

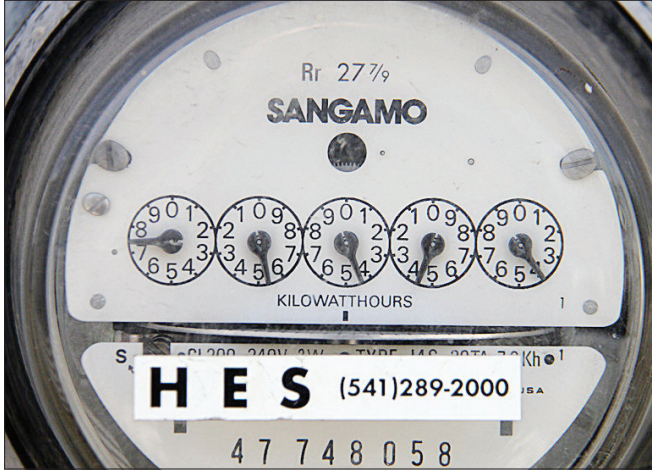
# Hermiston council discusses electric rate increase

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston Energy Services is likely headed for a rate increase in 2021 after the Hermiston City Council discussed options for one during a Monday, Oct. 12, workshop.

Councilors asked HES General Manager Nate Rivera to bring back detailed proposals for a few different rate increase options, but most said they were leaning toward a two-step increase next spring and fall rather than raising rates the entire amount all at once at the beginning of the year.

Rivera said that he understood that more members of the community are struggling to pay their utility bills since the pandemic. Right now 20% of HES customers are behind on payments, compared



An analog electrical meter measures power use on a local business for Hermiston Energy Services in May 2016.

to a three-year average of 15% before the pandemic started.

But Rivera also stated that if HES stays its current course, it will have a revenue deficit of just over \$1 million next year.

“This is a horrible time in our community to have

this discussion, but at the same time you guys need to understand where we’re at financially,” he said.

He said other than the 5% of its budget that is taken up with capital projects, the utility’s costs are mostly fixed “in and out” costs such as wholesale

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Hermiston residents facing financial difficulties who are struggling to pay their electric bill can find options at [umatillaelectric.com/my-account/energy-bill-assistance](http://umatillaelectric.com/my-account/energy-bill-assistance).

power purchases from the Bonneville Power Administration and its labor contract with Umatilla Electric Cooperative.

City Manager Byron Smith said the council should have been discussing a rate increase in March or April, but in light of the pandemic HES had been dipping into its reserves to put it off for as long as possible.

Rivera said in order to fill the anticipated \$1 million budget gap, HES would need to raise rates by 12.9% overall. That could be done through flat, across-the-board increases or a restructure of rates

for various classes of customers.

He said a general 12.9% increase would raise the average residential customer using 1,400 kilowatt hours from a bill of \$111 to \$121 a month. According to a rate comparison Rivera put together, that would move HES above Umatilla Electric Cooperative (\$118 a month) but below Pacific Power (\$159) and the state average (\$176).

The 12.9% estimate, he said, did not leave any room for extra increases to HES’s expenses that may crop up, such as a BPA rate increase or added regulations from the state.

Mayor David Drotzmann said while he understood the need to not burden taxpayers unduly, he has also appreciated the increased reliability HES has provided in recent years through capital improvement projects. He said as HES tries to tighten its belt, he hopes the city-owned utility doesn’t sacrifice reliability in the process.

Councilor Roy Barron brought up some of the programs that HES, UEC and some local agencies offer to help people with their utility bills, and he said he hoped those programs were being promoted, and that any rate increase is publicized well in advance. The programs got a major boost recently with donations from Amazon Web Services and CARES Act money from the city designated for helping residents in need.

# Umatilla County returns to COVID-19 watchlist

By **ALEX CASTLE**  
STAFF WRITER

Just weeks after its removal, Umatilla County became the first county to be returned to the state’s COVID-19 watchlist on Friday, Oct. 9, Gov. Kate Brown announced in a press release.

The county was removed from the watch list Sept. 18 but was added back the day after the state reported 481 COVID-19 cases on Thursday, Oct. 8, the most reported on a single day since the start of the pandemic.

“Combined with yesterday’s record-high statewide case count, this is a sign that we must tread cautiously or we risk losing the gains we’ve made in slowing the spread of COVID-19,” Brown stated in the release. “My priority is getting kids in every county safely back

in school — but that will become more and more difficult if COVID-19 case numbers spike.”

The return to the watchlist has no impact on businesses’ ability to remain open or the guidelines for social gatherings. It is used to inform state policymakers and the Oregon Health Authority about the spread of COVID-19 in individual counties and assist in prioritizing resources for those counties.

The state determines whether a county will be on the watchlist by the number and rate of virus cases that can’t be traced to a known source of transmission, also known as the sporadic case rate. A county is added to the watch list if it reports more than five sporadic cases and a sporadic case rate that exceeds 50 sporadic cases per 100,000 people during a

two-week span.

According to the Oregon Health Authority, Umatilla County recorded 42 sporadic cases (51.7 per 100,000) from Sept. 20 to Oct. 3. The county had recorded 27 and 31 cases in the two previous two-week windows, which amounted to 33.3 and 38.2 cases per 100,000 people, respectively.

“Last week, we saw a jump there,” Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said. “Most of which are folks we’re just not able to connect with.”

Fiumara said that can happen from people refusing to talk to contact tracers, not returning phone calls or not having a working phone number to begin with.

“The fact is that means we don’t know where they got it,” he said.

Umatilla County has also

seen a jump the last two weeks in case totals altogether. According to the Oregon Health Authority, Umatilla County added 115 new cases of the virus from Sept. 26 to Oct. 2. Fiumara said about 15 of those cases were tied to a new workplace outbreak that wasn’t identified in the state’s weekly report.

“We’ve definitely seen a little bit of an uptick,” Fiumara said on Oct. 9. “But we feel it might be dropping a bit again this week.”

The Oregon Health Authority reported 88 new cases of the virus in Umatilla County from Saturday, Oct. 3 to Oct. 9.

Fiumara said the county’s return to the watchlist won’t change any operations at the health department, but added it may be a reminder of the ongoing risk the virus poses.

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