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INSIDE

FATAL CRASH: A Hermiston woman was charged with manslaughter and DUII after a crash that killed a woman Friday night. **A3**

HOLIDAY RUSH: Hermiston churches, nonprofits and businesses offer visits with Santa and other Christmas activities this week. **A6**

TOY RUN: See photos of this year's Echo Toy Run in memory of longtime organizer Al Sells. **A14**

BY THE WAY

Construction on Geer Road is underway

Drivers could see minor delays on Geer Road after work began last week on installation of a new water main.

The main is being installed along the section of Geer Road between Theater Lane and Harper Road, moving the water system in Hermiston's northeast neighborhoods from dead ends to a loop. The benefits of the project will include greater capacity and water pressure, reduced loss of service during breaks and maintenance, better fire protection and improved water quality.

Umatilla Electric Cooperative will be working on an unrelated project along Geer Road at the same time, which could also cause minor disruptions to traffic this month.

Affordable Family Eyewear invites people to check out their new digs. A grand opening and ribbon cutting event is set for Thursday from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at 298 E. Gladys Ave., Hermiston.

Be sure to drop in and register for a chance to win some great prizes. Up for grabs during the celebration include a night at the **Swayze Suite** (www.swayzesuite.com) in downtown Hermiston,

See BTW, Page A2

READY FOR THE REBUILD



HH file photo

Charred portions of the Funland play structure at Butte Park in Hermiston await demolition after an early-morning fire in May 2019. Plans for a new Funland playground were presented Monday.

City council approves fundraising push for new Funland

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

A citizen committee will try to fundraise as much as \$810,000 from the community in order to rebuild the Funland playground "bigger, better and stronger" after it burned down in May.

The goal is ambitious, but Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann praised the group for dreaming big.

"This community has a rich history of doing things better than average, better than they've been done before," he said.

The city currently has \$752,000 in hand from an insurance settlement and some initial donations that trickled in unsolicited after the fire. It's enough to build a playground over bark chips, but the Funland Park Reconstruction Committee hopes to build a larger, more accessible and more durable playground with new features such as a restroom facility.

The largest cost of their vision — at \$336,000 — would be replacing the previous wood chips under the structure with a spongy, wheelchair-friendly, fire-resistant material made from recycled tires.

"The wood chips at the bottom of the swings and slides were displaced constantly," parks and recreation director



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Funland committee member Charlie Clupny and parks and recreation director Larry Fetter present plans for a new Funland playground to the Hermiston City Council on Monday.

Larry Fetter said, noting new wood chips would only cost about \$20,000 upfront but need to be replaced frequently.

The structure itself will be built from materials less flammable than wood, such as a compressed plastic made from recycled milk jugs that has become popular for new playgrounds. It will be designed to reduce the number of hiding spots for people up to no good, and will have an upgraded security camera system.

The tentative design the committee presented Monday would be broken up into three main thematic sections, plus a 16-foot-tall structure in the center and a separate area for swings.

The centerpiece of the adventure section is a large pirate ship where children can pretend to battle a mythological kraken coming out of the "water."

See Funland, Page A16

Winterfest lights up downtown Hermiston

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Santa Claus made an early stop in Hermiston on Thursday night, checking in with the town's little ones about what they want for Christmas during the annual Winterfest.

The centerpiece of the event on the festival street was a roughly 45-foot Christmas tree, decked out in thousands of multicolored lights. This year the privilege of flipping the switch to light the tree went to Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner.

"This is probably the greatest honor I've ever had as a state representative," he told the crowd.

Before Santa's arrival, Smith spoke about remembering the true meaning of Christmas. He refer-

enced the song "Carol of the Drum," also known as "The Little Drummer Boy," and said that each person has a gift they can give.

"Let's remember what the season is about," he said. "It's about family. It's about love. It's about caring for our Savior and those in need."

As the large crowd huddled around outdoor space heaters, waiting for Santa's arrival on a fire truck, Smith conducted an impromptu sing-along, pulling people up from the audience to lead everyone in their favorite Christmas carol.

"This is your chance — American Idol, Hermiston style," he said.

Sutton Osborne, 10, led everyone in "We Wish You A Merry Christmas." Later in the evening, while



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Majazty, the Hermiston High School jazz choir, performs at the Winterfest tree lighting ceremony in Hermiston on Thursday night.

See Lights, Page A16

