



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Members of the Hermiston School Board, Superintendent Tricia Mooney, second from right, and future Loma Vista Elementary School Principal Joshua Browning, right, pose for a picture at the groundbreaking of the new elementary school on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

Schools:

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Mooney called it a “huge step forward” in a project that has already taken years of planning and effort.

“Great communities have great schools, and this is one step to getting there,” she said.

After the Rocky Heights groundbreaking, school board members and other dignitaries traveled to the large, sagebrush-covered lot at the corner of East Theater Lane and Northeast 10th Street to break ground on the new school, which will be known as Loma Vista Elementary School.

Loma Vista will also serve 600 students, using the same general layout as the new Rocky Heights, and open for the 2022-23 school year.

At the second groundbreaking, Mooney recognized the work of a long list of people, including those who helped get an \$87.2 million bond passed in 2019 to fund the new

schools. The bond is also paying for the new softball complex, a new annex adding classrooms at Hermiston High School, purchase of additional property for future schools, and improvements to the parking and drop-off areas of several schools.

Wenaha Group has served as project managers for the bond, and BBT Architects did the design for the schools. Construction of both elementary schools will be handled by Kirby Nagelhout Construction.

“I’m looking forward to having students here instead of sand and sagebrush,” Mooney said.

The school district recently named Josh Browning as principal of Loma Vista. While the school is being built, he will work on staffing the school and making other preparations needed before its opening.

Browning, who is currently an instructional coach for the district, said he is excited to see work start on the building.



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Members of the Hermiston School Board, Hermiston School District and construction representatives pose for a photo at the groundbreaking of the new Rocky Heights Elementary School in Hermiston on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.



Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney speaks to attendees at the groundbreaking for Loma Vista Elementary School in Hermiston on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

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Lifeways:

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that the building would likely continue to offer inpatient care, but as a secure residential treatment facility, which provides a lower intensity of care and operates under different staffing requirements.

Lifeways already operates a secure residential treatment facility in Umatilla, known as McNary Place, and Johnsen said there is still additional need for that type of bed.

According to the news release, the Lifeways board of directors made the decision to cease offering acute care for individuals in crisis at the Hermiston facility because “the realities of COVID-19 and the health care worker shortage, especially for rural psychiatric hospital level licensure and credentialing, creates an unsustainable situation.”

Johnsen clarified that the biggest problem was finding psychiatrists, which under Oregon rules for acute psychiatric care hospitals must staff the facility 24 hours a day. She said Lifeways had received a waiver from the state allowing psychiatrists to provide care via telemedicine for 12 months. But after Aspen Springs passed six months of operation, plus months of recruitment efforts before that, with no luck finding even a single full-time psychiatrist willing to come to Hermiston, Johnsen said it became increasingly clear that Aspen Springs would not be able to meet requirements when the waiver was up.



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A “now hiring” sign advertises jobs at Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital sits along Northwest 11th Street near the recently closed facility in Hermiston on Friday, April 9, 2021.

forward, and knew that waiver wouldn’t be granted, and really looked at the care that we were bound to provide, it was just untenable,” she said.

On top of that, Johnsen said it was also difficult to find enough nurses willing to work in both a psychiatric setting and a rural setting, particularly during the pandemic.

County requesting proposals for new model of mental health care

The closure comes on the cusp of what could be a significant change in the way mental health services are handled in Umatilla County.

Shafer said the board of commissioners sent out a request for proposals, due April 26, for a single entity to provide all community mental health services for Umatilla County.

Currently, those services are divided between

Lifeways, which covers behavioral health issues not related to addiction, such as depression or schizophrenia, and Umatilla County Alcohol & Drug, which covers substance abuse. But residents in need of treatment often fall under both categories at once, and Shafer said too often that results in both sides insisting the other one should take the case.

“We’ve got fingers pointing every which way except at the problem,” he said.

Johnsen said Lifeways is submitting a proposal, and that Lifeways has been successful in retaining the contract for the community mental health program in the past when it has gone out for bid. She said Lifeways already has experience providing substance use disorder services in other places, including a 30-bed treatment facility and outpatient services in Malheur County, so they are equipped to provide

addiction treatment in Umatilla County too.

“We have a plan to submit and I feel we have a fully competitive application,” she said.

She said the county is requiring that proposals include plans to retain current staff of Umatilla County Alcohol & Drug to provide treatment under the new model if they wanted to stay, so even if Lifeways took over that side of treatment, clients would still be seeing familiar faces.

Lifeways planning next steps

Johnsen said despite the setback with Aspen Springs needing to close as an acute psychiatric hospital, Lifeways remains fully committed to serving Umatilla County residents.

“We want to remain flexible and nimble and continue to provide the community what they need,” she said.

Lifeways originally

broke ground on the Aspen Springs building at 1212 Linda Ave. in July 2016, stating its intent to open the facility a year later, but instead began taking patients in September 2020. In 2019, Johnsen told the *East Oregonian* that it had taken longer than expected to meet all of the state’s strict requirements for the highest level of psychiatric care.

With the facility’s closure, she said Lifeways leadership had known it would be difficult to staff it due to the challenges of finding licensed mental health providers willing to work in rural areas. But they had expected to be able to find enough people in time.

“It’s always been a risk point for us, but we didn’t think it would get to this level,” she said.

She said they are open to reopening the building as a hospital again in the future if the psychiatrists become available to do so, but for now, the staff and board felt the best option was to focus on providing a different level of care there rather than letting the building sit empty after the waiver ran out.

“It’s a great facility and we want to make it available in whatever capacity we can,” she said.

Johnsen said Lifeways has worked with Good Shepherd Health Care System in its effort to recruit mental health providers to the area and will continue to partner with Good Shepherd and other local agencies as needed to provide resources to the community.

‘It’s definitely a pressing need out here’

Dennis Burke, who was

CEO of Good Shepherd at the time of Aspen Springs’ ribbon cutting ceremony in July 2020, said at the ceremony that it was at times extremely difficult to find acute psychiatric care beds for patients who ended up in Good Shepherd’s emergency room and needed that level of care. Brian Sims, current CEO and president of Good Shepherd, said the organization was saddened to learn of the closure of Aspen Springs for that level of care.

“It will be a big loss, but we remain hopeful there will continue to be alternative solutions for our communities,” he said in an email.

From the county’s perspective, Shafer said converting Aspen Springs into a secure residential treatment facility would help fill a need, but not the biggest need.

County leaders have often lobbied the Oregon Legislature for additional funding to support capital projects, such as a planned expansion of the Umatilla County Jail that would help staff better accommodate people coming in while experiencing a mental health crisis or needing to detox. But Shafer said they also need to look at solutions to address the shortage of licensed mental health professionals, particularly those willing to work in a rural area. He said some sort of financial incentive for providers to work in small communities could be a start.

“It’s definitely a pressing need out here,” he said. “Infrastructure is one thing, but without professionals to run the building, it’s going to be an empty building.”