

# Hermiston breaks ground on Funland

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

A small group of Hermiston residents celebrated some good news on Wednesday, July 29, by breaking ground on the new Funland Playground at Butte Park.

The previous iteration of Funland — a large, castle-like wooden structure — burned down in May 2019 in a suspected case of arson. In the year since, a committee of city officials, parents and other residents has worked to design a new and improved playground that they hope will be just as fun but more secure, durable and accessible.

“I’m excited,” said City Councilor Roy Barron, who was one of six people to turn over a shovelful of dirt on the future home of the playground. “It’s nice to have something positive to look forward to for the community.”

In December 2019, the city council approved the committee to work toward a goal of fundraising as much as \$810,000 for the project, in addition to the \$752,000 insurance payout.

Larry Fetter, director of Hermiston’s parks and recreation department, said they



**Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann signs a shovel for Jadalynn Martinez as her brother Jaysen Martinez looks on at the groundbreaking for the new Funland Playground in Hermiston on Wednesday, July 29, 2020.**

were able to raise enough to check off the main items on their wish list. That includes an additional picnic shelter that is being donated by the Rotary Club, a building for concessions and restrooms, and a rubberized “poured-in-place” surface.

Fetter said the colorful poured-in-place surface underneath the playground

has a 20-year lifespan. It is porous enough for water to drain through instead of pooling up, accessible to devices, such as wheelchairs and walkers, and easier to maintain than loose materials that need to constantly be replenished.

“It’s firm, but resilient,” he said. “If you land on it, it’s like a marshmallow, but

it doesn’t get displaced like wood chips.”

The concessions building will provide restrooms for both the playground and the splash park, and offer an opportunity for groups or businesses to sell concessions while keeping an eye on both parts of the park.

The new playground will be made out of compressed



**Shovels sit awaiting use at the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Funland Playground in Hermiston on Wednesday, July 29, 2020.**

plastic materials that will be much more fire-resistant than wood, and Fetter said the playground’s design provides fewer places for people to hide and a fence that helps limit how many ways people can access it. He said the playground will also get a much-upgraded security and lighting system.

“We will have very high-definition cameras recording live, so there will be real-time monitoring,” he said.

Fetter said the city is still accepting donations for the project, which will go toward enhancements, such as additional benches and

shade. He said the hope is to open the playground in October, but if the weather or supply chain for the playground pieces don’t cooperate with the construction schedule, it may need to be finished in the spring.

Charlie Clupny, who helped build both the 1996 version of Funland, and the 2001 version that was built after the first burned down, said he was thrilled to see the iconic playground return again in a new form.

“It will certainly be a different kind of rebuild, but when it’s done it will be a spectacular monument to the community,” he said.

# Small schools shift gears on distance learning

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston School District had already seen the writing on the wall for an online-only start to the school year, but for some Eastern Oregon school districts, new metrics from the Oregon Department of Education mean a change in plans.

“We’re back to square one,” Echo School District Superintendent Raymon Smith said.

In order for any school in Oregon to be able to have students in the classroom, the entire state must have less than 5% of COVID-19 tests conducted coming back positive for three consecutive weeks. Then, the county where a school district resides must also have a less than 5% positive test rate and fewer than 10 new confirmed cases per 10,000 people in a seven-day period, three weeks in a row. An exception can be granted for rural schools with less than 100 students to bring kindergarten through third grade back into the classroom if they meet slightly looser metrics, including 30 new confirmed cases per 10,000.

**Echo**

Smith said Echo School District had been making plans to return all students to the building full time

in August. Now, they’re throwing their focus into online learning. Teachers who had already embraced technology tools in the classroom are training colleagues with a more analog style, and administration is pulling in training resources from places like the InterMountain Education Service District.

Smith said the approach will look a little more like a traditional class schedule for grades six through 12, although even the oldest students won’t be expected to sit in front of a computer for eight hours straight. There will be opportunities for watching prerecorded lessons at their own pace, and then getting together with the class online later for practice applying the information.

