

Downtown businesses ready to leave pandemic behind

By **BRYCE DOLE**
STAFF WRITER

It's been a challenging year for Laura Avila.

At 32, Avila has four children, ages 5, 9, 11 and 15, and lives off the tips she makes as a waitress at the La Palma Mexican Restaurant in Hermiston. Taking care of her kids while schools were closed was difficult, she said.

And earlier this year, some of her friends and family members contracted COVID-19 — including two of her children.

"It was really scary," she said. "They had a fever, their

body ached. But I never got it. I was tested and was negative. That's why I got vaccinated. I didn't want to get sick."

When pandemic restrictions were lifted at the end of June, Avila, like so many others, said she felt happy. Business has remained steady at La Palma — which her parents opened using their life savings in the mid-2000s — and yet things still picked up last week. Now, her biggest hope, she said, is for the community to stay safe and healthy.

"We just don't want to lose the support that we have by people getting sick," said

Avila, who, along with her coworkers, has been vaccinated against COVID-19.

For some business owners and employees in downtown Hermiston, it was a wash of relief to have masking and distancing mandates lifted, allowing customers to reenter businesses smiling and carefree. But for others, they are remaining wary as COVID-19 variants are on the rise and Umatilla County sits among the least-vaccinated and most-infected counties in Oregon.

"All the guards are going down, and there's great potential for problems

again," said Michael Gormley, the owner of Neighborhood Books & Gifts in downtown Hermiston.

Because he is a 70-year-old diabetic with a heart condition, for which he is undergoing testing, Gormley said he plans to keep up the plexiglass that divides him and customers for at least another year. He doesn't plan to make customers wear masks and keep store capacity down. But he still is wiping down the counters and doors with sanitizer and wearing his double-layered mask with books displayed on the front. Just to be safe.

For others, seeing peo-

ple's unmasked faces, their smiles and expressions, has brought joy and relief after nearly 500 days of isolation and fear.

Jeanine Dilley, a partner at Bella Grace Boutique, spent her day laughing and helping customers as they checked out clothes, home decor and makeup while country songs such as "Wagon Wheel" played from the overhead speakers. The shop had closed for seven months, Dilley said, until she and the other owners reached out to the community through Facebook and received overwhelming support to reopen.

And some businesses on Main Street are just getting started, underscoring Hermiston's growth even after a pandemic year shuttered businesses and ravaged economies.

Martin Farias opened Imparable's Nutrition Center around the first of the year. Already, Farias said he has helped more than 50 families with fitness and nutrition plans. One of his customers, he said, lost 60 pounds. He's excited to help more eager customers now that fear is subsiding.

"All the big things in the world," he said, "happen through crises."

Industrial park will provide options for Hermiston

By **JEFF BUDLONG**
STAFF WRITER

The effort to extend paved roads, water lines, sewer pipes and upgraded electrical power to the South Hermiston Industrial Park could provide Hermiston with the best of both worlds.

Cities are constantly looking to bring more businesses and jobs to their community, and the industrial park will provide space for smaller, but important, business to grow while still leaving larger plots of land available for bigger tenants.

"We wanted to make sure we were planning ahead of time to accommodate those smaller scale industrial users," Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said. "Allowing some of these smaller industrial developments to take root allows us not to be so beholden to the large-scale operators."

That doesn't mean the city would turn away large businesses looking to build or expand in the area, it just provides Hermiston with more options, Morgan said.

The land that will be available is aimed at the 10 to 50 employee operations and the interest is there. The area around Kelli Boulevard and Campbell Drive has reached about 80% capacity.

"Since we are now barreling toward actual construction, I have never seen so much interest and transactions taking place in the industrial property down there," Morgan said. "I think people are positioning themselves for development."

Morgan said businesses needing between 1 to 5 acres to build or expand a business are ideal for the industrial park, and will focus on construction trades and the suppliers for the agricultural operators.

The project, which is expected to last four months, has been a long time coming for the city with discussions beginning with the U.S. Economic Development Administration in November 2018.

"It has been a long road and we are really bootstrapping this to pull together resources from here, there and everywhere," Morgan said. "There have been a lot of folks involved in this, so I am really excited to see this finally coming to fruition."

Funding for the \$2.5 million project came from a variety of places, but the end result will create 16 parcels of light industrial property. The EDA provided \$1.46 million in a grant; \$1.16 million came from a local improvement district representing adjacent property owners; \$250,000 from the city of Hermiston; and \$50,000 from Umatilla County.

Morgan said the adjoining property owners will benefit from the project because they will see the improvements at a cost of about 40 cents on the dollar.

The city also reported the EDA estimated the activity will lead to 250 jobs and \$70 million in private development.



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