

# Some residents still await unemployment benefits

By NADA SEWIDAN  
STAFF WRITER

Four months since thousands of Umatilla County residents filed for unemployment benefits as a result of COVID-19, some say they still haven't received any money, while others just received months of unprocessed payments as of last week.

Renee Bousquet of Hermiston said she racked up 14 weeks of unprocessed unemployment weekly claims before she received a response from the Oregon Employment Department.

Bousquet said week after week she filled out the paperwork that was sent to her, and week after week, they kept sending the same paperwork for her to mail back. She said it wasn't until she faxed the paperwork with a cover note attached to it explaining how long it has been since she's heard back, that they responded.

"It took 14 weeks of no information, no one can tell me anything," she said.

Shortly after, the unemployment office got in contact with her, and once they received the missing information of why she was let go during the start of the pandemic, they were able to deposit unemployment com-



A hiring sign taped to the front of Nookie's restaurant in Hermiston in May is one of many seen around town since restaurants reopened.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

pensation for 11 out of the 14 unprocessed weeks.

"It took a long time for (the unemployment department) to get their stuff together, but they are getting it together," she said. "At least, it worked for me."

According to data from the unemployment office, as of July 21, a total of 513,300 claims received between March 15 and July 11 were processed in the state of Oregon, and approximately 99% of claims to date have been processed. This is compared to data from May 23, when only 61,000 applications

were processed and out of those submitted, about 43% had been paid.

Bousquet said that although she received her unemployment benefits, she knows multiple people who are still waiting on theirs.

Travis Hamman of Pendleton is one of those people.

Hamman applied for unemployment toward the end of March and has still not received his unemployment benefits, which is nine weeks of benefits for a total of \$8,000.

He said as time goes on, his need for that unem-

ployment compensation increases. Hamman said his truck, which he needs to conduct his business, is at risk of getting repossessed.

"I just received an email from reliable credit who financed my truck stating if I didn't pay them the \$1,700 owed to them within 7 days they will repossess my truck," he said.

Hamman said he stopped applying for unemployment in the middle of June once he was able to start up work again. However, he said people are canceling on projects and work is currently

unreliable in terms of frequency and pay. Hamman said that this pays some of the bills but still needs his past unprocessed weekly claim payments.

"I have told them I am trying to get back on track from not getting my unemployment that is owed to me. I have been back to work for almost two months however it started out slow and I am having to play catch up with all of my bills."

Hamman said he hopes he gets his unemployment processed as soon as possible so he can get his payments back on track.

Ariane Holm Le Chevalier, communication advisor and representative at the employment department, stated in an email that due to the high volume of applications they are still working on processing applications received prior to June 21.

"We are cautiously optimistic that we will be able to work through remaining claims by August 8," she stated.

She also stated that for those who need to still apply for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, that they should expect to wait for at least six weeks from when their initial claim is submitted.

Currently, the unemployment rate in Oregon has

fallen to 11.2% as of June from 14.6% in March. In Umatilla county, as of May, a total of 2,362 residents remain unemployed.

Bousquet said she is still unemployed and will continue to claim weekly, but that she couldn't believe when she got her unemployment compensation deposited and is thankful it is now processed.

The Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program, which provides an additional \$600 a week in unemployment, expires on Saturday, July 25. When asked how it will affect her, Bousquet said for her personally, her husband receives supplementary income, so it won't affect her as much as others who are sole providers, but that she speculates it will be a significant cut for those who are still unemployed.

"For most people, the payment from the pandemic program is more than you'll receive from the unemployment check," she said. "For anybody who may be the sole provided, it's a dramatic cut."

As for other unemployment programs, the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program ends on December 26 and the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program ends on December 20.

# Change in county code could push car dealership development

By ALEX CASTLE  
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County approved an amendment to its development code along the Highway 395 North corridor between Hermiston and Umatilla last week to allow for automobile dealerships to be developed in the area.

The code change was recommended by Umatilla County Planning Department staff following a June 25 public hearing and loosens the 30-foot maximum setback requirement and caps the irrigated landscaping requirement at a half-acre for select businesses.

"Buildings related to automobile, truck or motorcycle sales lots are exempt from the maximum setback requirements when the front of the lot is used for automobile, truck or motorcycle merchandise display," the amended code states.

The amendment was unanimously approved by the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners on July 15 following a public hearing that featured no public input in favor or in opposition.

"Our hope is that these changes will help encourage more development and redevelopment along the corridor for businesses like automobile dealerships that want to locate out there," Umatilla County Planning Director Bob Waldher said during the staff report portion of the hearing.

Waldher said these developers should now be able to adequately display vehicles for sale, while larger developments won't be challenged by having to abide by the original code of 15% of irrigated landscaping per parcel, which was exceeding limitations set by the



A line of new cars sit in at a dealership along Highway 395 north of Hermiston as traffic passes by on Tuesday, July 21, 2020.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Oregon State Department of Water Resources.

The economic development project has been geared toward improving the aesthetics and economic vitality along the corridor, which includes commercial- and industrial-zoned properties between Hermiston and Umatilla's urban growth boundaries. Waldher said development codes were amended in November 2019 that helped establish these design standards.

"Since then we've actually been able to implement some of those code changes, and back in February we met with a prospective developer for an automobile dealership

who was having some trouble meeting the design standards," Waldher said July 15.

That developer was concerned about being able to display their vehicles and the requirement to include the 1.5 acres of irrigated landscaping that would have been required on their 10-acre parcel.

After hearing those concerns, Walder and county planning staff met with Highway 395 North Technical Advisory Committee, which agreed the code should be amended to alleviate those challenges.

Waldher said that, at the behest of the Umatilla

County Planning Commission, county planning staff also determined the relaxed standards will apply to agricultural equipment dealerships also.

But the exemptions will only apply for those select businesses, and Walder said the amended development requirements should still achieve the project's goals.

"We're really trying to limit huge parking lots out in front of businesses if we can sometimes locate them to the side or rear of the business," Waldher said. "That can have a better aesthetic effect as well as improved walkability and things like that."

## Industrial development?



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Columbia Development Authority director Greg Smith leads a tour of the former Umatilla Chemical Depot for officials from Umatilla and Morrow Counties to discuss industrial development on the site on Tuesday, July 14, 2020.

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