

Infrastructure committee studies the future of depot

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

As the Columbia Development Authority waits to receive the former Umatilla Chemical Depot from the U.S. Army, major questions remain about how to best serve industrial portions of the property.

An infrastructure subcommittee formed this fall and is diving head first into the challenge of how to lay the groundwork for roads, water, sewer, electricity, natural gas, fiber internet and more to prepare the property for development.

“We only want to touch the ground once,” CDA executive director Greg Smith said. “We don’t want to lay water line only to have to pull it back out later.”

Transportation provides a good example. The CDA was granted \$7 million for roads there and the Port of Umatilla got another \$2 million as part of the Oregon Legislature’s 2017 transportation package. But, Smith said, there are a lot of options for spending that money — would it be better to create a new interchange leading to the depot off Interstate 84 near Patterson Ferry Road in Morrow County? Add an industrial entrance at the entrance of the National Guard’s Camp Umatilla? Adjust the current intersection of Interstate 84 and Interstate 82 so that semitrucks can be routed into the depot from there?

These are the types of questions the infrastructure subcommittee will study over at least the next six months.

Outside of the transpor-



Warehouses in the four hundred block of the Umatilla Chemical Depot remain standing on Oct. 8, 2014.

HH file photo

tation package dollars, the CDA doesn’t have a lot of money to work with so far. An allocation in this year’s House Bill 5006 of \$6 million for a “wastewater treatment facility and water supply line” refers to federal money passed through to the Oregon Military Department for upgrades to Camp Umatilla.

Although the National Guard training facility is located on part of the former depot, Smith said unfortunately the OMD isn’t able to share any infrastructure, such as water lines with civilian projects on the depot, for security reasons.

He did say, however, they have expressed open-

ness to partnering in other ways, such as loaning some labor or equipment to dig trenches.

Kim Puzey, director of the Port of Umatilla and chair of the infrastructure subcommittee, said Smith, who is also a state legislator in addition to his private economic development work, cautioned the committee that they likely wouldn’t get more money from the Legislature beyond the money they’ve already been allocated for roads. So Puzey is in Washington, D.C., this week meeting with Oregon’s senators and representatives to seek options for federal funding.

“We’re assuming (the

state) is a no, so we’re trying to find a yes somewhere else,” he said.

Puzey said the CDA is discussing possible revenue sources, such as renting out the depot’s approximately 1,000 concrete igloos as storage units.

Another option, he said, would be to take inspiration from Hermiston’s Regional Water System. That project was funded by a partnership of the port, the city and three private companies that all agreed to take on debt upfront and pay it down over time with revenue from the system.

He said different types of development, ranging from food processing facil-

ities to data centers, would have different needs, so it is important the CDA figure out what type of investments they are interested in attracting. The engineering firm Anderson Perry and Associates will then help them know what they need to provide to make the land “shovel ready” for those projects.

“You can say, ‘What do you need and we’ll go after it,’ but the timeframe is too lengthy,” Puzey said. “They’ll just go away. There are too many other properties that already have those things for them to stick around.”

Puzey and Smith both said that the committee’s

two meetings so far have drawn a variety of partners together, from Eastern Oregon Telecom to the cities of Umatilla and Hermiston.

The CDA has negotiated for water rights on the depot, but the cities have both offered to sell additional water and wastewater capacity. Smith said it will be up to the CDA and its infrastructure subcommittee to study the proposals and see which one was the best option from a financial standpoint.

He said Umatilla is making decisions now about major water projects and could use answers quickly about what the CDA might need from them, but unfortunately it is too early in the process to make those decisions.

Smith said the CDA is trying to be a good neighbor to nearby communities. For example, they’re trying stick to industrial developments on the depot and direct commercial projects, such as hotels, toward the cities so that they can benefit from adding them to their tax base.

He also cautioned people not to expect the depot to be transformed into a bustling hub of economic activity overnight — attracting, negotiating and constructing industrial projects takes years, sometimes decades.

On the other hand, Puzey said there have been a lot of promising discussions. He called the large piece of property at the intersection of two interstates “special.”

