Stanfield residents to see hike in school taxes

By JAYATI **RAMAKRISHNAN** STAFF WRITER

People living in Stanfield School District will see a spike in their next property tax bill, due to what the district claims is an accounting error.

The additional tax requirement is in response to the district's error in under-collecting to cover a bond measure passed nearly 20 years ago to pay for a new elementary school.

A flier sent out to all residents of the district notes that during the 2015-2016 fiscal audit, conducted in early 2017, the district was notified by its auditing firm that it had not been collecting enough property taxes to cover the bond payments by 2019, when the bond is set to expire.

Superintendent Shellev Liscom wrote in the flier that was delivered recently that the district would need to increase the percentage it levies for the bond for the 2017-2018 fiscal year. The letter stated that the change was not an "increase," but a reflection of what residents should have been paying in property taxes for the past two years.

Paul Chalmers, the tax assessor for Umatilla County, said last week that he had already received several phone calls about the problem and made clear that his

department does not set the rate for bonds and is not at fault for the error.

'The assessment and taxation department gets certified forms for every taxing district in Umatilla County," he said. "What they certify to us is what we put on the tax rolls."

Chalmers said he was made aware of the problem more than a month ago and advised Liscom to send a notice to taxpayers. He noted that for the upcoming fiscal year, Stanfield will levy \$792,553 for bond payments. Last year, they levied \$356,425.

Liscom said the error was discovered during a meeting with auditors, but that it's unclear exactly what led to the mistake and when it was caught. According to school board meeting minutes, Kris James, the district's current business manger. said that auditors gave the district a "good report with few findings" as recently as February.

Liscom and James put the blame on a previous business manager.

"It's hard to know what the last person was thinking," said Liscom, who was hired as the district's superintendent in

Although the district did not name her by name, the previous business manager at the time of the bond issue was Leeann ReMillard, who held the position for at

least 12 years, until her retirement in 2016.

James, who is starting her second year as Stanfield School District's business manager, said the issue came to light this year, while auditing 2015-2016 school year. James said Pendleton-based Cockburn and McClintock brought the error to the attention of James, Liscom, and two school board members.

"They said they found there was not enough tax dollars being levied to adequately cover the bond payments," said James.

She also said this was not the first time the firm had brought the disparity up to the district.

"They brought it to the previous business manager at least two times in the past," James said. "They suggested how to correct it, and it was up to the person to make those changes. That was not done."

James said that to her knowledge, auditors only told this information to the business manager, and not to the superintendent or anyone else in the district.

"I think they trusted that the business manager would bring that information to the superintendent," she said.

Chalmers said Stanfield taxpayers have been paying about \$1.28 per \$1,000 in assessed value. After the increase, they will paying about twice that much — \$2.56 per \$1,000 in value. According to U.S. Census Data from 2010, Stanfield's average home price is \$110,000. That means that according to Chalmers' numbers, the average homeowner will be paying roughly \$281 for the bond next fiscal year.

Some aspects of the property tax adjustment are still up in the air. Liscom said last week the district was working with Chalmers and with auditors to see if they can spread the increased payments out, instead of making taxpayers fork up the missing funds all at

Stanfield resident David Olson said he had been researching the issue since he received the flier earlier this month. He initially thought the notice was a scam.

"There was no address, no phone number, nothing," he said. "It wasn't on official letterhead."

He said he contacted Chalmers, who told him the information was legit. But Olson is still concerned procedure was not followed.

There was no amount, no information whatsoever," he said. "Just the idea of a small community like this — it's not the right avenue."

Contact Jayati Ramakrishnan at 541-564-4534 or jramakrishnan@ eastoregonian.com.

EOTEC looks ahead to ongoing activities

Board plans how to transition from construction to operations mode

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN STAFF WRITER

The first fair and rodeo at the new Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center grounds has come and gone, and board members are turning their attention to operating the facility.

Board members of both the Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo spoke at Friday's first EO-TEC board meeting since those events ended. Both said that overall, their events went well.

"The board didn't meet ... because they were worried about getting it completed, not having an event," said Dennis Barnett of the rodeo board. "After months of working on the facility, the event went off without a hitch."

Dan Dorran, an outgoing fair board member and a member of the EOTEC board, said seeing the facility in operation was a dream come true "I have thousands of new

friends I never would have had before, and probably as many enemies," he said. "Dreams don't come this big very often."

