

Local partnership sends surplus potatoes to food banks

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

The local agricultural community came together last week to send thousands of pounds of potatoes to Oregon food banks.

In the past, the spuds would have gone to waste, tilled over after they served their purpose as a test plot at the Hermiston Agricultural Research & Extension Center. But four years ago the experiment station decided to start partnering with local producers and the nonprofit Farmers Ending Hunger to put them to good use in food boxes for families in need.

"It's a great program," said John Burt, executive director of Farmers Ending Hunger. "It takes a lot of people to make it happen."

The program starts with test plots at HAREC, paid for by grants from the Oregon Potato Commission and tended by the experiment station. HAREC director Phil Hamm said while some produce grown at the experiment station couldn't be used for human consumption



Potatoes are bagged then stacked on pallets Wednesday at the Walchli potato processing facility outside Hermiston. At right, sorted potatoes travel down a conveyor belt for boxing.

STAFF PHOTOS BY E.J. HARRIS

tion after being subjected to experiments, the potatoes harvested Wednesday weren't experimented upon.

Instead, area growers each send 300 tubers to be planted at HAREC. There, plant pathologist Kenneth Frost evaluates them for dis-

ease, and contacts growers if he finds any issues.

Hamm said because the acres are a mixture of potato varieties, it doesn't work to send them all to a french fry plant, for example, but each individual potato is good for eating.

"This is a good use of potatoes that are absolutely OK, just not for a commercial setting," he said.

Last Wednesday, Stahl Farms donated the labor and equipment to harvest the potatoes, which were loaded onto trucks provided



by Medelez Trucking. The trucks took them to Walchli Potato to be processed, washed and packaged and sent to a storage facility owned by farmer Steve Walker. Hamm said they didn't have a total yet, but it was definitely more than 100,000 pounds of potatoes.

Farmers Ending Hunger, which started in Umatilla County, facilitates donations of fresh food from Oregon farmers to the Oregon Food Bank. Burt said Wednesday's effort with the test potatoes was a little different than the normal donation,

but it was worth the effort. Some of the potatoes went to CAPECO in Pendleton to be distributed locally, and the rest was picked up by the Oregon Food Bank to be distributed to a network of food banks throughout the state.

"We will leave as much locally as possible," Burt said.

Hunger is an issue throughout Oregon. According to the Oregon Food Bank, 14 percent of Oregonians are "food insecure," meaning they don't have reliable access to a sufficient quantity of nutritious food. Of those 552,900 Oregonians, 194,070 are children.

The food bank distributes food through 1,200 different sites around the state and Clark County, Washington. Food is kept in 21 regional food banks, with CAPECO serving as one for north-eastern Oregon. Food comes from corporate and individual donations, and Farmers Ending Hunger is one of the top donors. The nonprofit donated 26 million pounds of food crops between 2006 and 2017.

Rep. Greg Smith talks PERS, carbon tax with city council

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

The Oregon legislature is going to have to take some hard votes next year to address the Public Employee Retirement System's unfunded obligation, according to Rep. Greg Smith.

"We have to deal with an issue that none of us created," he said.

The representative for District 57 spent an hour with the Hermiston City Council on Monday, answering their questions about the upcoming legislative session and how the League of Oregon Cities' six legislative priorities might fare. While cities would like to see more money spent to address issues such as mental health care and homelessness, Smith said the state's \$22 billion obligation to PERS presents some challenges. The state has a bill due, he said, and it's time to pay it.

Smith said he believes the best way is to issue pension bonds, which would stabilize the bill for government entities such as schools. He likened it to a family that gets in over its head in credit card debt and goes to the bank to refinance their debt into a single payment. The refinance may make it easier on the family to get a handle on their problem, but they still need to figure out a way to either increase their income or cut their expenses to free up money to start paying off their debt.

In practical terms for the legislature, that means raising taxes or cutting spending. Voters won't be happy about new taxes, but they also won't be happy about cuts to public safety, health care or education.

"It's going to be hard," Smith said. "The question is whether the legislature has the fortitude to make those hard decisions."

PERS reform falls under the League of Oregon Cities' second highest priority of cost containment and revenue reform. The other part to that priority — prop-

erty tax reform — is one that Smith said told councilors they shouldn't count on being tackled in the 2019 session. A repeal of Measure 5, which caps property tax revenue for cities, would take a vote of the people. Smith said he had no problem voting to refer the question to voters but didn't see a majority of the legislature being willing to do so.

One revenue reform Smith said he felt sure would take place in the 2019 session is implementation of a carbon tax. However, Smith said he had a feeling the money raised by taxing carbon-producing businesses for emissions would go toward the Department of Environmental Quality to fund more regulations and monitoring, not into education or the PERS liability.

While Smith doesn't support that idea, he said it's important for legislators in the minority to come to the table for discussions on legislation they don't support in order to "make it less intrusive" for rural Oregon when it inevitably passes. Eighty percent of legislators live within an hour's drive of the capitol, he said, and are writing bills from that perspective. Smith feels an obligation to his district to make sure Eastern Oregon is included in discussions so that he can negotiate changes to the bill that will mitigate harm to rural Oregon.

"If you pound the table, they say 'That's nice, now go sit over there,'" he said.

It's a lesson many freshman legislators have to learn, and Smith said Eastern Oregon is mostly represented by freshman legislators right now, with longtime rural representatives such as John Huffman leaving The Dalles and Ted Ferrioli leaving John Day.

"That really puts us at a disadvantage," he said.

District 57 is well-positioned, however, because Smith serves on a long list of influential committees. Most significantly, he is vice chair of the House Revenue Committee and co-vice chair of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. That means Smith has influence on both the revenue-raising and the spending side of the legislature — something that he said is almost unheard of in Oregon.

As for the LOC's other priorities, Smith said the number one priority voted on by city councils — mental health — is also on the legislature's mind and would definitely come up in the upcoming session.

"As a state we are going

to pay for people's mental health care, the question is how are we going to pay for it?" he said. "Are we going to do it wisely and compassionately?"

He said he supported Umatilla County's desire for an expansion at the county jail to better deal with inmates who are dealing with mental health issues.

As for other priorities that are more specific city concerns, Smith said he would get together with city leaders in his district during the session and talk about how he could best support those priorities. One example of that was the LOC's sixth priority of preserving cities' ability to contract with a third party on building inspections. The legality of that has been called into question. City manager Byron Smith said if that isn't addressed Hermiston would no longer be able to do the city of Umatilla's inspections.

During the work session councilors brought up various other concerns and questions on topics such as forest health.

Hermiston surgeon shot in Kennewick

HERMISTON HERALD

by the Benton County Prosecutor's Office but was not arrested.

An orthopedic surgeon from Good Shepherd Medical Center is recovering after he was shot twice by his son on Oct. 13 in Kennewick.

According to the *Tri-City Herald*, Dr. Patrick Harrison was shot in the collarbone and stomach, and was taken to a hospital in Kennewick.

Harrison's son Hunter, 20, told police that he was defending his mother after a fight between his parents turned physical. According to the *Herald*, Hunter Harrison called a neighbor and dialed 911 after firing the shots. He was interviewed

Good Shepherd's Communications Director Nick Bejarano said in a prepared statement that the hospital encouraged Harrison's patients to contact his office for information about their care plans.

"We are saddened by the unfortunate set of circumstances surrounding Dr. Harrison," Bejarano wrote. "Dr. Harrison is a highly skilled orthopedic surgeon who has enhanced the orthopedics program by bringing new techniques and procedures to our community."



Patrick Harrison

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