

97 percent of curb ramps on state highways not ADA-compliant

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

Ninety-seven percent of curb ramps on Oregon's state highways are not compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act standards, according to a recent inventory, and Umatilla County is no exception to that lack of accessibility.

While Hermiston still has many that are not compliant, it does have some of the state's few curb ramps that do meet specifications thanks to upgrades that happened along Highway 395 two years ago.

Pendleton, on the other hand, has a long list of corners along its own stretch of Highway 395 that are missing ramps to allow wheelchair users to access the sidewalk. The city was one of several places in Oregon singled out in a report by advocacy group Disability Rights Oregon.

"I was very concerned about Umatilla County in particular and highlighted Pendleton because I thought it had the most egregious problems, but there were many areas that were concerning," said Tom Stenson, litigation attorney with Disability Rights Oregon.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1991 to create federal standards for accessibility, including laws that pedestrian walkways must include a ramp where they cross a curb. A settlement between disability rights advocates and the Oregon Department of Transportation approved by a federal judge in March 2017 committed ODOT to creating an audit of all crossings, completing curb ramp upgrades at 30 percent of the locations by the end of 2022, completing upgrades at 75 percent by the end of 2027 and fixing all of the curb ramp locations by December 31, 2032.

The audit, completed about a month ago, rated only 3 percent of the curb ramps on state highways as "good." Some were rated "fair" but most of the rest were rated "poor." In 20 percent of cases, there was no ramp of any kind. In others, the ramp was at too steep of an angle, blocked by a utility pole, in a place that required going out of the crosswalk



A semi-trailer passes in front of an ADA-compliant wheelchair ramp crossing Highway 395 in Hermiston.

STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

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and into oncoming traffic to access it, or lacking a set of bumps for vision-impaired pedestrians to know they are stepping out into a roadway.

Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT's Region 5, said ODOT has been fixing curb ramps as it completes other work. When the department installed new traffic control cameras along Highway 395 in Hermiston in 2015, ADA-compliant curbs marked with yellow bumps were installed, giving Hermiston some of Oregon's curb ramps classified as "good." More of those ramps will be installed later this year on Northwest 11th Street (Highway 205) when ODOT partners with the city of Hermiston to add traffic signals to its intersections with Orchard and Elm avenues.

Due to the settlement agreement, ODOT has also set some money aside to do projects specifically focused on ADA compliance.

"Obviously they can't all be done at once," Strandberg said.

They might not be able to all be done at once, but having 883 crossings out of 26,225 compliant since 1991 is not moving fast enough in the view of Disability Rights Oregon.

"If you're only managing to complete 3 percent of ramps in 27 years, your progress is not adequate," Stenson said.

He said creating proper curb ramps on state highways is not just about following the law, it's about allowing people with disabilities to fully and safely participate in their community. Stenson said he has seen people have to move out into oncoming traffic to access a sidewalk and has one client who showed him how she had to turn around and back up too-steep ramps to avoid tipping over in her wheelchair.

Darren Umbarger of Clearview Mediation and Disability Resource Center in Pendleton said things like that can be dangerous.

"People will get mad because here's someone riding down the bicycle lane in

a wheelchair. ... Sometimes it's easier to go down a bicycle lane and sometimes it's not, but sometimes there's no choice," he said.

Umbarger said ADA-compliant ramps aren't just for people in wheelchairs — they can make things easier for senior citizens with walkers, parents pushing baby strollers or delivery people pushing dollies.

In 2017 ODOT published the Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Transition Plan Update detailing a game plan for becoming fully ADA-compliant, including making all of its buildings more accessible and aggressively moving to fix curb ramps.

"ODOT is committed to improving the accessibility of the transportation system and its facilities. ... ODOT has made significant progress in reducing the number of missing and non-compliant curb ramps in recent years, and a commitment to ongoing resources will address remaining shortcomings," the report says.



PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, a joint venture between Umatilla County and the city of Hermiston, may be taken over by Hermiston in March.

Umatilla County, Hermiston in negotiations over EOTEC split

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County has spent more than \$4.8 million to create and operate the Eastern Oregon Event and Trade Center since its inception, and plans to spend almost \$1.2 million more in the next five years if Hermiston takes over full control of the event center.

The county's single biggest contribution to EOTEC was the roughly \$3 million it earned from selling the fairgrounds in 2013. The county provided an additional \$1,050,000 in 2015-16 for construction, and along the way more than \$136,000 for operational support.

A proposal by the county to give Hermiston full ownership of EOTEC Hermiston had listed March 1 as the take-over date, but commissioners voted to push that to March 12 when Hermiston City Council meets. While both entities voted Jan. 22 to begin negotiations for a deal, a final decision must still be approved by both, which have partnered in the project since the beginning.

