

Natural gas plant might be back on the table

Developers of Perennial Wind Chaser Station may have new buyer; opponents vow to continue court fight

By **BRYCE DOLE AND JADE MCDOWELL**
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The developer for a proposed natural gas plant outside Hermiston is reviewing an offer from a potential buyer who expressed interest in continuing the project.

Perennial Power Holdings said in a statement that it is “re-examining its options” on the Perennial Wind Chaser Station, which the company had previously stated it was planning to stop pursuing.

“Following steps we had taken to examine various legal and regulatory requirements required to terminate our Site Certificate for the Wind Chaser power generating project, we had a new potential buyer step forward,” the statement said. “We are currently reviewing this offer.”

Perennial-WindChaser LLC, a subsidiary of Perennial Power Holdings, received a site certificate from the Energy Facility Siting Council in 2015 to build a 415-megawatt natural gas plant outside Hermiston. After the company broke ground on a road on the site in September 2020, Friends of the Columbia Gorge and Columbia Riverkeepers filed a joint lawsuit against the project, claiming, among other things, the company had



A section of a roadway marks the entrance of the site of the future Perennial Wind Chaser Station on Friday, April 30, 2021.



not properly met requirements to keep its site certificate because it did not have a storm water permit yet when it started work.

A hearing on a motion to dismiss the lawsuit filed with the Multnomah County Circuit Court had been scheduled for April

6, but was canceled on April 5 at the request of Perennial, which told the court it planned to drop the project. That hearing has now been rescheduled to Thursday, May 6.

Erin Saylor, attorney for Columbia Riverkeeper, described the environmental group as skeptical about the mystery buyer and why someone would want to come forward after reading about the litigation attached to the project.

“We were pretty disappointed,” she said. “We’ve been calling this a zombie project for years. And this latest develop-

ment demonstrates just how true it is. We thought it was dead and now it’s miraculously come back to life again.”

The technology planned for Perennial Wind Chaser Station would allow it to power up more quickly than most power plants. According to the statement from Perennial, the plant would be used to prevent disruptions to customers’ power during peak usage times when renewable energy sources were not able to keep up with demand. It could be quickly brought online when the wind was not

blowing at area wind farms, for example.

“We remain convinced that the Wind Chaser technology we proposed is both sound and in the best interests of Oregon and its residents in terms of protecting the Oregon grid and its customers from potential future power disruptions, so we are encouraged by this new interest in continuing the development of this site ... With energy demands ever increasing in the region, we must continue to consider how to provide clean energy sources that have minimal impact upon the environment. Wind Chaser will rely upon the least polluting of the hydrocarbons sources, natural gas, to help the region transition to a green-based energy future,” the company stated.

Opponents paint it in a different light.

According to a statement by Columbia Riverkeeper and Friends of the Columbia Gorge, the plant would be a major polluter, emitting more than 1 million tons of greenhouse gases a year and becoming the sixth largest stationary source of greenhouse gas emissions in the state.

Saylor said now that Perennial has decided to continue with the litigation, Columbia Riverkeeper and Friends of the Columbia Gorge will persist with their efforts to fight the project in court, arguing that its site certificate is no longer valid and therefore can’t be transferred to another party.

Telemedicine options get boost from Senate bill

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
HERMISTON HERALD

HERMISTON — The pandemic spurred a surge in telemedicine over the past year, and some in the medical industry are lobbying for those options to remain when life returns to a more normal state.

One bill introduced by Sen. Bill Hansell, R - A t h e n a, would allow pharmacists to provide virtual services in certain circumstances.

Senate Bill 629 is currently scheduled for a hearing in the House Committee on Health Care on Thursday, May 6. The bill would allow for a pharmacist to remotely supervise a pharmacy technician or speak with a patient rather than being on site. It would give pharmacies in small cities without enough work to support hiring a full-time pharmacist the ability to operate as a satellite office,

where a pharmacy technician dispenses medications to patients under the supervision of a pharmacist at the main location.

