports that more Oregonians die from prescription opioids than any other drug, including alcohol, methamphetamines, heroin and cocaine. An average of

three Oregonians overdose on prescription painkillers each week. Opioid abuse has tripled since 2000 and someone overdoses in the U.S. about every 20 minutes. Oregon ranks highest in non-medical use of prescription painkillers in the country. In 2014, a quarter of Oregonians received a prescription for an opioid.

All that translates into a huge need for doctors, physician's assistants and nurse practitioners to join the effort by taking the required training and applying for necessary waivers.

Hofmann urged fellow providers to attend upcoming forums on non-cancer pain management in Hermiston, Pendleton, Ontario or La Grande. The seminars offer free continuing medical education credits, funded by the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization and a state grant. The first forum is Friday at Good Shepherd Hospital, Hermiston from 5-9 p.m.

Topics include talking to patients about addiction, the neuroanatomy and neurochemistry of addiction, pain schools, nondrug treatment options and the role of buprenorphine in treatment.

Other free forums, open to the public, will explore acute versus chronic

pain, non-drug options for chronic pain and the role of psychosocial support in chronic pain management. The first is Thursday in Hermiston. Register online at www.eocco.com or call Briona at 503-952-5010 or email her at briona.campbell@modahealth.com.

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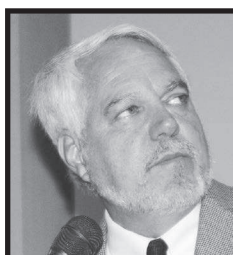
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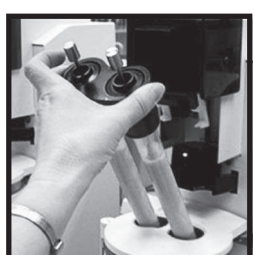
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