Jayati Ramakrishnan

Hermiston city councilors and Umatilla County commissioners break ground on a site in Northeast Hermiston where a new water tower will soon be constructed.

Hermiston breaks ground on new water tower

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

A small crowd turned up at the northeast edge of Hermiston on Wednesday, to see the site where a water tower will soon stand.

City councilors and county commissioners broke ground on a site at Northeast 10th Street and East Punkin Center Road, where crews will start working on a $4.1 million water storage and system expansion project.

It's expected to accommodate more than 1,000 new homes in Hermiston in the next 10 years.

The project will be funded by a partnership between the city and Umatilla County, with the county dedicating $2 million over four years. The city will furnish the rest of the costs.

Additionally, the Infrastructure Finance Authority will loan $500,000 to the city and to the county each year, starting in summer of 2020, as part of the two entities' enterprise zone agreement.

City Manager Byron Smith said they hope construction on the million-gallon water tank will be done by the end of 2019. The project will include installation of about 2 miles of water main, in the neighborhoods of East Theater Lane, between Northeast Fourth and Northeast 10th streets, along Northeast 10th between Theater Lane and Punkin Center Road, and East Punkin Center Road between Northeast Fourth and 10th. The entire project is expected to be completed in mid-2020.

Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann said the new water tower will mean Hermiston can accommodate more people, and keep up with overall growth. He said the location of the water tower will make it feasible for developers to build homes on about 300 acres of residential land that previously wouldn't have had adequate access to water.

"This is about addressing one of the council's main goals," he said. "Affordable housing for the community. It'll allow us to keep employees here in town, recruit people. When we work with our partners at the county and the school district, amazing things can happen."

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said the city is capitalizing on its location, and its resources.

"In terms of agriculture, we are clearly one of Oregon's most productive regions," he said. "We add further value through the kind of partnership we are celebrating here today. Umatilla County is proud to be a partner with the city of Hermiston in a $4 million project that we mutually hope will lead to the construction of a thousand new homes."

Riverfront Park remains closed due to flooding damage

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

The water has mostly receded from Riverfront Park in Hermiston, but the park remains closed due to flooding damage.

At least one large tree has fallen over, and the park is covered with a thick layer of silt and piles of debris ranging in size from twigs to logs. The section of the Oxbow Trail that connects the trail to the park has crumbled, and parks manager Jason Barron said other parts of the walking path around the park have been structurally compromised.

The rest of the Oxbow Trail and the new Highland Trail are intact and remain open.

"People are still able to get out and use our walking path system, we just ask they refrain from using Riverfront Park until we can get in there and assess," he said.

Since the ground was still covered with thick, wet mud, Barron said last Thursday that his crew was going to let the park dry out until at least Wednesday before getting in there to assess damage and start hauling away debris. They don't want their equipment to get stuck or tear up what grass is left.

He said the city would work hard to get the park back in usable shape as quickly as they could. Some projects might take more than a few days — the city will probably bring in portable restrooms, for example, until they can clear out all the silt that washed into the restroom building.

During Monday's city council meeting Larry Fetter said it would probably be two weeks before the park was officially open again.

Barron said the flooding, which caused the Umatilla River to cover the park for several days last week, came at a bad time while parks staff are busy getting all of the city's parks ready for summer.

The city of Umatilla has been dealing with its own flooding problems after its pedestrian bridge buckled under the pressure of high flood waters. While an early rough estimate had predicted replacement costs might run as high as $5 million, city manager David Stockdale later said engineers had examined the bridge and reduced the estimate to $3.2 to $4.3 million.

Stockdale said the engineers were not able to definitively rule the bridge a total loss because the floodwaters were still too high to properly assess the abutments. But they felt fairly confident it would not be salvageable.

The city had an 18-inch water main running through the bridge, and Stockdale said the engineers said demolishing and replacing the bridge with the water main would be a $3.2 million project. If government agencies decide that the water main needs to be run under the river instead of along the bridge, that would bump the estimated project cost up to $4.3 million.

The good news, Stockdale said, is Umatilla County emergency manager Tom Roberts said the price tag might be what puts the county over the damage threshold to receive federal and state disaster funds for recovery. The city council passed a resolution declaring a city emergency last week.

Stockdale said the city wants to replace the bridge as soon as possible, but it will likely take more than a year to do so.

Staff photo by Jade McDowell

A section of the Oxbow Trail leading into Riverfront Park in Hermiston has collapsed after being covered with flood waters for several days.

Hermiston will stage "walk-in" for education on May 8

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Many teachers around the state will stage walkouts on May 8, to demand better support for education from the Oregon Legislature. But Hermiston and Umatilla teachers decided not to participate in the walkout.

Instead, teachers from each district will stage a "walk-in," holding an event to send a message to legislators calling for adequate funding in schools.

Delfino Osorio Garcia, the Hermiston Association of Teachers president, said there were a few factors behind Hermiston's decision to not join the walkout. One, he said, was that they didn't want to add more days to the school year for students. If enough teachers walked out and school had to be closed, he said, it would add a day of school to Hermiston's calendar year, putting their last day of school on a Monday and running into summer school.

"Our decision was, how can we best support our union while also doing what's best for our students?" he said.

Garcia said the union decided to hold an event before school, at Hermiston High School's Kennison Field at 7 a.m. on Wednesday, May 8, inviting district administrators, school board members, Hermiston Association of Teachers union members, and people from the Oregon School Employees Association. Participants will listen to teachers speak about the need for adequate funding in schools.

"We haven't ever funded (schools) to where they need to be, and they keep taking away more," he said.

Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe said the district will be holding a walk-in on the same day, which will look a little different than Hermiston's. Community members will start their day by listening to speeches about the district's needs for funding. Then, they can choose to go to any of Umatilla's three schools, and spend a day doing "a walk in their shoes," seeing what a typical day looks like for Umatilla students. At the end of the day, they can turn in feedback about what they saw and what they think the needs and strengths of the district are.

"So many people haven't been in a school since they graduated," Sipe said. "This is an event for everyone."

Oregon Education Association president John Larsen said they are expecting more than 10,000 teachers and staff across the state to participate in the walkouts, which will include marches, speeches, and music performances in individual communities.

"Basically, it's to try and bring attention to the disparity of funding in our schools right now," he said. "Our schools have got to be funded."

Larsen, who was a Hermiston High School language arts teacher for 15 years before stepping into the statewide union role, said there's never been a statewide demonstration by teachers like this in Oregon.

"This is completely unprecedented," he said. "It's the result of 30 years of disinvestment from our schools. We keep covering the pain and cuts in our schools, and we can't do that anymore."

Threads of Life unveils quilt

The public is invited to an event that celebrates lives touched by organ donations and transplants.

The Threads of Life quilt unveiling is Saturday from 1-3 p.m. at Pendleton Center for the Arts, 214 N. Main St. The event also serves as a way to raise awareness about the critical need for organ donors. Hermiston resident Cindy McIntyre, who received a life-saving heart transplant nearly five years ago, will speak at the event.

Coordinated by Donate Life Northwest, the quilt is comprised of individually-designed squares created by community members honoring donors. The quilts celebrate the lives of transplant recipients and offers hope to those still awaiting transplants, including 3,000 people in the Pacific Northwest, according to statistics provided by Donate Life Northwest.

For more information, contact 503-494-7888, info@donatelifenw.org or visit www.donatelifenw.org/content/quilts.