

Residents protest water rate hike

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Frustrations over water rates in Hermiston reached a boiling point Monday as dozens of residents showed up to the city council meeting to voice their complaints about an increase implemented in March.

The public comment section of the meeting lasted more than an hour, with some citizens taking more than one turn at the microphone.

"I have to pull extra shifts at work to pay my water bill, which means time away from my kids, time away from my family," Kirt Hickey said.

He said that information put out by the city ahead of the increase made it seem like he would be seeing a \$20 a month increase, instead of jumping from \$80 to close to \$300. Others at the microphone also described seeing a spike in the past couple of months that was more than twice what they had previously been paying.

They said they felt lied to by the city.

The rate restructure has residents paying a base rate of \$30 per month plus 50 cents per 1,000 gallons of water up to 15,000 gallons, before the cost jumps to \$3.50 per 1,000 gallons. City staff told commenters that estimates of how much their bill would increase had been based on an average over the course of the year, with the expectation that lawn irrigation would cause much bigger increases in the summer months compared to winter.

Residents said that was small comfort to people who couldn't make ends meet now.

"Seniors are having to choose between medications or water," Larry Smith told the council.

One woman described cutting back to showering every other day, and hearing that her neighbors were showering together to save water. Others said they had stopped watering their lawns, creating a fire hazard and nuisance.

"I've been here my whole



A man speaks to the Hermiston city council Monday about frustrations with a March water rate increase. The audience for Monday's meeting took up seats in the council chambers and spilled over into the lobby.

life, went to school here, and I've never seen it look this bad," Jesse Brazil said, referencing the number of brown lawns he was seeing around town. "I'm so mad about it."

City councilors told the crowd they sympathized with the struggles of higher rates, as they, too, were affected as residents of the city. Councilor Rod Hardin, recently retired, said he was adjusting to life on a fixed income and the water rate increase had cut into his budget.

City councilor Roy Barrow said he had needed to make adjustments in his household as well, and understood the feeling of frustration with increasing taxes and fees at a local, state and federal level.

"You see yourself losing money here and losing money there and I'm sure the water was a tipping point," he said. "People are saying, 'Where is that money going?' and the hard thing with (water) infrastructure is that it's not always things people see."

Mayor David Drotzmann said the city's public infrastructure committee spent two years compiling a list of all of the water and sewer projects the city needs to

complete and found the city is "way behind." The city is more than 100 years old, he said, and some of its water is still running through the original pipes put in a century ago.

The increased water rates were not making a profit for the city general fund, he said, but instead every penny is being funneled back into making sure the city continues to have safe and reliable water service. The city had to balance concerns about higher rates with concerns about being the "next Flint, Michigan," he said.

"We have some impending problems," he said. "We're trying to prevent broken pipes, lead in our system."

Resident Sandra Hickey said she understood the concern about maintaining the system, but pointed out that as a homeowner when she wants to improve her home she saves up and fixes a little at a time as she has the money. She said she wanted to see the city take a similar approach.

"Most of us out here, when we go up stairs we go one at a time, we don't jump to the top," she said.

Jackie Linton, the only citizen who commented

when the city council voted for the rate increase in October, told the rest of the group that she had seen the decaying pipes pulled out of the ground and brought to city council meetings, and had listened to the hours of discussion in the meetings preceding the vote. That had helped her understand the need.

"This wasn't done overnight, and it was open to the public," Linton said. "I voiced my opinion at the time, just like everyone here could have done."

Drotzmann told the group that as the city gathers data in the coming months, the council could look at that information and consider any adjustments that might be needed.

In the meantime, he encouraged residents to take conservation measures and work on fixing leaks that may be costing them hundreds of dollars a month. He said the city's water app had alerted him to a leak in his line and that fixing it had already saved him \$160 in the first month.

He thanked everyone who showed up to share their experience with the rate increase.

"Keep holding us accountable," he said.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Identification tags of 20-year employees hang on a display during a celebration for the 20th anniversary of the Hermiston Walmart Distribution Center in April 2018.

Walmart adding 100 jobs to Hermiston distribution center

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Walmart announced Monday that it will be hiring 100 additional associates to fill orders at its Hermiston distribution center.

Interested candidates for the new positions were encouraged to attend a hiring event at the facility on Tuesday, and some were given on-the-spot offers. Those who were not able to make it to the hiring event can still turn in an application online at careers.walmart.com.

Wages start at \$17.15 an hour but can go up to \$18.85 for shift work and weekends. Benefits for full-time employees include medical, vision and dental as well as access

to Walmart's program that offers access to online college classes for \$1 per day.

The Hermiston center, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in the community last year, serves 106 Walmart stores in the Pacific Northwest. At that time the company announced that \$54 billion in goods had passed through the center, and company executives touted it as one of the company's most productive distribution centers in the country.

With close to 1,000 associates working at the distribution center in Hermiston and hundreds at stores in Hermiston and in Pendleton, Walmart is already one of the largest employers in Umatilla County.

Hermiston School Board appoints new member

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

The Hermiston School Board appointed a new member to its ranks this week.

The board selected Bryan Medelez of Hermiston after the resignation of board member Dave Smith earlier this month. Smith said he left the board to focus on the expansion of his business, O So Kleen.

"It's easier to be elected than appointed," said board chair Karen Sherman, following the candidate interviews.

Perry Hawkins, Tim Turner, Nazario Rivera, and Zaira Sanchez were the

other candidates up for the position.

The five applicants were interviewed by the board, before second vice chair, Ginny Holthus, nominated Medelez.

"No matter what happens," Sherman said prior to the appointment, "the four other people in the room need to consider running for election."

Vice board chair Josh Goller agreed, reminding the applicants that before he was elected, he had run unsuccessfully in the past.

Elections for the board position will be held in May.

Medelez will be able to run for the position then for a chance to fill the remaining term of office until June 2023.



Medelez

Medelez is the director of operations at his family's trucking business, Medelez Inc. and BJK Transport.

Born and raised in Hermiston, he now has three children of his own. His two sons currently attend Rocky Heights Elementary.

Medelez expressed excitement over the new bond proposal, which, if passed, would in part pay to replace Rocky Heights.

"I really think they

deserve an up-to-date facility. Not just my children, but the other children that go there and future children who will go there," he said.

After graduating from Hermiston High School, Medelez attended Oregon State University and eventually went on to complete his master's degree in business administration through Eastern Oregon University's off-campus program.

He previously served as vice chair on the Hispanic Advisory Committee, and on the board of directors for the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce. Medelez also coaches youth football and wrestling in the Hermiston area.

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