Hansell said he had previously helped get funding for a medical clinic in Elgin that was affiliated with the Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande. The small clinic would like to be able to dispense medications to patients on site, he said, but instead patients have to travel an hour round trip to pick up medications because there is not enough work to support a full-time pharmacist for the clinic. Under this bill, a qualified pharmacist with Grande Ronde Hospital could remotely supervise a pharmacy technician at the clinic in Elgin.

“We anticipate that other clinics are in the same situation,” he said.

He said when he sponsored the bill, it was after finding out that Oregon is the only state west of Texas not offering it as an option.

“I thought, if it’s that universal, if there are concerns, we can work them out,” he said.

The bill has received the support of the Oregon Society of Health System Pharmacies, Oregon State Pharmacy Association and the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems.

A surge in telehealth

Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston has embraced new telehealth options since the pandemic began, but Troy LeGore, vice president of Good Shepherd Medical Group in Hermiston, said in an email that Good Shepherd Health Care System as a whole has had a “robust” selection of telehealth offerings since prior to the pandemic.

Those uses of video and phone technology have stretched across departments, and are often used to help patients have access to specialists not available on site. In the clinics, patients have access to tele-cardiology, tele-endocrinology, genetic counseling and monitoring of high-risk pregnancies. In the emergency room, patients might be assisted by tele-stroke or tele-neurology services. The

Family Birth Center also connects virtually to specialists who can help guide practitioners on site in critical care of infants.

Once the pandemic hit, Good Shepherd added telehealth for all primary care clinics and urgent care, allowing patients to see a doctor without risking a visit in person. The hospital also added other options to help people avoid coming inside, such as curbside pickup from the pharmacy. If a patient is showing signs of COVID-19, they can discuss their symptoms with a provider over video first, before getting a curbside COVID-19 test.

LeGore said telemedicine has its benefits and drawbacks.

On the negative side, some patients don’t feel like they got their money’s worth if they didn’t see a doctor in person and some struggle with figuring out the technology needed to connect. There are also hands-on assessments that need to be done in person, such as taking blood pressure.

On the other hand,

LeGore said, telehealth gives patients in more rural areas access to specialists they would otherwise have to travel long distances to see. It has also helped limit patients’ and providers’ exposure to each other during the pandemic.

“Telehealth options provide a convenient and safe way to deliver limited patient care and follow-ups,” he said.

LeGore said Good Shepherd plans to continue providing services added during the pandemic.

Cheryl Pearce, director of physician clinics for St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, said the hospital had used telehealth in some cases in the past, including for its stroke recovery program. But the clinics were limited on what telehealth they could provide.

Rural clinics were unable to be reimbursed for telehealth appointments for Medicare patients in their home, for example.

Once the pandemic hit, the Trump administration waived those rules, allowing clinics to continue see-

ing patients even when everything was shut down.

“A lot of the time, we just had to do it by telephone initially, because we couldn’t get any webcams because everyone in the country was trying to do everything virtually,” Pearce said.

Since then, however, St. Anthony has been able to expand and strengthen its virtual telehealth offerings. Pearce said the number of visits done virtually have “waxed and waned” over the course of the pandemic, depending on how quickly COVID-19 is spreading in the community.

Telehealth can be particularly useful for follow-up visits, she said, when providers have already diagnosed the problem but need to check in with a patient to see whether their symptoms have improved or if their new medication is working.

She said she hopes to see more rule changes like Hansell’s telepharmacy bill, allowing clinics to continue expanding telehealth options after emergency authorizations for the pandemic end.

Restaurant Revitalization Fund now taking applications

HERMISTON HERALD

The federal Restaurant Revitalization Fund is now taking applications.

The fund, established by the American Rescue Plan stimulus package, provides forgivable, interest-free loans to bars, restaurants and other eating and drinking establishments affected by COVID-19 shutdowns.

Businesses can apply for an amount equal to their 2019 gross receipts minus their 2020 gross receipts, minus any Paycheck Protection Program funds already received. The minimum amount is \$1,000 per business, and the maximum is \$10 million. Eligible uses for the money includes a variety of business expenses, from payroll to rent, and recipients are not required to pay

back any of the money as long as it is used for eligible expenses no later than March 2023.

Applications opened May 3. For more information,

or to apply, visit the Small Business Administration website at sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/covid-19-relief-options/restaurant-revitalization-fund.