



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The Hermiston Downtown District is planning a “pocket park” in the courtyard in the 200 block of Main Street.

# Upgrading downtown

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
STAFF WRITER

Hermiston’s downtown district has added more than \$8 million in assessed value in just four years.

The blossoming of new and improved features has come in many forms, both public and private, and it’s not done yet.

“There’s lots of good news,” city planner Clint Spencer said.

While large public projects like the festival street and Harkenrider Center — both under construction now — have been taking up most of the attention, Spencer said private businesses have also taken the initiative to complete projects on their own to enhance downtown.

A group of business owners meet regularly as the Hermiston Downtown District, whose mission is to “revitalize, enhance, and maintain the economic, social, aesthetic, and cultural environment of Hermiston’s historic downtown

area.” Last week they discussed beautification projects they have taken on, including flower baskets and a “pocket park” project they are planning for the large courtyard in the 200 block of Main Street.

Susie Bendixsen, office manager for Bendixsen Law, which looks out into the courtyard, said they would like to add planters and possibly a shade tree and wrought-iron benches similar to those in city parks.

“If somebody wants to go outside and eat a sandwich they’ll have a place to do that,” she said. “There’s not a lot of places to sit downtown.”

Bendixsen said business owners raised some money for the project last year with the help of RARE planner Emma Porricolo and will likely take turns watering the landscaping to save on irrigation costs.

Main Street is a brighter, more vital place than it was four years ago when the city council created the Hermis-

ton Urban Renewal District to focus on downtown revitalization. During a council meeting Spencer counted 27 total projects downtown since 2013 — 13 private projects, four public projects and 10 spearheaded by private entities that received assistance from the city or urban renewal agency.

The result has been a 20 percent increase in assessed property values, from \$42.3 million in 2013 to \$50.6 million at the end of 2017. Spencer said about half of the increase can be attributed to the new Holiday Inn Express that opened in late 2016.

The urban renewal agency (made up of the city councilors) gets its money by freezing the amount of property taxes going to taxing districts like the fire district at 2013 levels downtown for the next 20 years, then skimming off the extra revenue generated by property value increases to funnel back into projects that will push property values even higher.

Some property owners have made improvements without the help of the urban renewal agency, such as the extensive remodel and expansion of La Palma restaurant. Others, like Simmons Insurance Agency, have gotten help sprucing up their storefronts from a façade grant program started by the agency.

As for public projects, Hermiston Energy Services recently replaced old utility poles downtown with more decorative lighting, complete with hooks and irrigation for hanging flower baskets. Spencer said the urban renewal agency plans to expand that lighting throughout the downtown district and add decorative wayfinding signs, additional landscaping and possibly arches leading into areas of downtown.

The capstone of the urban renewal district is the festival street currently under construction on Northeast Second Street in front of city hall.

# Hermiston council race to feature three contested seats

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
STAFF WRITER

Three of Hermiston’s four city council races are contested this year.

Only Shean Fitzgerald, husband of current councilor Clara Beas Fitzgerald, is running unopposed after the deadline for filing passed Tuesday. He is looking to take over his wife’s seat in Ward 2 after Clara decided to retire from the council to focus on other things, including her position on the Oregon Commission for Women. Fitzgerald is a “semi-retired” operating engineer who still takes jobs in the construction industry from time to time.

In Ward 1, a three-way race between incumbent Lori Davis, school board member Mark Gomolski and resident Jackie Linton is underway. Davis has served on the council for eight years after first being appointed to the seat and then being elected a few months later in 2010.

Gomolski previously ran for an at-large seat on the city council in 2016 but was edged out of the five-way race by the four incumbents. If Gomolski, elected to the Hermiston School District board by write-in last year, is elected he is hoping either the city or school district is willing to change their meeting dates, as they both meet on the second and fourth Monday of the month. He said he believes the change would be beneficial to members of the community who wish to attend both meetings.

Linton, who did not immediately return a call for comment, has been a frequent attendee at Hermiston council meetings in the past two years after first becoming involved in a city project to renovate a park on Beech Avenue, which in 2016 was re-named Greenwood Park after her grandfather Greenwood Woodrow Luster, who first established the park.

In Ward 3, Kyran

Miller is challenging incumbent Jackie Myers. Myers, a licensed tax preparer, was first elected to the council in 1994 and has served on a variety of city committees including a current assignment on the Parks and Recreation committee.

