

Trott resigns as Umatilla mayor

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

Umatilla Mayor David Trott has resigned, citing irreconcilable differences with the city council.

Trott has been at odds with other city leaders since January, when he called a special executive session to discuss the performance of city manager Russ Pelleberg and the city council chose to take no action on his concerns. In a lengthy resignation email sent to the council March 1, Trott accused the council of putting “its collective head in the sand” and trying to quash any public discussion of problems Umatilla faces.



David Trott

“Attitudes like this show a disdain and lack of respect for the public that the Mayor and Council represent,” he wrote. “Our ‘public’ are not going to shrivel and melt away because of an open and honest public discourse between the Mayor and Council.”

The council met in executive session on Jan. 25 at the request of Trott. Trott told the *East Oregonian* before the meeting that he felt Pelleberg had lied on his job application when he first applied to work for the city as public works director in 2013.

Pelleberg wrote that his reason for leaving Columbia Irrigation District in 2012 was “elimination of position.” The assistant manager position he left has not been refilled to this day, but public records show the district’s board voted to terminate Pelleberg for unsatisfactory performance. Trott also felt that Pelleberg should have been more forthcoming about the fact that the institution where his bachelor’s and master’s degrees are from — Breyer State University — is an unaccredited online company that has been labeled a “diploma mill” by the Alabama Community College System.

Trott also said he was calling the meeting to discuss concerns about Pelleberg’s interactions with city planning director Bill Searles,

whom Pelleberg had sent a letter of discipline to. Trott said he was also in contact with citizens who had alleged unethical behavior by some city employees that he was attempting to look into.

At the following city council meeting on Feb. 7, city councilor Mel Ray asked for an executive session to be added to the end of the meeting to discuss Trott’s performance. Trott denied the request, saying that the public needed prior notice, and requested that councilors’ concerns about him be aired in an open session on March 7.

Later, after receiving emails from councilors criticizing his request to have the discussion in public, Trott withdrew his request for an open session. The city also canceled a planned Feb. 21 executive session for Pelleberg’s annual review.

In his resignation letter Trott criticized councilors’ suggestions that it would be “political suicide” for the city if the council had the discussion about Trott in open session.

“We, the collective Council (Councilors and Mayor) asked for the public’s trust by electing us to office,” he wrote. “We took an oath to represent and serve the public, and to uphold local, state and federal laws. We are not above the public, and I fear that some of our Council has either lost sight, or never had sight, of that obligation. We should not be ‘transparent’ because it is some word of the time, we should be transparent because it is the only means by which the public knows that we are properly conducting ‘their’ business, for the good of ‘their’ community.”

Trott said he would take his concerns to the state ethics commission, and his resignation was effective immediately.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.

Action groups looking to give downtown a jump start

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

If Main Street is considered the heart of a community, then Hermiston is rolling up its sleeves and preparing for some CPR.

Downtown stakeholders met this week to form five action groups ready to tackle challenges they feel Hermiston’s downtown district faces.

“Hermiston has a lot of potential, but there is definitely some room to take some action,” Main Street coordinator Emma Porricolo said.

Porricolo, who is part-way through a year-long stint as a RARE (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments) student for the city of Hermiston, told the group that interviews with downtown business owners, managers and property owners had shown five major challenges that stakeholders believe need addressed in order to help downtown thrive.

Those challenges are a shortage of retail and restaurants, a perceived lack of parking, a need for building upkeep and renovation, a need for beautification and a shortage of downtown events and activities.

Some of those problems are already being addressed in disparate ways by groups like the Hermiston Downtown District and the city. First Thursday events at the beginning of each month are now a fixture, for example, and shoppers drawn to Main Street businesses this Thursday were a sign that the effort is paying off.

Kathy Lowe was there for First Thursday, and said she sees signs that downtown is already being revitalized from where it was a few years ago.

“This is my first time, and I think it’s great to kind of help getting to know downtown,” she said.

She had just come from Two96 Main, a fairly new pop-up market she hadn’t



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The Hermiston downtown stakeholders are attempting to tackle challenges confronting Main Street like enticing more retail and restaurant businesses.

known about before. She said she would definitely be back.

Although some individual efforts are bearing fruit, Tuesday’s meeting was a chance to talk about a larger vision for downtown, and about how to leverage all the available resources to get there.

