

Police remain committed to body cams

Chief says \$70,000 price tag is worth the investment

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

The city of Hermiston spent \$70,000 in late 2014 to give its police department body-mounted video cameras for officers. The contract for the cameras, data storage and records management expires at the end of five years.

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said he recognizes the cost to the city was significant, but the 12 Axon Flex cameras continue to deliver and he hopes the city re-ups the agreement.

Hermiston Police Department has 27 officers, but the 17 in the patrol division have to wear the cameras, plus the four sergeants share one. The sergeants spend part of their shifts in the office, so they do not need individual cameras. Edmiston said that helps cut down on costs.

Cam footage has revealed “when we haven’t always put our best foot forward,” Edmiston said, and those videos provide valuable teaching tools for improvement. The cameras also have exonerated officers.

Right off, he recalled an incident in late May 2015 when officers had to deal with a transient near City Hall. Two officers tried to



A still image from a police body camera shows what the camera can see when an officer is following a vehicle or making a traffic stop. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

get him to leave, yet after several attempts the man refused and flicked a lit cigarette at police.

“That was it,” Edmiston said. “He was under arrest for offensive littering.”

As an officer tried to handcuff him, the chief said, “he reared back and head-butted a pane glass window.”

The window did not shatter, and police took the man to the ground, where he began head-butting the sidewalk. A third officer rushed over and put his boot under his head to keep the man from hurting himself.

Police cameras captured the ordeal and a Hermiston woman watched it unfold from a distance. She contacted Edmiston because she thought she saw police kick the man in the head and con-

sidered taking her story to the media.

“I let this lady explain to me what she saw,” Edmiston said. “Then I played the video for her.”

He said he told her it was OK to think she saw what she saw, but the video showed what really went down.

Hermiston officers with the cameras also use “Signal Sidearm,” technology that senses when an officer pulls their gun from the holster. The holster sensor turns on the officer’s camera and the cams of nearby officers. The technology means officers in those stressful moments do not have to think about flipping on cams.

“It’s great because any time we’re pulling our guns out it’s a heightened situa-

tion,” Edmiston said. “Why wouldn’t we want our cameras rolling?”

Camera footage has come into play in criminal investigations and prosecutions, he said, and Hermiston Municipal Court Judge Thomas Creasing has asked to see footage.

“Any judge is going to want as much information as possible to make decisions,” Edmiston said.

Local departments have cameras in their police vehicles, but Boardman is the only other local agency to use body cams. Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts maintain he would like to bring on the cameras, but the cost is prohibitive.

The basic recording system — from the cameras to data storage — would run a



EO FILE PHOTO
It has been more than three years since the Hermiston Police Department issued lapel-mounted body camera to all of its patrol officers.

bit more than \$70,000, Roberts said, “but to do it right would be about \$100,000.” And Pendleton has more pressing needs, such as keeping its fleet of police cars running.

“I can’t think of a week where we did not have at least one if not two cars red-lined or in the shop,” Roberts said, and that costs “eats up an entire line item in our budget.”

The department has applied for a federal grant to cover the cost of body cams, but Roberts said he was not holding out hope for success. Similar efforts did not secure the crucial funds.

The Pendleton chief also said some departments, including Boardman and Hermiston, jumped into the camera use early, when companies were offering sweet deals. Some departments nationwide are finding suc-

sequent contracts pack much higher costs, Roberts said, and are dropping their camera systems in spite of their obvious benefits.

Edmiston pointed out Hermiston, Pendleton and other local law enforcement contract with the company Lexipol to provide policy and procedure manuals and training, and Lexipol has increased its price 40 percent in the last three years. But Lexipol’s team of lawyers keep up with “all the crazy case law” that comes out of federal courts and does a good job of updating the information, so departments pay. Otherwise, he said, some city attorney would shoulder that work load.

Edmiston said he expects the next contract for the body cameras to come with higher costs, but he does not see Axon asking for a significant increase.

Water, sewer rates may increase

By JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITER

The Hermiston City Council is planning to restructure water and sewer rates in October.