Miller said he decided to run because he thought his years as a small business owner would help him find ways that the city could save taxpayer money on operational costs, and find ways to attract more businesses and promote growth in Hermiston.

“I have no problem with any of the city councilors, they’re all doing a wonderful job, but I wanted to throw my hat into the ring to provide a different perspective as a business owner,” he said.

Miller spent his career as a funeral home director in Michigan before retiring to Hermiston in August 2016. He said he had visited for “business and friends” for about 10 years before that and liked the community.

In Ward 4, incumbent Doug Smith is running against Michael Engelbrecht. Smith is in his first term as city councilor after being elected in 2015. He started working as an officer with the Hermiston Police Department in 1988 and after retiring began to work as a general contractor.

Engelbrecht did not return a call for comment Tuesday afternoon.

Hermiston residents will get a chance to cast their vote for the councilor representing their ward in the May 15 election.

For Wards 2, 3 and 4 the May election will be considered the general election and the winner will take their seat in January.

Because Ward 1 has more than two candidates, the May election will be a primary and the top two vote-getters will have a runoff in November.

To find what ward you live in, visit [www.hermiston.or.us/government/city-council](http://www.hermiston.or.us/government/city-council).

# Houfmuse seeks release before trial

By **PHIL WRIGHT**  
STAFF WRITER

Murder defendant Tyree Houfmuse of Hermiston is seeking release from jail while the state has asked to delay his trial as it waits for more work by the crime lab.

The Umatilla County District Attorney’s Office on Feb. 27 filed a motion that would stall the trial — now set to begin April 30 — until November. The DA’s office claims the delay is necessary because more tests are still needed from the Oregon State Crime Lab, while Houfmuse’s attorney says he should at least be given the opportunity to make bail.

Houfmuse, 35, faces murder, first-degree manslaughter and weapons charges in the May 2017 shooting death of James Cragun. Houfmuse has been in the county jail in Pendleton since his arrest in June with bail set at more than \$1 million.

A motion for Houfmuse’s release will be heard Thursday afternoon in Hermiston.

Defense attorney Kara Davis, in the motion filed Feb. 28, claims if the state gets the delay, her client will

have been in jail almost a year and a half while being presumptively innocent.

“Credit for time served as a remedy is meaningless in the case of an acquittal,” Davis states.

Davis also explains the district attorney declined to hold a bail hearing to show a judge the proof is evident or the presumption strong that Houfmuse killed Cragun. Oregon’s constitution, she argues, mandates the court to set reasonable bail.

Houfmuse is claiming self defense. Davis in court documents asserts Cragun was violent, violated restraining orders not to contact his ex-girlfriend and sent her text messages using a racial slur to refer to Houfmuse, an African-American, and stated “I’m going to kill him then myself.”

Houfmuse was aware of the threats when they fought, according to Davis, and Cragun had the gun and charged Houfmuse. Cragun, however, died from a gunshot wound.

“You’re allowed to use lethal force anytime someone is trying to commit a serious personal felony against you and as long as it’s reasonable,” Davis said.

After filing her documents with the court, Davis said, she received a crime lab report ruling Houfmuse’s DNA on the gun was “inconclusive.” Cragun’s DNA, however, was on the gun. Still, she said, she did not understand how her client’s DNA would make a difference in the state’s trial tactics.

“This is a self defense case,” she said. “Why would you need his DNA on the gun?”

District Attorney Dan Primus did not immediately return a call seeking comment, but in his request his office said testing won’t be done in time for an April trial.

“The state just received a new report from the Oregon State Crime Lab, which will affect how this case will be tried, and, additionally, there are still tests being done by the crime lab,” according to the request. “We have been told that there is no way these tests can be completed by the trial date as currently set.”

Davis said she does not know of any new evidence.

“All the evidence the state has is evidence that would have been seized at the time of the shooting or shortly thereafter,” she said in an interview with the *East Oregonian*.

In her motion, Davis wrote: “Because the state’s case is weak at best and because the Oregon State Police Crime Lab’s own tests further weaken the case against Mr. Houfmuse, Defense asks for his release or at least a significant reduction in bail.”

Davis also filed motions asking the court to hold a separate trial for the manslaughter charge, suppress evidence from a police search and not allow statements Houfmuse made after he told police he should probably talk to a lawyer.

The state has until the end of March to respond to Davis’ filings.

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Houfmuse

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