

Year in Review:

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hamstringing the economic opportunities and stability of the entire region.” They wrote that growers and other shippers in the area had already been complaining of major issues with Union Pacific after their first round of layoffs, and cited safety concerns that ex-employees had expressed to the *Hermiston Herald*.

The community responded by offering up services for families that had lost their income and putting together an emergency job fair to encourage people to stay in the community.

2) Water rate increases anger residents

After the City of Hermiston’s restructure of its water rates kicked in on March 1, anger built among residents of the city who had seen their bill go up significantly in the wake of the new rates.

The updated rates were based more heavily on usage, with any water over 15,000 gallons a month increasing from 50 cents to \$3.50 per 1,000 gallons. While some residents saw minimal increases, others took to social media and an August city council meeting to testify that their bill had doubled or more. They said they had stopped watering their lawns or taking daily showers to afford their bill.

Despite pushback, the city council kept the rates the same, stating that the revenue was needed for projects to protect the integrity of the city’s water system and keep it running, including replacing crumbling, century-old pipes.

3) Voters pass \$82.7 bond for Hermiston School District

An \$82.7 million bond passed by voters in November will ring in the replacement of the Hermiston School District’s oldest elementary school, Rocky Heights, and add a new elementary school on Theater Lane. It will also fund an annex to increase capacity at the high school, elementary school site improvements and purchase of new property for future growth.

The changes will eventually result in a redrawing of elementary school boundaries to ease crowding.

The passage of the bond resulted from an election that kept supporters and dissenters alike on the edges of their seats until late into the night. Eventually, the measure was approved by 52.4% of Hermiston voters.

That success was the first of its kind in over a decade and followed a failed measure in 2017, for a \$104 million bond which aimed to replace Rocky Heights and Highland Hills, among other projects. This year, administrators and board members acknowledged that the bond was too big an ask for the community.

It was the first bond to pass under Superintendent Tricia Mooney’s leadership. It was also the first time that the political action committee, Yes for Herm-



HH file photo

A man speaks to the Hermiston city council Aug. 26 about frustrations with a March water rate increase. The audience for the meeting filled the seats in the council chambers and spilled over into the lobby.



HH file photo

Agape House Executive Director Dave Hughes poses for a portrait at his desk.

iston Schools sought campaign management from a third party, Pac/West Communications.

4) Funland playground burns down

On May 10, Hermiston lost a treasured piece of the community when the Funland playground at Butte Park burned down in the early morning hours.

The large wooden structure was originally built by volunteers in 1996, then rebuilt with an even larger community effort in 2001 after arson destroyed it.

After the fire in May, the city put together a committee of citizens and city councilors to choose a company to build a new playground. They unveiled designs for a “bigger, better and stronger” playground in December that would be made out of fire-resistant recycled plastic with an ADA-accessible rubber ground covering, broken up into themes such as Wild West and agriculture. They plan to begin fundraising as much as \$810,000 before attempting to complete the new playground by Sept. 2020.

5) Amazon offers \$40 million in lieu of taxes for Hermiston project

In October, the Hermiston City Council and Umatilla County Board of Commissioners agreed to give Amazon a 15-year property tax break for a new development the tech giant has planned for southeastern Hermiston.

In exchange for not paying property taxes, Amazon promised to pay \$40 million over the course of the 15 years, spread between the city, county and other

local taxing districts such as Hermiston School District and Umatilla County Fire District 1. The city and county have not made final decisions on how their portion will be spent, but have discussed using it for mutually beneficial projects such as paving Gettman Road in Hermiston.

The decision caused discussion in the community about the role of such tax breaks. While some pointed out that \$40 million is much more than the taxing districts get each year from the bare ground currently there, others questioned why a trillion-dollar company shouldn’t pay its full share of local property taxes.

6) Hermiston Foods plant purchased for CBD processing

NORPAC’s closure of the Hermiston Foods vegetable processing plant was one of the top stories of 2017, but in 2019 the facility finally found a buyer in local farmer Alan Cleaver.

