

# Hermiston police buckling down on distracted driving

By JESSICA POLLARD  
STAFF WRITER

Last year, the Hermiston Police Department handed out almost 200 citations for operating a motor vehicle while using a mobile electronic device and for careless driving. Now, thanks to a grant, the department aims to hand out more distracted driving tickets.

The department has received a \$4,000 Distracted Driving Enforcement Grant through Oregon Impact, a nonprofit that advocates against impaired and distracted driving. The grant will provide about 60 hours of overtime specifically focused on distracted driving.

According to the Oregon Department of Transportation, there are four types of distracted driving — visual, auditory, manual, and cognitive. One of the most prominent behaviors, which can involve all four types of distracted driving, is cellphone use.

Between 2013 and 2017, 20 people in Oregon died and over 1,500 have been injured due to crashes involving cellphone use behind the wheel. This includes 158 people who were injured while in the car with a driver between the ages of 16 and 18, who was



The wrecked car of Alexxyss Leigh Therwhanger, who died while distracted by her phone while driving on Highway 395 in 2016 south of Pilot Rock, sits on display outside of the Hermiston High School in 2017.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

using a cellphone at the time of an accident.

“There’s a significant difference between talking on a cellphone and texting on a



Edmiston

cellphone,” said Hermiston Police Department Chief Jason Edmiston. “There may be some sort of justification for someone talking on a cellphone. Texting on a cellphone, there’s no rhyme or reason. Pull over if it’s that important.”

The grant is the first of its

kind received by the HPD, which also pursues grants supporting high visibility and DUI enforcement.

The HPD has an officer whose main focus is traffic patrol. Edmiston said he usually responds to crashes, and that traffic patrol goes beyond catching distracted

drivers.

“A lot of criminal activity is mobile,” Edmiston said.

A routine traffic stop could result in the return of stolen property, or in the discovery of clandestine substances.

Edmiston said the department has investigated mul-

iple crashes that involved pedestrian use of cellphones.

The number of crashes in the city of Hermiston has increased 10% the past five years as population has expanded from over 17,340 to 18,200 people.

When the HPD makes a traffic stop for distracted driving, they’ll issue the maximum fine for the Class B traffic violation, which is \$1,000. Second offenses, or first-time offenses that result in a crash, can expect a maximum fine of \$2,000 for a Class A violation.

Edmiston said he expects the amount of citations to increase in Hermiston for the duration of the grant.

“Traffic citations are no fun, but they’re not the end of the world,” he said.

Edmiston’s connection to distracted driving is more than just professional.

In 2016, his great-niece, Alexxyss Therwhanger, 19, was involved in a deadly crash south of Pilot Rock. She was living in Richland, Wash. at the time.

Investigations later revealed she had been using her cellphone periodically during the trip.

“That was a 19-year-old who hadn’t experienced life yet,” he said. “She had everything in front of her and made one mistake. We’ve all made mistakes, but that one cost her dearly.”

## County plans to take over NOWA water interest

By JADE MCDOWELL  
NEWS EDITOR

An interest in Columbia River water that could potentially supply the former Umatilla Chemical Depot is changing hands from the Northeast Oregon Water Association to Umatilla County.

“This is one of those projects that will be able to sustain economic development in Umatilla County for years to come,” commissioner John Shafer said.

Commissioners voted Wednesday to approve an exclusive option agreement with NOWA in preparation for acquiring interest in the rights to pump up to 45 cubic feet per second out of the river through a pump station located there. The water could be used to serve potential economic development on the depot and to recharge the aquifer located there, giving farmers greater access to water for irrigation.

The project has about \$835,000 plus interest left to be paid off, which the county will purchase. Shafer said the county will immediately provide NOWA with the money for a \$25,000 interest payment due July 7.

Shafer said NOWA founder JR Cook had discussed with him that the organization needed someone to take over the financial obligation for the water interest but had not had any takers. Such an opportunity to draw water from the Columbia River is extremely difficult to obtain from the federal government.