The city’s infrastructure committee has been working with engineers from Anderson Perry to create a capital improvement plan and look at how to raise revenue for needed maintenance on water and sewer infrastructure. The consensus is that more money is needed to continue operations; the question is the best way to structure rates to get there.

“We want to make sure each utility can cover their current and forecast expenditures, and we want to make sure it’s fair,” said Dave Wildman of Anderson Perry, during an hour-long discussion Monday.

All rate structures Anderson Perry staff came up with assume an annual rate increase of three percent per year to keep up with inflation after the initial restructure.

On the water side, the first option would be an increase of the base rate from \$19.82 per month to \$20. Currently users are charged \$1.25 per 1,000 gallons after 13,000 gallons but the first option would charge \$2.50 per 1,000 gallons past 15,000 gallons. The result would be that a “regular user” of 20,000 gallons would see their bill go down slightly from \$44.48 to \$40, while a

large user (65,000 gallons) would see their bill increase from \$100.73 to \$152.50.

The second option is similar but increases the base rate to \$24.50, keeping a “regular” user at about the same as their current bill.

The third option raises base rates to \$30 and everything over 15,000 gallons to \$3.50, bumping a 20,000-per-month user to \$55 a month.

Wildman said since the city began paying off the debt service for the wastewater treatment plant built in 2014, water has been subsidizing sewer costs.

For sewer the city currently charges a flat rate of \$27.25 for all residential users, and for commercial users charges a base rate of \$29.66 plus \$1.50 per 1,000 over 5,000 gallons. Options presented to the council include keeping residential rates the same but raising commercial, or upping the base rate to \$30 for all users, with a \$1 per 1,000 gallon charge for residential and \$2 per 1,000 for commercial. Another option would feature a \$36 base rate with \$2.75 per 1,000 fee for all users, or \$30 base rate with \$4.10 per 1,000 rate for all users.

Rates for residential users of 5,000 gallons would remain \$27.25 under the first option, be \$35 under the second option, \$49.75 under the third option and \$50.50 under the fourth.

Councilors said they liked the idea of a structure that focuses on raising charges on heavy usage instead of the base rate. Councilor John Kirwan said it didn’t seem fair that currently a person living alone and generating very little wastewater is subsidizing a family with multiple teenagers.

Mayor David Drotzmann said raising the base rate tends to affect smaller users such as seniors on a fixed income, and focusing more on usage fees gives people the power to lower their own bills through conservation.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan noted that when doing rate comparisons with similarly-sized cities or the largest cities in Oregon, Hermiston is consistently in the “bottom five to 10 percent” on rates, and any of the rate restructures the city is considering would still keep it on the lower side of the spectrum.

Stanfield city manager among candidates for Umatilla job

By JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITER

Blair Larsen, Stanfield’s city manager, is one of three finalists for the open Umatilla city manager position.

The Umatilla Chamber of Commerce announced Thursday that it will be holding a public meet and greet with candidates Larsen, Scott Meszaros and David Stockdale. The event, which is open to the public, is set for next Thursday, Sept. 13 from 6-7:30 p.m. at the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center, 100 Cline Ave.

Larsen has worked as Stanfield city manager since 2013.

Meszaros has been town administrator of Meeker, Colorado, (population 2,352) since 2012, according to a news release from

the chamber. Stockdale was most recently city administrator for Prosser, Washington, for two years.

The *Tri-City Herald* reported that he resigned in June after an investigation that showed he had used an Oregon driver’s license to avoid paying about \$361 in sales tax, mostly at the Kennewick Costco. He told the paper it was a “simple misstep” due to confusion about his tax status since the rest of his family had not yet joined him in Washington.

Former Umatilla city manager Russ Pelleberg resigned in June and the city council chose community development director Tamra Mabbott to serve as interim city manager while a consultant conducted a nationwide search for

candidates. The public is invited to meet the candidates Thursday, with opening comments by Mayor Darren Duflath and a brief statement by each candidate kicking off the night. Light refreshments will be provided.



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