

Merkley announced disaster relief funding now available

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden announced last week that \$150 million is available to certain counties hit by severe winter storms and flooding this year, including Umatilla County.

Merkley said he didn't know exactly how much of that money would end up being awarded to Oregon projects, but municipalities, nonprofits and tribal nations could turn in grant applications for everything from topsoil being washed away to damaged buildings and roads. He said he and Wyden would send letters of support for recovery projects in Oregon.

The money now available is combined with other provisions Merkley pushed to have included in a \$19.1 billion bipartisan disaster relief package passed by Congress, including financial relief for wineries and hazelnut growers severely impacted by the heavy wildfire smoke of 2018.

"This is part of an ongoing view from the front row as the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Agriculture and Rural Development Committee," he said.

While spring flooding damaged parts of rural Oregon, wildfire season was more mild than in 2018. Merkley said it was important to put money toward preventative measures.

He said the Senate Appropri-



Senator Jeff Merkley waves to parade-goers during the Westward Ho! Parade in Pendleton on Friday morning.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

ations Committee had included \$8.5 million in the Department of Defense appropriations bill for training National Guard members to fight wildfires. That was a \$1.5 million increase from the first two years he helped secure that funding.

"I think it's now pretty well

established as a regular thing," he said.

In addition to worries about weather damage, Merkley said he also knows farmers are worried about the effects of the Trump administration's trade war. He said they are right to be worried, because there "doesn't seem to be

a real strategy" to how tariffs are applied.

"The thing that bothers me is the lack of a cohesive plan," he said.

Merkley said the United States does have a huge trade deficit with China on manufacturing, but the administration needs to sepa-

rate out manufacturing and agricultural trade when developing a strategy.

He said even if a Democrat wins the presidency in 2020, it will take time to repair some of the interruptions to trade relationships and reassure buyers.

Merkley said one bright spot for Oregon farmers seems to be the ability to now grow hemp legally. He said there would likely be some "ups and downs" as the hemp market stabilizes, but it is possible hemp will be a billion-dollar crop for Oregon this year.

"I see a longterm future for hemp," he said.

Hermiston could become a hemp-processing hot spot soon as local farmer Alan Cleaver is working to turn the former Hermiston Foods processing plant into a facility for extracting CBD oil from hemp.

Tackling another popular topic in the country right now, Merkley said the Senate needs to continue to find ways to tackle the country's drug addiction epidemic, from opioids to methamphetamines.

"We still don't have enough money to address addiction that exists now, and to prevent future addiction," he said.

He said companies that sold opioids under false pretenses about the true potential for addiction needed to be held accountable for helping pay to clean up the damage they caused.

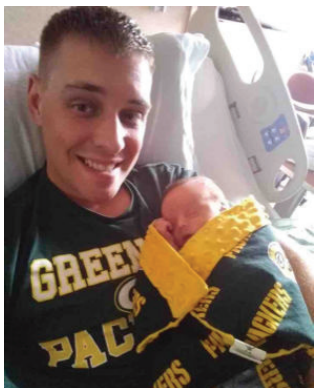
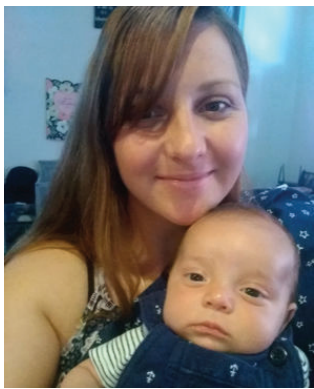


Photo contributed by Jessica McCallister

LEFT: Christy Erickson holds her son, Jordy. RIGHT: Jordy is pictured as a newborn with his father, Derrick Erickson.

Friends rally around family who lost infant in crash

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Friends of the Eastern Oregon family whose infant died in a crash last week are spreading the word about ways people can help.

Christy and Derrick Erickson of La Grande lost their 4-month-old baby Jordy Erickson last Wednesday, after a crash on Highway 82 in Wallowa County.

Jessica McCallister, Jordy's godmother, said the family is devastated. She started a GoFundMe campaign online to collect money to help with costs they will face, including funeral expenses, a new vehicle, time off work and medical bills for their 2-year-old son who was seriously injured in the crash and left the hospital Friday.

"I just want them to be OK," she said. "I feel like this is the only thing I can do for Jordy and his parents."

McCallister, who grew up in Hermiston and Stanfield and now lives in Union, said she was thrilled when the Ericksons asked her to be Jordy's godmother, knowing that she is unable to have children of her own.

"They wanted to offer me the honor of loving a child," she said. "I promised them I would do anything for him."

She was out of state when Christy went into labor, but hopped on a plane immediately and made it in time for his birth. She said it is difficult losing him so soon, but nothing compared to what his parents are experiencing.

People can donate to the family through the GoFundMe online at bit.ly/2ITzFIq or donate to an account set up in the Erickson family's name at any Community Bank.

Candace Salim, another family friend, is organizing a dinner to collect donations for the family on Wednesday at the American Legion building at 301 Fir St. in La Grande. Salim said she is asking people to donate spa-

ghetti, salads and desserts for the dinner. There will be photos of Jordy and a journal where people can write notes of condolence for the family.

Doors will open at 4 p.m. for people to drop off food, and the dinner will begin at 5:30 p.m. Anyone interested in helping with food for the dinner can call 541-910-3991.

A funeral service will be Sunday at 11 a.m. at Daniel's Knopp Crematory in La Grande.

Stanfield school bond will cost taxpayers less

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

This October, Stanfield taxpayers can expect their first payment on the school district bond to be lower than previously estimated, at approximately \$2.49 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

The \$14 million bond, which was passed with 65% of the vote in May, was originally estimated to cost \$2.70 per \$1,000.

Stanfield School District Superintendent Beth Burton said that careful timing helped the district successfully sell \$12.7 million of the bond at a premium in August, lowering the estimated rate for taxpayers.

"We told the community they wouldn't pay more than \$2.71," she said. "We're really fortunate to have good advisors who kept their eye on the market."

Tax payments on the previous bond, which passed in 1999, wrapped up in June. The money was used to build a new elementary school.

In 2017, the district had to increase the levy rate on that bond for taxpayers due to an assessment error discovered during a 2015-16 audit. The previous years, they'd not been charging enough to pay off the bond before its expiration in 2019.

Burton said this time around, the district is making sure that level payments are a priority.

When Burton stepped into the superintendent position in 2018, she said she saw how past rates were completely staggered over the years.

"It caused a lot of strife in the community, people were really unhappy. It really was a wild swing from year to year," Burton said. "One of the things that was really important to us was a level payment."

The \$14 million bond, along with \$4 million in grants from the Oregon School Capital Improvement Fund, which were secured last September, will be used to construct a middle school wing at Stanfield Secondary School.

Currently, the middle school and

the music program are being housed in two modular buildings on school property.

Burton said that if all goes according to plan, the district hopes to take out the modulares before the end of this school year. Renovations on the secondary school are set to take place at the beginning of summer.

Part of the bond money also went toward purchasing the property that Stanfield Elementary was built on this July. The property was previously being leased from Union Pacific.

Other projects include security updates, the addition of windows to the secondary school and a parking lot reconfiguration for the elementary school.

Burton encouraged Stanfield residents to give a call to the district if they have any questions or concerns about the bond. She said the district will try to release information on the bond projects regularly.

"I feel like we did right by the community," she said.

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Karen King
Pendleton, Oregon

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