

PGE starts scholarship fund for laid-off workers

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

Portland General Electric is attempting to dull the sting of upcoming mass layoffs at Boardman Coal Plant by offering employees free classes at Blue Mountain Community College.

PGE spokesman Steven Corson said the company's \$30,000 donation to BMCC to establish the program was one of the ways PGE was avoiding leaving its employees high and dry.

"We don't want to be that company," he said.

PGE announced its intention to cease coal-based energy production at the plant back in 2010, but they recently started talking with the more than 70 employees who work in Boardman about their post-coal plant options as the deadline loomed.

Corson said some employees talked about transferring to another PGE worksite while others mulled retiring.

But for those employees



The Boardman power plant is set to close at the end of 2020.

HH File Photo

who were looking to stay in the area, the company is offering them a chance to switch careers by getting a degree or certificate

at BMCC. Corson said the program was not only meant to benefit their employees, but act as a retention tactic

to ensure that employees have an incentive to continue working at the plant through its closing date on Dec. 31, 2020.

Casey White-Zollman, BMCC's vice president of public relations, said she and BMCC Foundation Executive Direc-

tor Margaret Gianotti visited the Boardman facility a few months ago and were impressed by PGE's plan.

"This is a pretty amazing thing they're doing," she said.

According to White-Zollman, the PGE Boardman Scholarship Fund is open to anyone who is or will become unemployed due to the closure of the Boardman Coal Plant.

Starting with the summer term in June, scholarship recipients will get as much as \$1,500 toward their tuition.

Recipients must be enrolled in at least one class, and if they maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average, they will get another \$1,500 for a second term.

Corson said the scholarship fund will remain active through the end of 2021, one year after the Boardman Coal Plant is slated to close.

White-Zollman said six PGE employees have already applied for the scholarship.

Commissioners, crowd do not like county charter proposals

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

The group recommending changes to Umatilla County's government felt pushback May 29 against its proposals. The opponents sang a song of, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The eight-member charter review committee presented its findings and three potential ballot measures to the board of commissioners during a work session at the county courthouse in Pendleton. The simplest measure would change the charter's description of the law enforcement department to the sheriff's office and rather than spelling out most of the duties of the sheriff refer instead to Oregon law.

Elections also change. Per the proposal, if no more than two candidates file, there would be no May primary election and the candidates would advance to the November general. If more than two run, the two who win the most votes in the primary face off in the general.

The biggest proposal changes the county from three full-time commissioners to five part-timers who would be responsible for hiring the county counsel and a county manager. That also drew the most resistance.

Commissioner Bill Elfering said the lack of a full-time commissioner is a concern.

"Some have tried this the other way, and it hasn't worked very well," he said.

Commissioner John Shafer hitched on, pointing out that Clatsop County is considering nixing its manager and volunteer board for full-time commissioners.

Charter review members strove to defend the position, arguing the size of the county and the size of the county's budget demands a professional at the helm. Michele Grable, the charter committee chair, and other members argued commissioners should focus their time on policy, county advocacy and strategy and not the "nitty-gritty" of management. Grable recalled one night when Commissioner George Murdock oversaw the problem of a leak in the district attorney's office on the third floor of the courthouse. She said commissioners have better things

to do with their time.

Some old habits are hard to break, Murdock said in his defense, but there was a greater issue.

"I have an uncomfortable feeling we are rushing to judgement," he said. "I'm still at a point I want to ask questions."

One of those, he continued, was about how a manager would affect the public's access to commissioners. Yet he also said having he and his fellow commissioners alone decide the structure of county government "causes me great discomfort." The broader public instead, he said, should decide.

Some of that public spoke up at the end of the meeting. Nearly all said they did not like the idea of part-time commissioners and a

full-time manager. One man said he wanted to be able to take as much time with a commissioner as his problems demand, while others worried a full-time manager would impose his will on the county.

Most, including Rex Morehouse of Pendleton and Rob Lovett of Hermiston, said they have no problem with access to commissioners now and the county board is working just fine as is.

Only one person spoke in favor of the committee's recommendations: Hermiston Mayor David Drozmann.

"I work in that environment," he said, "and it works really well."

The charter committee and the county board planned to continue the discussion June 4.

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