



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE MCDOWELL.

Eastern Oregon Telecom has moved into its brand new building at 2180 Kelli Blvd. in Hermiston. For photos of the celebration, see A15.

EOT celebrates new building, ownership

By JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITER

Eastern Oregon Telecom's new headquarters are much larger than their previous ones, but it was still crowded on Thursday night as dozens of supporters and employees gathered to celebrate the new building.

The building wasn't the only change they were marking. EOT announced two weeks ago that its parent company, Umatilla Electric, had sold it to senior management.

"This is exciting new times for all of us for a lot of reasons and I'm so grateful you're here to celebrate," Franell told the group.

Longtime members of the "EOT family" came from as far away as Las Vegas, California and Pendleton (which is "at least as far," Franell joked) to celebrate with drinks and hors d'oeuvres and drawings for gift baskets from local businesses who get their internet and phone service through EOT.

The new building,

located at 2180 S.E. Kelli Blvd. in Hermiston behind the old Hermiston Foods plant, provides more office space for staff, extra restrooms, a reception area, increased amenities like a mail room and a large shop that allows the company to park its vehicles and equipment indoors and on site.

The extra room should come in handy as Eastern Oregon Telecom starts on the new, employee-owned leg of its journey. Franell said the new owners are still consulting with attorneys and employees before deciding how that will work. The company also expects to do some strategic planning before expanding into new service areas, which will likely result in additional staff. EOT currently has about 3,500 customers.

On Thursday Franell introduced the current staff to attendees before the ribbon cutting ceremony, noting their roles in making EOT run smoothly. The senior management team includes Franell, Chief Financial Officer Paul Kee-

ler and Chief Operating Officer Richard Holbo.

Franell said when Keeler came to work for EOT he "changed the business forever" and got the company on a strong financial footing. EOT has been providing services since 2001, and Franell said those in the room who had been customers since the beginning knew that they had gone through some rocky times.

"For those who have seen the early days, it's astounding how well we have come along," he said.

He said after years on the Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce board, it was fun to be the recipient of one of the chamber's ribbon-cutting ceremonies for the first time. Chamber director Debbie Pedro said Franell and EOT have always been a "great partner" for the chamber and in the community and it was exciting to see them get such a beautiful new building.

"We feel very fortunate, and proud of what you've accomplished," she said.

Armstrong to open new clinic

By JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITER

When her contract with the Umatilla Hospital District ends on Oct. 29, Jennifer Armstrong wants her patients to know she isn't going anywhere.

Armstrong, a nurse practitioner, plans to open up a private wellness center in Umatilla after the hospital district board voted in May to not renew her contract to continue providing services at the Encore Wellness 4 Life clinic — the city's only medical clinic.

Danice McBee, who sits on the board, said the special taxing district wanted to "go in a different direction" but they were still discussing what that would look like and are not ready to announce anything yet. She declined to elaborate on what had prompted the decision. They do plan to continue using the tax money collected by the special district to provide medical services to the community in some form after Armstrong's contract ends, she said.

Armstrong and her husband Mark Keith, who have already opened a second Encore Wellness 4 Life location in Kennewick, are hoping to open the new private clinic on Nov. 1 so that Umatilla doesn't see any gap in services. They have purchased a three-acre lot just west of the intersection of Highway 730 and Highway 395. The abandoned white two-story house will be converted into a medical clinic by November if all goes according to plan, while the "wellness complex" will add hospice housing, walking trails and other features later.

"It's going to take a while to get all the other things built, but a lot of the same services (as the current clinic) are going to be here," she said. "It's not going to feel like a clinic, but we will



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

Nurse Practitioner Jennifer Armstrong stands in abandoned two-story home that is being remodeled into a medical clinic, just west of Highways 730 and 395.

still do what patients are accustomed to."

Those extra services will include living quarters for hospice care, adult respite care and even long-term care, Keith said. They also plan to sell products such as hemp-based CBD supplements and kombucha, a fermented tea (the Mayo Clinic's website states that while kombucha does contain health-promoting substances such as probiotics, in light of health claims about things like preventing cancer, currently "valid medical studies of kombucha tea's role in human health are very limited"). They want to add RV spots for family members of patients to be able to stay overnight during visits if needed and create walking trails around the property.

A group of practitioners who Armstrong currently contracts with have agreed to follow her to the new location, Keith said. He said there will be specialists who can consult patients on everything from allergies to hormones.

"It's going to be a destination for wellness, not just sick care," he said.

Armstrong worked from 2000 to 2006 at Gifford Medical Clinic in Hermiston before coming to Umatilla, where she has provided free sports physicals to teens in the community and walk-in services for patients who said they couldn't get seen for days or weeks at other clinics.

"In April we had 62 (urgent care) walk-ins that got in in under an hour," Keith said.

He and Armstrong said patients come from all over, not just Umatilla — she even uses telemedicine to see patients as far away as Salem.

While Keith said Armstrong has built a loyal following during her time in Umatilla, Armstrong said she wasn't told by the Umatilla Hospital District why they had decided to not continue to pay her to provide services in the district when her contract is up at the end of October.

She said the upside of the hospital board's decision is it has provided the opportunity to create an "amazing project" for the community beyond current services.

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