Cleaver, who owns Columbia Basin Onion and related companies in Hermiston, announced in May that he was purchasing the plant in order to use it to extract CBD oil from hemp for pharmaceutical purposes, under the name Columbia Basin Extraction.

Since the federal government legalized industrial hemp — which does not contain the high-inducing THC that its cousin marijuana does — last year, Cleaver has been growing the new crop to be used for medicinal purposes. He retrofitted the former Hermiston Foods building to extract CBD from dried hemp pel-



HH file photo

Hermiston Parks and Recreation director Larry Fetter (right) assists Kayla Sandlyn and Dylan Duke earlier this year in locating a wooden fence board carved with the name of Dylan’s father Scott Duke, who passed away several years ago.

lets using a cold extraction method with denatured ethanol, and told the *Hermiston Herald* in May that he planned to hire 30 to 40 employees.

7) New housing announced

Hermiston’s housing market got set to grow this year, as new subdivisions broke ground or passed through initial hurdles such as annexation or rezoning.

In April, the city council annexed 11 acres on the northwest corner of West Theater Lane and Northwest Geer Road for Monte Vista Homes, which planned to build 53 single-family homes and one multi-family project on the property. The same month, Northwest Housing Alternatives broke ground on a 48-unit apartment complex on Southeast Sixth Street.

In May, the council approved another annexation, this time 9.35 acres on Elm Avenue across from the Oxbow Trail entrance, where FDM Development plans to build 39 new homes.

In July, the council approved the final plat for the eighth and ninth phase of the Highland Summit subdivision, which includes another 40 lots.

In November, the city annexed 36 acres at the intersection of Elm Avenue and Diagonal Road, where Lloyd and Lois Piercy plan to build 25 acres of “moderate” single family homes and a selection of duplexes and triplexes containing approximately 45 accessible

HONORABLE MENTIONS

City builds new water tower
 Union Club opens
 Fiesta Foods closes
 City launches food truck pod
 “Watermelon king” Skip Walchli dies
 Hermiston sees record-breaking February snows
 Major drug bust puts strain on local foster care system
 Maxwell Pavilion opens
 Former city manager Tom Harper dies
 Riverfront Park damaged by floods
 Hermiston Chamber of Commerce gets new director
 Chamber of Commerce purchases land for new building
 Hermiston woman killed in unsolved hit and run
 Two boaters drown in Columbia River
 Walker’s Farm Kitchen closes
 Chuckwagon closes
 Lifeways prepares to open Aspen Springs psychiatric facility
 Boiler fire closes city hall for more than a month
 Panda Express opens
 Woman arrested for DUII after fatal crash
 Cities plan Umatilla River Trail
 Hermiston residents file for county commissioner

units designed for residents age 55 and older.

In December, after adding dozens of townhomes to the first phase of the Cimmaron Terrace subdivision, VestCapital broke ground on the second phase, which will begin with 38 new single family homes and include a new 7-acre public park.

8) City considers possible sale of Hermiston Community Center

It was the news that didn’t actually happen: city manager Byron Smith confirmed to the *Hermiston Herald* in October that a potential buyer for the Hermiston Community Center had come forward and was in the process of doing due diligence on the property before making an unsolicited offer.

The plan back then was for the person or company, who the city declined to name, to present a proposal to the city council at a date in the near future, but by the end of 2019 the mystery buyer had yet to step forward.

If the sale did take place, it would be big news for Hermiston. The city purchased the former Safeway and surrounding property for \$544,000 in 1994 and the community raised another \$665,000 for its renovation, according to the *Hermiston Herald* archives. It has since been used regularly for community and private events, and currently houses the offices of the city’s parks and recreation department.

9) Ranch & Home opens

Many businesses opened

and closed in Hermiston during 2019, but likely the most anticipated opening was Ranch & Home, a large retailer based in the Tri-Cities that offers western clothing, tools, hunting and fishing supplies, barbecue grills, lawn care supplies and other outdoor-related items.

The retailer announced plans for a Hermiston store in early 2016, planning to open by the end of 2017. The store’s actual opening date was April 19.