Larry Givens, county commissioner, and Byron Smith, Hermiston city manager, said the deal is about cutting down on the number of governments involved in EOTEC, akin to having the correct number of cooks in the kitchen. "That's what we're hoping," Smith said.

Smith and Givens said the delay allows more time to work out details to the deal. That includes language requiring the city to construct a new building at EOTEC to serve as year-round office and storage space for the county fair.

Smith said the city and county agree on the need for the building but have yet to decide how to pay for it.

The deal also would have the county pay \$105,000 to cover half of EOTEC's construction overrun and \$595,000 for its half of the equipment, storage and other needs requested by VenuWorks, the company hired

to oversee EOTEC. The county also agreed to pay \$375,000 in the next five years to cover operations, plus \$85,175 in 2018 and \$75,399 in 2019 to cover operational overruns as currently estimated by VenuWorks.

Givens said handing over EOTEC to the city without ongoing fiscal support would not have been fair, and VenuWorks reported it needs three years to break even. "Still, the goal of EOTEC is be a self-sustaining facility," Givens said.

All told, the county finance department reported the total contributions through 2022 would come to more than \$6 million but that could change if the city and county don't reach a deal. That seems unlikely, Givens and Smith said, as both sides want to reach an agreement.

One piece of the proposal that might need more time to come together is the county handing control of Airport and Ott roads — which lead to EOTEC — to the city. Givens said the county is waiting on about \$1.1 million from the Oregon Department of Transportation before it upgrades the roads. He said it could be June before the county gets that check.

The primary project would add a center turn lane on Airport Road, making it three lanes wide. That's a tight construction timeline before August, when the county fair is underway at EOTEC.

"We don't want the roads torn up when we're having to do the fair," Givens said. "So timing it critical."

He also said the state funds may not be enough to cover those costs and improve Ott Road, which is unpaved, so this could go into multiple budget cycles.

Smith said the city wants the roads, but this would not hold up the deal. The city and county, he said, would just come to an agreement to work out the roads as the funding comes through.

STDs on the rise in Umatilla County

By **KATHY ANEY**
STAFF WRITER

What's going on with gonorrhea?

The sexually transmitted disease, known colloquially as "the clap," is surging in Oregon and around the nation. Umatilla County reported 71 new cases of gonorrhea last year and 88 cases in 2016 — up from just four in 2012.

Two other STDs, syphilis and chlamydia, are also on the rise in the United States.

Ruth Helsley, of the Oregon Health Authority, manages the state's HIV/STD prevention program.

"STDs are having a big-time comeback," Helsley said. "Oregon is not unique — it's happening all over the country."

From 1975 to 1997, gonorrhea rates plummeted, stayed steady for a decade, then began rising again.

Syphilis had an even more dramatic rise from the ashes.

"In the '90s, we thought

syphilis was gone," Helsley said.

Now both STDs are back — in spades.

Helsley offered an explanation. People are taking more sexual risks because they are less afraid of contracting HIV.

"At this point in history, the fear of HIV as a lethal diagnosis is going away," she said. "Now, it is treatable."

She said people are more relaxed about engaging in risky sexual behavior. But just because HIV treatments provide a better prognosis and even protect partners, she said, doesn't mean they combat gonorrhea, syphilis or chlamydia.

With the threat of fatal HIV lifted, "obviously what's causing a rise in STDs is unprotected sexual activity."

The Umatilla County Public Health Department is dealing with the gonorrhea epidemic by frank discussions with clients and messaging to the public about the

importance of protected sex. A poster greets those entering the Pendleton clinic.

"Half of all sexually active young people will get an STD before the age of 25," it says in block print.

Jim Setzer, the county's public health administrator, isn't shy about the subject of STDs or how people get them.

"People don't get gonorrhea by someone sneezing in line at Safeway," Setzer said. "They don't get this by themselves."

That's why tracking down sexual partners is so important. He understands the hesitancy of those asked to divulge names, but it's necessary.

"You know the old adage," Setzer said. "You're not just sleeping with that person. You're sleeping with every person they've slept with."

To those working to stop the epidemic, it seems like the public health version of Whack-a-Mole.

Last year (in 2017), Umatilla County had the dubious distinction of having the third highest rate in the state.

The county made inroads by sending a communicable disease nurse and a disease intervention specialist into the field for several months to make home visits to partners of patients diagnosed with gonorrhea. Often the nurse, Riann Roggiere, tested for gonorrhea on the spot. If positive, she administered an intramuscular injection of ceftriaxone and another drug by mouth.

Gonorrhea symptoms usually appear within two weeks, but sometimes symptoms aren't immediately noticeable. Men might notice pain urinating, along with swelling, discharge and sore throat. Women may experience similar, but milder symptoms. But, Setzer said, "Many people are asymptomatic."

Untreated infections can lead to scarring, infertility, arthritis, heart valve damage or inflammation in the lining of the brain.

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