For the younger grades, particularly kindergarten through second, there will be a lot of working in small groups through video chats with teachers and aides, scheduled as much as possible around times that work well for each family.

“Let’s be honest, you cannot educate 25 kindergartners at once by Zoom efficiently,” Smith said.

He said they will have evening sessions once a week where parents can tune in and hear from their child’s teacher about what their student has been learning and what they will

be learning in the upcoming week. He encouraged parents to be proactive in alerting their child’s teacher to any issues that could be improved.

Instead of jumping straight into classes on Aug. 24, the first week of school will be used for making sure all students have electronic devices and internet access, and training parents and students on how to use the various devices and platforms being utilized by teachers.

**Stanfield**

Given how far short Umatilla County falls on any of the metrics for reopening school, Stanfield School District Superintendent Beth Burton said her district is now planning for an online-only start to the year. The school’s second quarter starts on Nov. 9, and she said she hopes the district will have a chance to implement its hybrid model then.

“This is not what we had envisioned,” she said.

Burton said the good news is that the district has much more time to prepare for comprehensive distance learning than they did in when schools were closed with only a day’s notice in the spring. She said parents and students should expect a much more comprehensive, rigorous offering this time around, with students interacting via video with

their teacher and peers on a regular basis.

“(In the spring) we worked really hard at it, but we didn’t have the time to be really methodical about planning it,” she said.

Burton said Chromebooks loaned to students in the spring came back in good condition, and after cleaning and upgrading them the district will loan them back out again. She said some of the devices are due to be replaced, but a nationwide shortage means some students might have to make due with the older ones for the first couple of months.

The district had already pushed back its usual August start time to Sept. 8 to give construction crews working on the expansion of the schools more time to work without students on campus. Burton said if there was one silver lining to the school closure in March, it was an early start to the construction.

COVID-19 does, however, complicate the district’s original plans to “cram everyone in” the spaces not under construction during the 2020-21 school year, Burton said.

“Obviously, that would be irresponsible now,” she said.

Whenever students do return to the classroom, it will be in a way that follows the state’s guidelines for

social distancing, she said.

**Morrow County**

Morrow County School District’s board of education planned to meet the evening of Tuesday, Aug. 4, to discuss in detail how the district will offer comprehensive distance learning for the foreseeable future.

Superintendent Dirk Dirksen said until the announcement from the state, the original plan had been to offer parents a choice between a hybrid model or an online-only experience. He said the district had planned to help those students who were going to be online-only with access to internet and devices, but it will be more difficult now that the entire school district will be using

that option.

“We have enough devices for all the kids, the problem is coming up with internet,” he said. “Some parts of Heppner don’t even have any cell service.”

He said staff were disappointed that they would not be able to serve students in person to start out the year, but they were ready to take up the challenge. One benefit of the online-only start, he said, was they would be 100% focused on making the distance-learning portion be the best it could be.

“It’s not going to be the same as the spring,” he said. “It will be as challenging and rewarding for the kids as if they are in the building. We’re trying to make it that same level of opportunity.”

# Umatilla County passes 2,000 COVID-19 cases since March

HERMISTON HERALD

Umatilla County Public Health announced two new deaths of residents diagnosed with COVID-19 on Tuesday, Aug. 4, bringing the county’s total to 25 deaths.

The latest deaths were a 74-year-old man who tested positive July 17 and died July 28 at Trios Medical Center in Kennewick, Washington, and a 74-year-old man who tested positive July 12 and died Aug. 1 at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton. Both had underlying health conditions, according to the news release.

The latest numbers announced Aug. 4 bring the county up to 2,005 confirmed cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began. As of Aug. 4, there were also 107 presumptive cases. The county’s hospitalization

number dipped into the single digits for the first time in weeks, with nine residents hospitalized.

More than 11,000 tests have been conducted on county residents since the

pandemic began. In her July 30 announcement that Umatilla County would be going back to baseline reopening, Gov. Kate Brown cited the county’s test positivity rate of 23% of tests as one of

the reasons the county was being returned to baseline, along with its average at the time of 51 new cases per day and the fact that 45% of cases had not been successfully traced to a source.

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