10) Dave Hughes retires from Agape House

After more than 15 years at the helm of Hermiston’s food bank and social services organization, Dave Hughes retired from the Agape House (run under Eastern Oregon Mission, along with family shelter Martha’s House), in October and loaded up an RV with his wife Jodene. The pair headed straight to Globe, Arizona.

Hughes, 73, took the director position at the organization back in 2002.

Under his leadership, Agape House headed to its current location on West Harper Road, and developed new ways of helping Northeastern Oregon’s vulnerable populations— including initiating a backpack program for food insecure elementary schoolers Umatilla and Morrow Counties.

Until the Eastern Oregon Mission board selects a new director, Cathy Putnam of Hermiston is currently serving as interim director of Agape House.

DONATIONS:

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she said. “It’s a good feeling.

For Eastern Oregon Mission’s Agape House in Hermiston, the story is a little different.

“November and December are our biggest months for people to give,” said Cathy Putnam, interim director of the organization.

Each year, Agape House is the site of Christmas Express, a program put on by city employees to provide people in need with gifts and food. Usually, the event reaches 500 families. Putnam said this year, the event served fewer than 400, and the organization is not sure why.

Putnam said Agape House is in awe of how generous the community is in providing support to the organization.

“We’re just stewards of what is given to us,” she said.

Putnam added that Agape House’s needs are often greatest, not during the holidays, but during fall.

“At the beginning of the school year, we’re really in need of school clothes,” she said. “A lot of times parents won’t have the furniture they need when they’re new to town.”

And when the organization is accepting larger items like furniture, Putnam said, they’ve been increasingly careful about what they accept.

“We’re trying to be good stewards; if it’s not usable, we have to pay to get it taken away,” she said. “We’re asking people to think about if it’s something they would still use.”

Marilyn Johnson, who coordinates the Outreach Food Pantry in Pendleton, said this winter the Pendle-

ton School District donated nearly 4,000 pounds of food to the organization.

“We get these massive inflows,” she said. “But this community always has donated food throughout the year. We get donations almost daily.”

She added that monthly shipments from the Oregon Food Bank branch at CAPECO helps bolster the rise and fall of seasonal donations.

“That’s the one dependable shipment we know we’re going to get,” she said.

It’s not all human needs organizations that see upticks in giving during the holidays.

Michelle Glynn, manager at Pendleton Animal Welfare Shelter, noted December is a time of heavy donations to the organization.

“I’ve seen quite an increase during the holidays. We need all the dona-

tions we can get, and especially during the spring,” she said.

Each spring, PAWS especially needs cat litter due to an influx of kittens.

And while the donations flow freely during winter, she said the adoption and surrender rates stay roughly the same.

Fuzzball Animal Rescue in Hermiston has received a few calls about people looking to surrender their pets, and the organization has picked up a few strays near Christmastime, too, board member Robin Barker said.

But adoptions are slow. “People are looking for puppies and kittens at Christmas, and most of our rescues are older than that,” she said.

“We’re terribly overloaded. The community is very supportive of us, but people don’t want to adopt (animals).”

BTW:

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information can be found at www.saif.com/agseminars.

The **Hermiston Herald** offices will close at noon on Tuesday and all day on Wednesday in honor of the New Year’s holiday. After this week the Herald will resume its normal schedule of releasing a print edition on Wednesday.s

Tickets are now on sale for the **Melonville Comedy Festival**. In its 27th year, the event will be held Friday, Jan. 24 at the **Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center**, Hermiston.

The tickets are \$35 if purchased in advance (\$40 at the door) and are available online at www.melonvillecomedyfestival.com or from **Last Chance Tavern** or **Midway Bar & Grill**. Also, tables of 10 are available for \$300. See next week’s **Hermiston Herald** for a full story.

The **Harkenrider Senior Activity Center** is closed for New Year’s on Wednesday. The menu for Thursday is scrambled eggs with ham, hash brown patties and biscuits with sausage gravy. Friday is cube steak sandwich, salad and dessert.

— You can submit items for our weekly *By The Way* column by emailing your tips to editor@hermistonherald.com.