

Cities have limited options in addressing panhandling

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

The First Amendment protects Americans' right to free speech, and that includes their right to ask strangers for money.

After receiving complaints about "aggressive" panhandling, the Hermiston Police Department is reminding people that cities are constitutionally prohibited from banning panhandling. The law treats individuals asking for money for themselves the same as it treats a Salvation Army bell-ringer or firefighter collecting donations for charity.

Police Chief Jason Edmiston said there are some people who want to see heavy-handed enforcement to stop panhandling altogether and others who think it isn't the government's place to interfere with a person's right to ask for money. Police try to walk a fine line between not interfering with free speech rights, while also addressing instances where people are being harassed or made to feel unsafe.

"It's tricky," he said. While anyone can stand on a public sidewalk with a sign. If



A woman in a vehicle in the parking lot of Walmart gives money to a man on Thursday in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris/East Oregonian

someone is causing a disruption on private property, such as a store's parking lot, the business does have the option to contact law enforcement and trespass the person from their property.

"There needs to be some kind of incident or incidents to justify that," he said. "It's all based on what's reasonable."

The city also has an ordinance that prohibits people from blocking a public sidewalk, so if a panhandler's possessions are piled up on the sidewalk next to them police can ask them to move.

While cities' blanket bans on panhandling (or other kinds of "charitable solicitations") have been struck down in court, many

cities do have ordinances that address certain behaviors associated with panhandling. In 2015, for example, Umatilla passed an ordinance banning the transfer of money or other items between a vehicle in a highway's lane of travel and a pedestrian. While people are still legally allowed to stand on the side of the highway and ask

for money, anyone who wants to donate must find somewhere to legally park their vehicle first.

Edmiston said there has been a definite increase in panhandling recently in Hermiston, particularly with panhandlers who aggressively approach people. In some cases, he said, the people have a "sob story" that police know for a fact isn't true, such as a person with no children asking for money for a hotel room for their children. He said the department has had some conversations about whether such a false story constitutes "theft by deception," but have not chosen to charge anyone so far.

There are some people who truly do need the money and are being honest about their circumstances, Edmiston said, but giving to the organizations that serve the area's low-income and homeless populations is generally a better way to make sure the money is used efficiently to help people in real need. If people do want to give money or food to someone "in the field," he said, they should find somewhere safe and well-lit to do so.

"I would just say, be smart," he said.

Governor establishes rural broadband office

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

Oregon Governor Kate Brown has established an office that will develop broadband opportunities for rural and underserved areas of the state. Brown signed an executive order to create the Oregon Broadband Office on Dec. 14.

Eastern Oregon Telecom CEO Joe Franell is chair of the Oregon Broadband Advisory Council, a state-wide committee that backed the creation of the new office.

In her proposed 2019-2021 budget, the governor allotted \$5 million to broadband development in rural Oregon for the Broadband Infrastructure Fund. Franell said funding has not been approved for the office yet.

Franell said he doesn't yet know exactly how the office will be staffed, but said there are supposed to be five employees. He said there is already telecommunications analyst, Chris Tamarin, who has provided support to the advisory council.

He said Brown has expressed specific interest in helping rural Oregon

communities get broadband access. Franell said there are still more than 40 schools around the state that don't have access to high-speed internet.

But he said there are more gaps to bridge in broadband service than just the urban-rural divide.

"I think once we dig in we'll find out that there's a digital divide along other lines—Socioeconomic and cultural lines."

Joe Franell, Chair, Oregon Broadband Advisory Council

"I think once we dig in we'll find out that there's a digital divide along other lines," he said. "Socioeconomic and cultural lines."

He said the second of two comprehensive studies by the advisory council found that Latino communities around the state had seen a reduction of broad-

band adoption recently. "Like water or electricity, everyone should have access to broadband," he said. "I think the office will be quite busy."

The advisory council was created by the legislature in 2009, Franell said, specifically to provide advice to government officials on broadband utilities and availability.

Brown appointed spokespersons for several areas, including representatives for tribal government, education, economic development organizations, healthcare providers, and urban and rural telecommunications service providers. Franell was appointed to represent the latter. Every two years, the council gives a full report to the legislature.

Franell said the concept for a state broadband office was spearheaded by State Rep. Pam Marsh, from Ash-

land. Marsh is also on the advisory council.

"She brought it up because there were federal funds we'd been missing out on," he said. "The council decided it was something we needed to put in our report."

Earlier this month, when he testified before the House Interim Committee on Economic Development and Trade on behalf of the advisory council, Franell talked about digital inclusion — giving all Oregonians access to high-speed internet in order to bridge educational, medical and safety gaps.

At 84.9 percent Oregon has a higher rate of internet adoption than the national average, 81.4 percent. But Franell said changing broadband standards mean that coverage is less than ideal.

"The definition of broadband is a moving target," he said in his presentation.

Greater Hermiston Community Foundation reaches \$200,000 goal

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

The Greater Hermiston Community Foundation has reached its goal of raising \$200,000 less than a year after taking its first donation.

A group of community members began the charitable foundation in the spring with the goal of providing a sustainable fund from which to draw grants to support local community enhancement projects.

Because grants will be awarded using the money generated from interest earned on the account, and never from the donations themselves, the foundation board agreed to not begin awarding grants until it had \$200,000 for a year.

"Surpassing this first major milestone will allow the GHCF to award its first grants in early 2020," board president Greg Harris said in a statement.

The Greater Hermiston Community Foundation board is made up of Harris, Nate Rivera, Cindy Middleton, Dennis Barnett, Roe Gardner, Greg Juul and Jeff Snell. It is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 nonprofit with a mission to "encourage, pru-

dently manage and distribute charitable contributions to improve the quality of life for our community, now and in the future."

For more information, visit greaterhermiston.com.



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