

# Hermiston Energy Services rates will increase

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

The Hermiston City Council approved a rate increase for Hermiston Energy Services during their Monday, Nov. 9, meeting by a 4-2 vote.

Overall, rates will go up by 6.98% in January 2021 and another 6.9% in October 2021, but the effect to each customer's bill will depend on the class they fall under and how much energy they use.

Residential rates will go up by 6.1% in January, small commercial by 7.92%, large commercial by 8.67% and irrigation by 7.57%. The average residential user

would climb from \$111 a month now to \$117 in January and \$124 in October, according to Hermiston Energy Services General Manager Nate Rivera.

City councilors said raising costs on things is the least favorite part of their job, but it's their job to keep the city running as its own costs rise.

"Sometimes we need to realize we have to make these hard decisions, and sometimes it's no fun because we're going to raise the electricity, but if we want to survive, we have to do that," Councilor Manuel Gutierrez said before making the motion to accept HES's recommendation.

Before the vote, Rivera told the council that HES has been pulling \$85,000 a month from its reserves and has delayed maintenance in order to put off the rate increase for as long as possible during the pandemic, but even with that strategy, HES projected to have a more than \$1 million deficit for the 2020-21 fiscal year, mostly driven by increases in the cost of the power that HES purchases from Bonneville Power Administration.

The proposed increases would cover that deficit, he said, and allow for an expected 1% increase from BPA next year. But it would not cover the capital projects that have already been

delayed, increases in labor or equipment costs, or replacing any of the money drawn from the reserves. HES is a not-for-profit entity, Rivera said, so all money raised from rates goes straight back into running the utility.

Three Hermiston residents — Renata Morgan, Jackie Linton and councilor-elect Maria Duron — testified at the meeting, asking the council to consider ways to reduce the burden on residents. Morgan said she would rather see more frequent 1.5% increases than a 7% increase all at once when her paycheck isn't going up 7%.

"I understand what you're saying here about

this, but what I don't understand why you let it get so far," she said.

Linton said she understood that people could apply for help with their bill, but many seniors on a fixed income who were used to working to support themselves for 50 or more years will not always be willing to ask for charity.

Rivera had previously highlighted ways that residents struggling to pay their bills can get help. Those include HES's online "smart hub" where customers can track their usage, rebates on energy-efficient appliances, free energy audits and the HEAT fund available to help pay low-income customers' bills.

"The main key is really to start that conversation with them and let them know there is help available; they just need to work with us, and as long as a customer is willing to work with us, we're not in a situation where we've ever tried to shut them off. As long as they're making the best effort they can, we'll work with them," he said.

Hermiston Energy Services supplies about 5,200 customers in Hermiston with electricity. The rest of the city is mostly covered by Umatilla Electric Cooperative, which HES contracts with for labor but which is a separate utility that sets its own rates.

## Council approves zoning change, annexation

Police chief also approved to sign updated Deadly Use of Force Plan

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

Land use decisions by the Hermiston City Council during their Monday, Nov. 9, meeting could pave the way for future commercial development on the northeast side of the city.

The council approved annexation of an 11.5-acre property at 455 E. Elm Ave., behind Walmart. The annexation came at the request of Steve Richards of Eastern Oregon Development LLC.

Richards owns Highland Mini Storage in Hermiston and other storage facilities in the region, and previously tried to build another set of storage units on Highway 395 near Rogers Toyota, before the council denied his zoning request in October 2019. On Nov. 9, City Planner Clint Spencer said it was his understanding that Richards planned to add a similar storage development to part of the Elm property and use the rest for

new retail space.

In a separate agenda item, the council also approved change to the comprehensive plan map for a 1.9-acre set of properties on the north side of West Theater Lane. Developer John Ucney of UK Properties submitted the application to change the seven existing lots from multi-structure residential to outlying commercial.

Spencer said the developer doesn't have a specific plan for the tract of land yet, but hopes to market it for commercial use.

**Council approves police agreements**

During their Nov. 9 meeting, the city council also approved Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston to sign a mutual aid agreement and a document known as the Umatilla County Deadly Physical Force Plan on behalf of the city.

The physical force plan was created after the Oregon Legislature mandated in 2007 that all counties create such a plan. Umatilla County's was last updated by local law enforcement agencies

in 2008, and Edmiston said, given the increased scrutiny on police use of force this year, he suggested the agencies review the plan.

City Manager Byron Smith told the council there were no significant changes made to the 12-page plan during the review process, and the council approved it without further discussion beyond clarifying which agencies the plan covers.

"Now what we're presenting to you is essentially the same plan, but it has been looked at and reviewed, and I think that's an important piece that we're staying current on things like this," Smith said.

Each law enforcement agency is responsible for setting its own policies with officers concerning events leading up to officers shooting a suspect or using other methods of deadly force, but the plan outlines what takes place after such an incident occurs.

It states that a "law enforcement agency of primary responsibility" will conduct a criminal investigation while the involved officer's employing agency will con-

duct a simultaneous administrative review. It outlines the steps those agencies should take, how the involved officers should be debriefed and that the district attorney — who has the sole authority to decide if a grand jury should be convened — should be notified as soon as possible. It also requires that all agencies signing the plan should require at least four hours a year of training on use of force for its officers.

In addition to the use of force plan, the council also authorized Edmiston to sign an updated version of the mutual aid agreement between Hermiston and neighboring law enforcement agencies in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

Edmiston said the agreement comes into play almost every day, as personnel from city, state and county agencies assist each other. The agreement also outlines the structure of the Major Crimes Team, which is made up of detectives from multiple agencies and is mobilized in the event of a homicide or other serious crime.

## Echo Fire District mixes up tax bills

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

Residents within Echo Fire District have been sent notice that they were overbilled on their property taxes due to a filing error for the district's bond.

Taxpayers who have not paid their property taxes yet can pay the lower amount on their new, corrected statement, according to the letter. Those who already paid the amount in their initial statement will receive a refund for the difference "in the next few weeks."

Rachael Reynolds, director of taxation and assessment for Umatilla County, said the error came from paperwork filed by the fire district that mistakenly levied the district's \$500,000 bond over one year instead of 10.

The district also notified residents in a statement on its Facebook page, apologizing for the error and any inconvenience it caused.

Echo Fire District is an all-volunteer fire district of 25 volunteers, covering 496 square miles in the county. According to information provided by the district before voters passed the \$500,000 bond in May, the bond will pay for new equipment, including the replacement of a 1964 fire engine, and the addition of a new bay to the fire station so that the district can park all of its engines indoors.

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