Sheri Stuart, Oregon Main Street Coordinator, kicked off the meeting with a presentation of ideas other communities had found success with. She said while downtown businesses may be small individually, as a collective group they are a major employer in town. The health of downtown is also something that large companies consider when choosing a community to build in.

“If downtown isn’t clean and healthy and attractive and offering lots of services, they have other places they can be,” she said.

Later, attendees broke into groups to discuss ways to make some of Stuart’s suggestions work in Hermiston.

Umatilla County planning director Tamra Mabbott facilitated the restaurant and retail group, which was the most popular table of the night.

She said they discussed the need to create “synergy” through features like outdoor seating and sandwich boards, and events like a Food Cart Friday. They also came up with a list specific businesses the city should work to recruit downtown that would draw more people.

“We really need an ice cream shop,” she said.

In the “parking problems” group, members discussed erecting wayfinding signs to help visitors easily find the parking lots available for free public use. They also discussed ways to encourage employees to park in under-utilized lots instead of taking up prime spots directly in front of other businesses.

While Hermiston’s downtown hosts a few very large events each year, the events group discussed ways to use the city’s planned festival street as an opportunity for smaller, more regular events like the farmer’s market to draw people downtown.

Casi White of Simmons Insurance Group said she would bring her children downtown for something like a splash fountain or a children’s museum.

On the beautification side, group members discussed a marketing campaign for the city’s bench and trash receptacle sponsorship program, which could result in more wrought-iron benches and trash receptacles downtown. They also identified 14 light poles that could be used for hanging flower baskets, and expressed a desire to create a gathering place in the large brick courtyard off Main Street by adding a water feature, benches and a Little Free Library.

The renovation and upkeep group talked about pursuing more effective façade grants and creating a window decorating contest.

Porricolo asked group members to exchange contact information, discuss who they could recruit to their action group and set a follow-up meeting. Community members can contact Porricolo at city hall if they want to get involved.

“It seems like there are some really great ideas to get things going in downtown and that’s exciting,” she said.

Contact Jade McDowell at 541-564-4536.

Kiwanis Club celebrating its 10-year anniversary

By **JADE McDOWELL**
Staff Writer

The Echo Kiwanis Club is celebrating its 10th anniversary next week.

By some standards the club is small — a little over 20 members at any given time — but in a town of 700, it has an unusually high per-capita rate.

Mike Duffy, club president, said people seemed to want to join Kiwanis Club in Echo to serve their community and network with others.

“The basics are to find people who want to be in-

involved in things and ask them to join, and then treat them respectfully, as volunteers deserve to be treated,” he said.

As the service club celebrates a decade in Echo, Duffy said several of its charter members are still active in the club. Right now they meet the first and third Thursday of each month at 6 p.m. in the Masonic Lodge, but they are discussing a return to their roots by meeting at the Buttercreek Coffeehouse and Mercantile, which opens for business Friday. The

club’s original meetings 10 years ago were held in the building, back when it was the Red Express.

The Echo Kiwanis Club runs Chester’s Food Pantry, named after the late Chet Prior after he showed up to a meeting and announced the club needed to reduce hunger in Echo. The pantry gives food boxes to dozens of families in the small community each month.

The club also helps with events like the Red 2 Red bicycle race, and hosted an Oktoberfest celebration

last year to raise money for restoration of the historical St. Peter’s Catholic Church, built in 1913.

“It’s not used as a church anymore, but it’s a real dear landmark,” Duffy said.

Echo Kiwanis raises about \$7,000 per year for scholarships for local students and volunteered to run the city’s annual car show this year and donate the proceeds to Echo School. Students from the school’s mechanics program usually run the show as a fundraiser, but the

program is taking a year off due to construction at the school and Duffy said Kiwanis Club members didn’t want to see the “ball drop.”

The club also runs the BUG program, which stands for “bringing up grades.” Duffy said they look at grades partway through the year and then provide an ice cream social and prizes for students who manage to raise their grades.

“It’s a really simple program, but it works,” he said.

The Echo Kiwanis Club is celebrating its 10-year anniversary with a dinner party on March 16 at Sno Road Winery, catered by H&P Cafe and featuring a speech by past Kiwanis International president Sylvester Neal. There will be no-host wine and beer starting at 5:30 p.m. and dinner at 6 p.m. Cost is \$20 and attendees must RSVP to Duffy (541-379-4880) by Thursday, March 9.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.

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