



Staff photo by Jade McDowell  
**Rick Jewett, left, and Mike Jewett, right, of Hermiston Sanitary Disposal unload mattresses during Hermiston's free recycling event in 2018. This year's will take place on April 13.**

**SPRING**

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Umatilla residents will have their own community clean-up event to look forward to on April 13. The day marks the community's annual "Slam Dunk the Junk" from 9 a.m. to noon. Waste collection sites will be located around the city that morning and volunteers will move through neighborhoods to help clean up properties and haul unwanted items from yards. To sign up to be a volunteer, to sponsor a dumpster or for more information call 541-922-3226 x108 or email esmeralda@umatilla-city.org.

**City parks**

City staff are already working on sprucing up

city properties as the weather gets warm. Jason Barron, Hermiston's parks manager, said his department has hired four seasonal workers and is looking for more.

"We're still a little short-handed," he said.

Workers unlocked restrooms and put out picnic tables at city parks around town on Monday to kick off the spring parks season. Picnic shelters at the parks are now available for reservations by calling the parks department at 541-667-5018.

Barron said staff have also been edging sidewalks around parks, weeding, landscaping flower beds, pressure-washing restrooms and shelters, scrubbing away graffiti, trimming bushes and more

to get parks in shape for the busy season. They will be adding mulch from old Christmas trees to the disc golf course off of Northwest 11th Street later.

The department continues to work on the remodel of Greenwood Park off Beach Avenue. They plan to put in the finishing touches, including new play equipment and a shelter, by mid-June.

Barron said members of the public can do their part at city parks by cleaning up after themselves, disposing of litter and by picking up after their dogs. They can also report problems such as broken equipment to the parks department.

"We just ask everyone to try and be a respectful user," he said.

**LAYOFFS**

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Ben Hill was laid off this month after four years as a mechanical service operator. He said he was also concerned about the workforce reduction's impact on safety.

As part of the layoffs that have been occurring, the hump at Hinkle has been closed recently. The hump harnesses the power of gravity to separate cars from incoming trains into different areas of the yard. Hill said closing the hump and manually separating cars on flat ground created a "nightmare" for the yard.

"Every route to Hinkle is blocked with trains trying to get in and out," he said.

Others the *East Oregonian* spoke to also said the move had created chaos. In response to a question about why the hump was closed and if it was a temporary closure, McMahan responded that the company's Unified Plan 2020, which has been rolled out at Hinkle over the past few months, "streamlines our operations and impacts the number of trains that need to be humped."

He said that safety remains the company's "number one priority and the entire Union Pacific team is committed to operating a safe, efficient and reliable railroad."

**Loss of morale**

Hill said the multiple rounds of layoffs across departments in recent months have created a culture of constant stress and worry as employees head to work not sure if they will still have a job by the end of the day.

"You see people who are normally happy-go-lucky start to sour," he said. "Morale is gone."

Hill said he enjoyed his time with Union Pacific, and worked with a lot of great people. He said he felt the layoffs and the problems coming with them weren't coming from local managers but from those farther up the company who didn't have "boots on the ground."

Others shared similar stories of seeing high stress and even panic attacks at work as more layoffs are expected.

Dave Gracia, who retired as an electrician from Union Pacific in 2014, said he still keeps in touch with former coworkers, and has heard from them that morale at the yard is "in the toilet" and employees feel powerless.

Gracia said he was surprised to hear of layoffs, since the company had avoided laying employees off in Hermiston through the recession that began in 2008.

"Before, they were doing everything they could to hang on to guys," he said.

People who joined the company since then, he said, "thought they would be a lot more secure in their work with the economy the way it is."

He said Union Pacific is following in the footsteps of CSX, a railroad operating on the eastern side of the United States that in recent years switched to the "precision scheduled railroading" that Union Pacific is now implementing through its Unified Plan 2020.

In 2018 multiple media outlets reported

that CSX had seen an increase in accidents after going through a significant workforce reduction in 2017. Railway Age, an industry publication, reported CSX had the lowest accident rate of the country's seven Class I railroads in 2013 but the highest in 2017, increasing by 73 percent.

In an October 2018 announcement of its Unified Plan 2020, Union Pacific chairman Lance Fritz stated that adoption of precision scheduled railroading through the Unified Plan 2020 "is our path forward to secure our place as the industry leader in safety, service and financial performance."

**Longtime neighbor**

The railroad played an outsized role in Hermiston's early history, and Union Pacific has been one of Hermiston's top employers for decades. The city's June 2018 financial report listed Union Pacific as its fifth largest employer at approximately 500 employees. McMahan declined to name the number of employees in Hermiston, but said Union Pacific had 1,506 employees in Oregon at the end of 2018.

Mayor David Drotzmann said Union Pacific spokesman Aaron Hunt reached out to him Friday to assure the city that while the company is reducing its workforce in Hermiston, it does not plan to close Hinkle. He said Hunt explained that streamlining some operations meant fewer employees were needed.

"I appreciate he gave us the confidence that Hinkle is not going away," Drotzmann said.

He said Union Pacific has been an important part of the community for many years, and a large transfer of employees into Hermiston in the 1990s helped boost Hermiston's growth.

"They brought a lot of members to our community during that time," he said.

Gracia was one of about 100 Union Pacific employees who transferred to Hermiston from Salt Lake City in 1998. He said the railroad has been an attractive employer in the past, with good benefits and an opportunity to learn a craft.

Some skill sets are easier to transfer than others. After being laid off, Hill said electricians were being snatched up by area data centers, but other former coworkers are struggling to find family-wage jobs in the area and are instead performing jobs like part-time pizza delivery driver. Some furloughed workers the newspaper reached out to declined to be interviewed even off the record, citing a worries that an interview would hurt their chances to work for the company elsewhere in the future.

McMahan said Union Pacific has sent some jobs to its Albina yard in Portland and to Pocatello, Idaho. *Trains Magazine* reported that Union Pacific closed up its locomotive shop in El Paso, Texas, in November and announced the closure of the Pine Bluff, Arkansas, locomotive shop in February.

In January, Union Pacific reported record earnings in 2018, with a net income of \$6 billion. On April 18 the company plans to provide an update on its earnings on a call that will be streamed at up.com.

**PHOTO OF THE DAY**



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

**Flood waters surround a barn last week on Noble Road southwest of Hermiston. A National Weather Service forecast calls for a slight chance of showers in Hermiston on Thursday and a 60 percent chance of precipitation on Friday.**

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**OR 37 Cold Springs Highway CLOSURE AHEAD**

If you travel on Oregon Highway 37 in northern Umatilla County – HEADS UP ! Bridge repair work next year will result in traffic delays and a FIVE-WEEK-LONG FULL CLOSURE of the highway at the UPRR (Cold Springs) overpass, about a mile east of U.S. 730 and 30 miles northwest of Pendleton. The full highway closure at the bridge site will occur during springtime of 2020.



While the highway closure and other traffic impacts won't happen until next year, we want your input now before the project design is finalized.

To find out more and to provide your feedback, visit our **ONLINE OPEN HOUSE BETWEEN APRIL 1 AND MAY 31, 2019 AT...**

**HTTP://OPENHOUSE.OREGONDOT.ORG/UPRR-AT-COLD-SPRINGS**

We know that bridge and highway closures can be frustrating, that's why we are getting the word out a year in advance. We hope you will take a few minutes to learn what we are planning and to get involved by providing your feedback and comments.

Questions can be directed to ODOT Project Leader Grant Matlock 541-963-3177, or by email at [Grant.Matlock@odot.state.or.us](mailto:Grant.Matlock@odot.state.or.us)



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