Despite their overall satisfaction with the first event at the new location, EO-TEC board members quickly shifted focus. Their next major job will be to find a permanent manager to run the facility. Nate Rivera, the superintendent of Hermiston Energy Services, agreed earlier this month to serve as interim manager of EOTEC for up to six months — but

one of his main goals will be finding a candidate to replace him full-time.

Rivera updated the board on some tasks he's been working on since the fair and

rodeo ended. "This week, we had a management company on site to do a facility assessment walk-through," he said. "We did a two-hour tour. They saw potential at the entire site."

Rivera said the company, VenuWorks (which also operates the Three Rivers Convention Center in Kennewick), told him the first objective for management should be revenue creation.

"They said we need to get something at this facility that makes money every day," Rivera said. The most likely way to do

that, they suggested, is by developing the RV park on the EOTEC site. But Rivera also told the

board that they need to solidify their own objectives before bringing in a general manager. "Until we answer some

of those questions, it's going to be difficult for someone to take this journey with us," he said Rivera requested direc-

tion from the board on several operations issues. He suggested hiring a team from MLD Services for maintenance and janitorial services, and that the board enter a contract with them from now until the end of October. He also asked for ap-

proval on booking an event - a horse sale — at the facility using existing pricing structures from the fair, and requested that the board approve planting trees in the swells at the north end of the fairgrounds parking lot so they don't have to be hand-watered. The board unanimously approved Rivera's requests.

ToyotaCare

Psychiatric facility applies for state approval

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County's main mental health service is seeking approval on plans to open a psychiatric hospital in Hermiston.

Lifeways Inc., will be reviewed by the Oregon Health Authority to open Aspen Springs Hospital, a 16-bed psychiatric hospital under construction at 1212 W. Linda Ave., Hermiston. The OHA will make a decision

the facility in July 2016, and the hospital was scheduled to open this spring. Lifeways director of communications Rick George said the plans were stalled by some issues with other facilities' applica-

'We expected it to be a faster process, but two other projects were going on the other side of the state, which pushed us back," he said.

"The state handles all of those (processes)," he said. "An organization like Lifeways has to go through sevseries of questions about why they want to open a facility, what they're trying to do."

A press release from the Oregon Health Authority notes that the review will evaluate whether the project is effective to the area it proposes to serve, and whether it's financially viable.

When it was first announced, the project was estimated at a construction cost of about \$4.3 million, with an annual operating cost of \$2.8 million. George said those numbers should remain Lifeways broke ground on eral steps. Apply, answer a roughly the same, despite the

He said the public hearing will take place in late September or early October in Hermiston, and will allow them to finalize their appli-

Council approves manager's raise vid Drotzmann told Smith

Council unanimously approved amendments to the for City contract Byron Manager Smith that will give him a \$5,000 annu-

al raise and extend

his contract a year. The action came **Byron Smith** Monday night following an executive session to discuss his performance over

the past year. The contract amendment includes a one-year contract extension through Aug. 28,

2019 and an increase of \$5,000 per year to his base

> pay. That will give Smith, who was hired as city manager in 2014 with a base salary of \$115,000 a year, a new base annual salary of \$137,000. He is currently making \$132,000 per year

after the most recent cost of living increase for all city employees approved by the council in June.

'We appreciate your service to the city," Mayor Daafter the unanimous vote. "It's been a challenging year," during which Smith also served as chairman of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center board, which completed construction on new facilities to take on one of the center's primary functions as home to the Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo.

Those two events moved to the new EOTEC facilities and hosted their signature annual events there early this month.

Gary L. West









Find out why so many homeowners go with Guild!



Pendleton Branch **Elaine Anderson** Sales Mar. | Loan Office NMLS #487577 129 S. Main Street Pendleton, OR 97801 O: 541.304.2069 C: 541.429.5029

eanderson@guildmortgage.net



Hermiston, OR 97838 O: 541.371.5562 C: 541.720.2786 katie.johnson@guildmortgage.net

Staffed by well-known local residents, Guild Pendleton and Hermiston have the nationally-backed resources and local know-how to serve our unique region.

any is an Equal Housing Lender; NMLS #3274, ML-176 distribution, #1 lender status based on the December 2016 Corelogic Report, (81707