“This one’s get all the federal permits done and it’s ready to go, it’s just capped off waiting for development,” Shafer said.

During Wednesday’s meeting, Cook called the interest a “very valuable asset to the region.” The water could be used by companies looking to build on the depot land and to recharge the large aquifer that runs under the depot.

“This project has the very real opportunity to take wintertime Columbia River water and recharge that aquifer that is actually in a critical groundwater area, that has been depleted to the point that there is a ton of storage because we’ve pumped all the water out of it,” he said.

Shrinking water levels in the area’s basalt aquifers have taken farmland out of production or moved



HH file photo

The Columbia River in northeast Oregon will deliver water to three project areas to relieve stress on underground aquifers, while allowing farmers to grow more high-value crops that feed the region’s economy.

*“There is no question about the importance of this project to industrial and agricultural growth of the region”*

Bill Elfering, Commissioner

it to less profitable dryland crops. NOWA was launched with a grand vision of a water recharge project that would build three pipes from the Columbia River and allow farms to use that water instead of groundwater, giving the aquifers time to recharge. The water

pulled from the river would be mitigated by municipal water rights transferred and left in the river.

Factors ranging from government bureaucracy to a lawsuit against Westland Irrigation District have slowed the project, however. The county’s purchase of the interest discussed Wednesday would help preserve the central arm of the project by keeping the option open to pipe water to the depot area.

Once the final deal goes through, the county will be guaranteed intake capacity of 30 csf year-round and will have first right to an additional 15 csf except for July 15-Sept. 30. It will also obtain an easement to build a pipeline to pump the water to the former depot.

The depot is in the final

stages of being transferred from the U.S. Army to the locally-controlled Columbia Development Authority. The CDA plans to market portions of the depot for industrial development, and water availability will improve the land’s marketability.

Commissioners voted unanimously Wednesday to sign the option agreement.

“There is no question about the importance of this project to industrial and agricultural growth of the region,” commissioner Bill Elfering said.



Staff photo by Jessica Pollard

A motorcycle was involved in a motor vehicle crash outside 32553 East Punkin Center Road in Hermiston.

## Hermiston man killed in motorcycle crash

A Hermiston man was killed in a multiple vehicle crash on Highway 207 outside Circle K convenience store Monday.

According to the Oregon State Police, alcohol is being investigated as a factor.

David Way Morgan, 75, of Hermiston was driving a grey 2013 Dodge pickup towing a horse trailer north

and made a left turn toward the convenience store when a red 1984 Yamaha XT2 motorcycle, driven by Nathaniel John Bloomer of Hermiston, 56, collided with the trailer at about 4:20 p.m. while heading south, according to OSP.

Bloomer was transported to Good Shepherd Medical Center, where he was pronounced deceased.

### FARM CITY PRO RODEO

Kids aged 4-7 years weighing 55 lbs or less  
24 contestants will be chosen from a blind draw

## Mutton Bustin' Sign-ups

**INLAND POOL & SPA**  
80996 Hwy 395 N #7 Hermiston, OR 97838

**July 24, 2019**  
Sign up - 6:00 pm  
Draw - 6:30 pm

Child and parent or guardian must be present for sign-ups and weigh-in.  
Insurance documents must be signed.

**WEEK LONG SALE!**

**JULY 9th - 14th**

## 30 YEAR Anniversary Celebration

SUNDAY JULY 14TH • 12-5PM

**FREE VEGETARIAN BBQ**  
WITH PURCHASE

**FREE GIFT BAG WITH GOODIES**  
WHILE SUPPLIES LAST

SALES SAMPLES VENDORS

TREASURE HUNT FOR \$20 GIFT CARDS

FASHION SHOW 2PM

Melting Massage by Sunita (\$20/15min)

**ALIVE & WELL**

541-567-0272  
2150 N. First St.  
Hermiston

The Office will be

# CLOSED

## JULY 12<sup>TH</sup>

for the whole day.

We apologize for any inconveniences.

Thank You

Hermiston Herald