

UPDATES

Rent relief program \$15 million short of demand

OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Hundreds of commercial landlords and tenants who applied for state funding to cover unpaid rent went away empty-handed last month — a disappointment worth approximately \$15.5 million.

Oregon's Commercial Rent Relief program is set to hand out \$49.9 million to property owners after the first round of grant funding closed March 22.

Applications outpaced cash, with the requests totaling \$65.4 million.

The results aren't unexpected: Oregon hasn't had a commercial eviction moratorium in place since the end of September 2020, and business owners in arrears had until March 31 to make up the back rent.

State data released to Pamplin Media Group shows those applicants with empty pockets — more than 350 business owners in total — are all located in the Portland metro area.

The state's agency funding formula allocates 20% of the fund each to Portland metro and Willamette Valley businesses, as well as a 15% slice each to the eastern, southern, central and coastal regions of the state. But rural applications came in well below their cap, so the money rolled over and Portland area businesses ended up with 63.7% of the allocation.

"The lottery process took out 356 applications," said Nathan Buehler, a spokesperson for Business Oregon, "resulting in 2,609 applications that will move forward for funding."

Unlike Oregon's residential rent relief program, the commercial program doesn't favor smaller landlords. But the commercial tenants seeking state money to pay their lease must be for-profit businesses, based in Oregon, with fewer than 100 employees per storefront.



Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney, second from right, speaks before a groundbreaking for the new Rocky Heights Elementary School in Hermiston on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Breaking new ground

HSD celebrates the start of construction for two new schools

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston School District had a lot to celebrate on Tuesday, April 13.

The district welcomed all students back to the classroom full time for the first time in over a year, and celebrated the groundbreaking for two new schools.

"This day could not get any better," Rocky Heights Elementary Principal Stefani Wyant said.

She said she was thrilled to see all of her school full again, and to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for a new, larger Rocky Heights that will be constructed in the current athletic fields next to the school.

The softball fields there are in the process of being moved to a new softball complex next to Hermiston High School, on the former fairgrounds. Students will continue to attend at the current building for the 2021-22 school year while construction is underway, before transferring to the new school in the fall of 2022.

For some, knowing the next school year will be the last for



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Jeff Deswert, president of Kirby Nagelhout Construction Co., takes a photo as members of the Hermiston School Board and District Superintendent Tricia Mooney pose at the groundbreaking of the new Rocky Heights Elementary School on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

*"GREAT COMMUNITIES
HAVE GREAT SCHOOLS,
AND THIS IS ONE STEP TO
GETTING THERE."*

— Tricia Mooney, superintendent, Hermiston School District

INSIDE

The artists for the murals at Rocky Heights Elementary School share the meaning and history of the murals, **Page A11.**

the original Rocky Heights building is bittersweet. Wyant said the school has served multiple generations of families, and some current staff were Rocky Heights students themselves.

"A lot of families have gone through here," she said, calling it "home" for her after she began her teaching career there and eventually became principal.

The building was built in 1962, however, and has maintenance and security issues. The new \$23 million building, built to serve 600 students, will have a one-story, 73,500-square-foot layout with 24 classrooms plus a library, gym and other common areas.

At the April 13 groundbreaking, Superintendent Tricia

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Lifeways closes Aspen Springs as a psychiatric hospital



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

At midnight on Thursday, April 8, 2021, Lifeways closed its Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital in Hermiston after just over six months in operation.

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

When Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital opened in Hermiston, it was hailed as a sorely-needed addition to the state's meager supply of mental health treatment beds. But the facility closed at midnight on Thursday, April 8, after just over six months in operation, citing "unsustainable" difficulties staffing it.

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said Aspen Springs had been a "wonderful" addition to the county's efforts to improve access to mental health services, and he was disappointed it would not continue.

"It kind of took the wind out of our sails, to be honest," he said. "It was a huge blow."

Lifeways, a community men-

tal health provider covering parts of Eastern Oregon and Idaho, opened the 16-bed inpatient hospital for acute psychiatric care officially in September 2020, four years after it first broke ground on the project. According to a news release, it served a total of 75 patients between then and its closure on April 8. The facility was at the highest level of psychiatric care offered in Oregon, for individuals experiencing a severe mental health crisis.

The news release stated Lifeways will work with Oregon Health Authority to find "an alternative level of care for Aspen Springs that is more aligned with health care worker availability."

Liz Johnsen, chief operating officer for Lifeways, told the *East Oregonian*

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