“I don’t know of an industrial property so well-situated in the western United States,” he said.

Umatilla County OKs Amazon deal

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners gave its approval for a 15-year property tax break to Amazon to build new data centers near Stanfield. In exchange, the multinational tech giant agrees to pay tens of millions over that span to the county and Hermiston.

The Hermiston City Council approved the deal Oct. 14, requiring Amazon Data Services to invest no less than \$200 million in the Greater Hermiston Enterprise Zone, which the city and the county co-sponsor. The county board of commissioners took on the matter last Wednesday morning in Pendleton.

County counsel Doug Olsen told the county board that in lieu of taxes, Amazon agrees to pay at least \$2 million a year to the county and city. The local governments are working on an agreement about how to spend the money.

Amazon also will pay an annual amount equal to the property tax on an assessed value of \$25 million, but that won’t be on the tax rolls. Still, Olsen said, “That means each one of the taxing districts in that area will be receiving a portion.”

In addition, Amazon will pay \$50,000 a year to Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 for fire safety and \$50,000 a year to the Hermiston School District.

Amazon opted to pay Hermiston schools, he said, because some of its employees are likely to live in that district. He also said the payment will not diminish the amount of

funding the school receives from the state. Commissioner George Murdock said the money to Hermiston schools amounts to a corporate gift.

Umatilla County commissioner candidate Patricia Maier of Hermiston questioned what would happen if the county demanded Amazon pay the property taxes.

“That’s conjecture,” Murdock replied. “In my estimation, if we decline them we won’t get anything from them because they’ll go somewhere else.”

The very reason for enterprise zones and the like, he continued, is to incentivize private development.

Mark Morgan also addressed the board. He’s the Hermiston assistant city manager and administrator of the enterprise zone. He said he ran the numbers on “how much money we’re giving away as a result of all of this” and after “37,000” calculations determined the deal is “giving away exactly zero.”

That notion, he said, assumes the city and county already had those revenues. He claimed the payment based on the \$25 million of assessed value would make Amazon the third biggest property taxpayer in Hermiston and the total deal would make it the top property taxpayer.

The deal also requires Amazon to pay its workers at least 130% of Umatilla County’s average wage. According to the Oregon Employment Department, annual wages in Umatilla County averaged \$40,233 in 2018, thus 130% of that would top \$52,000.

Umatilla high schoolers get a taste for space

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

The first all-female spacewalk in NASA’s 61-year history was Friday. But before the space agency focused its attention on making history, it took some time out Thursday to give some Umatilla County students the chance to go behind the scenes of the historic event.

Students from Umatilla High School spent time learning how NASA astronauts Jessica Meir and Christina Koch would fuel up and climb into their space suits in a zero gravity environment.

Robotic teacher Kyle Sipe tuned high-schoolers into a live chat session with Angela Case, a program coordinator at Space Center Houston, who showed students about how astronauts live day-to-day in spite of zero gravity.

“When you’re in space, there is no up or down,” Case told the students.

Through the video session, students made guesses about what astronauts eat for dinner and how long they exercise each day in order to avoid muscle atrophy — many students in the room guessed it was five hours a day, but it’s actually just two.

When the presentation ended, students had the chance to ask questions with Case via chat, who answered them in real time.

They learned that the longest time anyone’s spent at the ISS — which is the size of a football field — has been one year, and that zero gravity has no effect on swallowing and digesting food.

Sipe said that attendance to the session was much larger than he anticipated. He said many students are



Astronauts Christina Koch, right, and Jessica Meir pose for a photo on the International Space Station.

Photo courtesy of NASA

focusing on astronomy in science class this month and the opportunity to learn more about the life of an astronaut couldn’t have been better timing.

He added that it’s not the school’s first interaction with NASA. In 2011, the robotics team won a NASA scholarship to help boost the program during its first year. And in 2017, then-junior Anthony Ibarra traveled to Florida to participate in the International Space Settlement Design Competition.

“I’m excited kids got a chance to ask questions and interact with someone from the Space Center,” Sipe said.

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