



A Hermiston Police car blocks access to Southeast Fifth Street in Hermiston due to downed power lines on Saturday, May 30, 2020. Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The Columbia Development Authority meets

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

As the Columbia Development Authority continues to wait on the final approval needed for the Army to transfer the former Umatilla Chemical Depot to local control, CDA director Greg Smith worries about what might slow the transfer down.

He told the board during its June 4 meeting that many of the key players with the U.S. Army and Oregon Military Department, who have been working with the CDA, are retiring soon or have recently retired, replaced by new people who aren't familiar with the years of work that have already been done on the transfer agreement.

"I want to share that's a real vulnerability for the CDA," he said.

The former Army depot, which closed in 2012, comprises about 17,000 acres in Umatilla and Morrow counties along Interstate 84. About 7,500 acres have already been turned over to the Oregon Military Department for a National Guard training facility. The Army is working to turn over control of the rest of the property to the CDA, which is a partnership between five local governments, for development of a wildlife refuge and approximately 3,965 acres of industrial and commercial land.

So far, the transfer deal has hit seven years worth of speed bumps, from disagreements about water rights to drawn-out negotiations on preserving cultural sites, such as the

Oregon Trail ruts that run through the property.

The agreement over cultural sites, known as a programmatic agreement, is one of the last pieces of the puzzle. Now that the CDA has come to an agreement with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Smith said the document needs to be approved by the federal Office of General Counsel.

"I'm nervous, because what I'm hearing from folks in D.C. is that the OCG is significantly backlogged, so we need to figure out how to make this a priority," Smith said.

He said companies continue to express interest in industrial land on the depot, as soon as the CDA has the authority to lease or sell the property. The CDA's infrastructure committee has been meeting with Anderson Perry & Associates, Umatilla Electric Cooperative, Cascade Natural Gas, railroad consultants and other companies as they create a plan for extending needed infrastructure to those sites.

The CDA didn't have much business to conduct during its meeting, but they did approve Smith to work with Umatilla County Emergency Manager Tom Roberts on an agreement for the county's emergency management department to use some equipment the CDA had been left. Roberts also thanked the CDA for allowing his department to use a couple of the depot's concrete igloos, built to store munitions, for storage.

Council adopts budget amid calls nationwide to 'defund the police'

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

The Hermiston City Council adopted a new budget for 2020-21 on Monday, June 8.

The budget's biggest capital improvement projects for the year are water and wastewater improvements, including replacing wastewater pipes along Newport Avenue and water mains along Ridgeway Avenue. The city also plans to rebuild Funland Playground at Butte Park after it burned down in 2019, and finish design work for a restructuring of the three-way intersection of Geer, Harper and River roads.

The original plan had been to give city staff a 2.75% cost of living increase in July, but reduced revenue because of the pandemic has pushed that raise out until at least January 2021.

The budget passed without debate between councilors, but Mayor David Drotzmann said he hoped community members watching knew that the budget had been discussed in depth previously at a budget committee meeting that included multiple councilors and members of the public.

"We're very familiar with this budget," he said.

At a time when many major metropolitan areas are discussing calls by the Black Lives Matter movement to "defund the police" by diverting more funding away from police departments and into social services, Hermiston's police budget added two positions. A new school resource officer, paid 75% by Hermiston School District, will be assigned to the middle schools, and a new records clerk will help the department process increased requests for body camera footage and other records.

At the end of the city council meeting, as councilors discussed recent protests in Hermiston, Drotzmann said he felt the Hermiston Police Department's work was essential to the community.

He also said he was proud of Hermistonians for making their voices heard through protest, and that they did so without resorting to personal violence or destruction of property.

City councilor Lori Davis said she had a constituent who asked her to bring up the Hermiston Freedom Rally, which took place May 30 in protest against COVID-19 restrictions. She said the constituent felt frightened and disturbed by the people who showed up carrying "assault rifles," with their faces covered, and that the image "didn't represent Hermiston."

Drotzmann said he got several calls and emails from people who were also concerned about that rally and wanted the city to not allow it to take place. The group rented the downtown festival street from the city.

"When we start silencing one group, who gets to make that decision, and when does it stop?" Drotzmann asked.

City councilor Roy Barron also said he had heard concerns, particularly regarding the perception that speakers for the rally were "bringing white supremacy to town," but like Drotzmann, he didn't want to infringe on others' right to free speech.

He said he attended the Black Lives Matter protest on June 6 and he understood that the anger motivating such protests around the world are an expression of pain that the black community is feeling. He encouraged everyone to work together to root out systemic racism.

He also said he thought Hermiston has a great police department, but they shouldn't have to be the ones handling so much of

the mental health and addiction problems in the community. He said he wanted to see more help for them in those areas, more training to equip them to handle those situations and protocols to make sure officers are taking care of their own mental health so that they can deal with high-stress situations.

"I would encourage people to engage with our police department," Barron said.


Monday's regular meeting was preceded by an hour-long work session to discuss possible changes to Hermiston's zoning rules to accommodate a proposed homeless shelter.

The shelter, proposed by a new local nonprofit known as Stepping Stones, would be comprised of at least 20 Conestoga huts 6 feet by 10 feet wide on a lot behind the Agape House. The huts, which would have no running water or electricity, would each offer a homeless individual, couple or a parent and child a place to sleep in exchange for fulfilling steps, such as volunteer work or applying for jobs to help them move out of homelessness. The lot would also include a common building where guests could socialize and charge their cellphones.

Guests would only be allowed on the property in the evenings to sleep and

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