

Hermiston City Council OKs restaurant assistance program

Program will distribute \$10 gift cards to city residents to use at local restaurants

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
STAFF WRITER

A customer's next lunch tab could be paid for, courtesy of the city of Hermiston. At a Monday, May 10, meeting, the Hermiston City Council voted unanimously to direct city staff to work with the Greater Hermiston Chamber of Commerce on developing the Restaurant Assistance Pilot Program. Inspired by a similar initiative the city had with Hermiston Cinema and the Desert Lanes bowling

alley during the summer of 2020, the program would use \$50,000 from the latest COVID-19 federal relief package to create gift certificates redeemable at Hermiston restaurants. Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said the city still needed to finalize the details with the chamber, but staff wanted to get the program funded before the end of the fiscal year June 30. According to a draft outline of the plan, Hermiston would distribute \$10 gift cards to city residents through their utility accounts, the chamber, Hermiston Parks and Recreation and the Hermiston Public Library. Participating restaurants would accept the

gift cards as payment and then turn in the cards to the chamber for reimbursement. The program is expected to run through the end of 2021. Councilor Nancy Peterson asked if the city was planning on tracking purchases made by the gift card to determine whether the program was effective. Mayor Dave Drotzmann asked if recipients could make some sort of cash match before acquiring the gift cards. "They won't just get a free cheeseburger," he said. "They have a little skin in the game." Chamber CEO Kristina Olivas said the goal is to keep the program as simple as possible to ensure wide participation from the city's

restaurants, whether they are chamber members or not. Olivas said the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local restaurant industry have been uneven: Many of Hermiston's most popular restaurants were able to use increased revenue from drive-thru and delivery to make up for the shutdown to indoor dining while the smaller, "mom and pop" restaurants were trying to figure out how to stay open. Councilor Roy Barron is concerned about equity, saying that a number of smaller restaurants, particularly Latino-owned restaurants, were neither members of the chamber nor the Hermiston Latino Business Network, and struggled with

gaining access to assistance programs. Olivas said she was aware of the issue and would work toward marketing the pilot program to the Latino business community. But she also added that the chamber and city wouldn't be able to dictate at which participating restaurants consumers spent their gift cards. Morgan said governments sometimes suffered from "paralysis by analysis," and the city would be able to use the response from the pilot program to inform how they approach future assistance programs. "We'll learn a lot just by rolling it out," he said. The council voted 6-0 to authorize the program. Councilor Phillip

Spicerkuhn recused himself from the vote because he's a member of the chamber board, while Councilor Lori Davis was absent. Earlier in the meeting, the council unanimously voted to enter into an inter-governmental agreement with Umatilla, Stanfield, Echo and Umatilla County to contract with Pac/West Communications to provide government affairs services. Hermiston already contracts with Pac/West to represent their interests in Salem, but the new agreement would involve all the entities using Pac/West to "closely work together in seeking projects that strengthen the West County area."

Workforce Taxi Program sees growth in 2021

HERMISTON HERALD

Ridership in the Workforce On-demand Ride Cooperative (WORC) rebounded in the first quarter of 2021 as more residents used the service to access jobs at grocery, retail, and fast food establishments in Hermiston and the surrounding communities. The WORC taxi program was started in October 2019 and is subsidized by state transportation funding. Employees and employers can purchase ticket packets at reduced rates for scheduled transportation provided by Hermiston Taxi to and from their workplace. After a decline in demand for the program in the second quarter of 2020 during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city began offering free ticket packets in August to help people access their

workplace. Workers continued to purchase new tickets after the free program expired in January, with an average of 598.5 tickets purchased each month between January and April 2021. "The goal of this program from the beginning has been to make sure lack of transportation isn't an obstacle for people to get to their jobs, and we're really pleased that WORC is providing another option for people," said Mark Morgan, assistant city manager. "The program is averaging about 20 riders per day to all kinds of workplaces." About 78% of April ridership was to or from grocery, retail or fast food jobs, with about 7% to industrial worksites. The program is available to employees and employers in Hermiston, Umatilla and Stanfield.

The Next Chapter opens new horizons

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Book lovers have a new local option to get their reading fix with the opening of The Next Chapter Bookstore. The store, which opened April 30, is owned by mother-daughter team Angela Pursel and Alexis McCarthy. McCarthy said she and her mother own the dance studio next door, and had some extra space in the building, and so decided to use it to pursue a project they've always dreamed about. "Both of us have always wanted to run a bookstore. Always, always," she said. McCarthy described the bookstore's selection as "robust." It includes fiction and nonfiction across genres, for adults, young adults, teens and children of all ages. She said they are happy to order a specific book if someone wants it, and they are also hoping people will give them feedback about what kind of books they would like to see in the future. "One of our biggest things right now is to find out what people in the community are reading and stock up accordingly," she said. In addition to books, the store also offers reading glasses and "bookish" gifts. They also have a selection of puzzles and toys, and what McCar-



Jade McDowell/Hermiston Herald

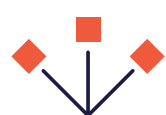
A selection of books fills the shelves at The Next Chapter Bookstore, which opened in Hermiston on April 30, 2021.

thy refers to as "nerd games," such as Splendor and Settlers of Catan. "They're more specialty games you wouldn't necessarily find next to Monopoly," she said, hastening to add that she does really enjoy Monopoly too. The store is open Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays, although McCarthy said if people email in book requests they can still take orders on

other days. She said she and Pursel were overwhelmed and grateful for the support they received their first weekend open, and look forward to helping people discover their new favorite books. The Next Chapter Bookstore is at 1000 South Highway 395, Suite C in Hermiston, next to Dance Unlimited. For more information visit thenextchapterhermiston.com.

How do we rebuild a better Oregon?

After a year of tremendous hardship, how do we rebuild a more interconnected, equitable, resilient Oregon? How do we help each other recover, rebuild, and restart our lives and businesses? How do we start listening to and considering each others' point-of-view? How do we inject opportunity, across the state so everyone has a chance to add to the greater good? **The answer — Together.** Join us as we learn and share how to rebuild a better Oregon, for all Oregonians.



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