

Holiday tree lighting scheduled for Dec. 5

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

When the city of Hermiston picks a Christmas tree, it's go big or go home.

The tree lighting up Hermiston's Festival Street this year is the biggest yet, altering the downtown skyline as it stretches above the rooftop of the two-story Union Club.

Parks and recreation director Larry Fetter estimated the top is about 45 feet above street level — a few feet taller than trees of years past — but it's the width that's really impressive.

"It took up two lanes of traffic (while transporting it)," Fetter said. "It's definitely broader."

Five years ago, drivers passing Northeast Second Street were doing double takes as they checked to see if a 30-foot pine really was sprouting up from the middle of the road. RDO Equipment had donated the tree to the city, which decided the best way to put it up was to jackhammer a hole directly into the middle of the road next to city hall.

There was some grumbling from taxpayers about the practicality of digging a hole in a perfectly good road, but the city hoped the lights would draw shoppers downtown, and the tree-lighting ceremony was a hit.

Each year since, the light displays on the tree and surrounding block have gotten bigger and brighter. The city turned the street into a year-round "festival street" hosting a variety of events, and there are nightly light shows throughout December.

"It's become quite a spectacle," Fetter said.

The city has always used trees that were slated to come down that year anyway, to avoid waste. This year's tree was donated by the Hermiston Seventh-day Adventist Church. The church's original building burned down in 2018, and the tree that now sits downtown was in the way of construction for the new church being built.

Mark Black, the contractor for the church, said construction is on schedule for completion sometime during the summer of 2020. The burned-out building was recently demolished



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
A Umatilla Electric Cooperative line-truck uses its crane to stabilize the tree as it is cut on Monday.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Umatilla Electric Cooperative employee Cody Ridant uses a chainsaw to clear branches from the base of the tree prior to cutting it down.

and steel beams are rising up to take its place.

He said he was happy they were able to work out the timing to donate the tree to the community.

"It's going to be a beautiful tree," he said. "It's a

good gift from the church."

On Monday, a crew from Umatilla Electric Cooperative carefully moved the massive tree over the course of three hours. They trimmed branches off the bottom, cut it down and used multiple

boom trucks to pick it up and lay it down sideways on wooden stands designed to keep the branches from getting crushed underneath.

The thick tree seemed to swallow the flatbed trailer, trailing its branches over the

road as it moved downtown with a police escort. Finally, the tree was lifted back up and gently lowered into a hole in the festival street that is covered by a manhole cover most of the year.

Fetter said parks staff will once again string the thousands of lights vertically instead of horizontally, which allows them to pack more lights on and doesn't require driving a truck in circles around the tree.

The city will host a "Winterfest" tree-lighting celebration on Dec. 5 starting at 5:30 p.m. on the festival street next to city hall. The tree lighting will take place

at 6:15 p.m. with entertainment before and after by Hermiston High School's Majazzsty jazz choir, the Hermiston High School jazz band and Gems & Gents Cheer Group. Santa Claus will be available for photos, there will be food vendors on site, and the event coincides with downtown merchants' First Thursday sales and giveaways.

For the rest of the month, the festival street will feature light shows each half hour from 5-8 p.m. Monday through Friday. The holiday season will end with a New Years Eve fireworks show and giant watermelon drop.

Potential fifth candidate announces bid for county commissioners seat

HERMISTON HERALD

A fifth candidate could be entering the race for Umatilla County Board of Commissioners.

At last week's Pendleton city council meeting, Holly Jo Beers of Milton-Freewater announced she was planning a run. As of last Wednesday she had not filed the paperwork with Umatilla County, but Beers referred to herself as a candidate at the meeting and has until March 10 to make her campaign official with the county.

Other candidates are Dan Dorran, Mark Gomolski, Patricia Maier and Jonathan Lopez, all of Hermiston.

The Pendleton council

meeting Nov. 19 became an impromptu candidate forum as three of the candidates introduced themselves.

Lopez, Beers and Maier all used their time during the public comment section to provide the council with some biographical information about themselves and answer the occasional question about their platforms or views on local issues.

The Position 3 seat is being vacated by Commissioner Bill Elfering, who is retiring from the board after two terms.

All candidates will run in the May 19 primary and the top two candidates will move on to a runoff election on Nov. 3, 2020.

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