

# Traffic changes coming on East Diagonal Boulevard

Hermiston City Council also adopts law giving city manager authority to declare emergency

By PHIL WRIGHT  
STAFF WRITER

Housing developments along East Diagonal Boulevard are prompting a reduction in speed for a portion of the road and the addition of a four-way stop.

The Hermiston City Council approved both with unanimous votes at its meeting Monday, July 26.

The city is going to install the new four-way stop at the intersection of Northeast 10th Street and East Diagonal Boulevard.

Clinton Spencer, Hermiston's planning director, told the council that upgrading the intersection to a four-way stop when development warranted has been a recommendation in the city's transportation system plan since 2014, and that time has come.

"Specifically, when we were reviewing the traffic impact analysis for the Diamond Run subdivision, their traffic engineer said a four-way stop would be merited when this division has built out," he said.

Diamond Run is under construction, he said, and installing the stop now makes sense before the project wraps up and the school year starts in the fall. The change will make the intersection safer for students traveling to Sandstone and Highland Hills schools. The subdivision also includes a new walking path along Northeast 10th Street, creating a safer off-street route for pedestrians.

Drivers also are going to have to slow down on East Diagonal Boulevard between Seventh and 10th streets due to the new Santiago Estates, a 199-unit manufactured home park. The council approved lowering the speed limit from 35 mph along the stretch to 25 mph.

Spencer said this change comes from a recommendation from the city's planning commission, which has discussed the need to ensure safe routes for children traveling from the park to schools south of Diagonal. The Santiago Estates also will have a school crossing at the park's entrance to allow students to access the multi-use path in the south side of East Diagonal.

Mayor David Drotzmann said he was glad to see the city taking action on the street, adding with all the new housing and schools nearby,

it's going to be busy.

In other business, the council:

- Amended the city's "Water Shortage Emergency" section of its code to bring it in compliance with the adopted Water Management and Conservation Plan. This ordinance only updates the process for declaring a water shortage emergency and does not declare a shortage. The change becomes effective in 30 days.

- Approved a city law allowing the city manager to declare an emergency.

City Manager Byron Smith said staff were preparing the city's emergency plan and discovered there is no authority in city law or the charter to declare an emergency. He said he crafted a proposal based on suggestions of similar ordinances from the League of Oregon Cities. He also said the 27-page draft of an emergency plan aligns with Umatilla County's plan and with Umatilla County Fire District 1, but this is for what happens in Hermiston.

The council amended the draft to require the council to meet within seven days of an emergency declaration. The change to city law becomes effective 30 days after passage.

# Hermiston home manufacturer sued for alleged civil rights violations

By EMILY CURETON  
OREGON PUBLIC BROADCASTING

HERMISTON — Two former employees of a Hermiston home manufacturing company claim they endured years of anti-Black racism, discrimination and, in one woman's case, sexual harassment, only to be fired after reporting the incidents to managers, according to a lawsuit filed in federal court last week.

The complaint comes from two Black women who worked for Marlette Homes between 2018 and 2020. The company also does business as Clayton Hermiston, and is registered as CMH Manufacturing West, Inc., part of billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, which controls a manufactured home empire, and has itself faced criticism in 2015 for allegedly exploiting people of color through predatory lending practices.

Twin sisters Lisa Williams and Angela Pierce, both 55, accuse the company's Hermiston branch of a hostile work environment, sexual harassment, race-based discrimination, wrongful termination and whistleblower retaliation.

"Ms. Williams and Ms. Pierce heard and saw (the n-word) used in their environment, saw swastika symbols in the bathroom of Defendant, and were subject to physical assault and other dangers," according to the complaint.

"We have no comment at this time," Marlette Homes Human Resources Manager Erinn Gailey-Genack said when reached by phone Wednesday, July 21.

The Tennessee-based corporate office for CMH Manufacturing did not respond to

requests for comment.

State records show the company denied similar allegations of illegal conduct earlier this year, while admitting to racial slurs appearing in company bathrooms.

The lawsuit describes times when Pierce and Williams were the only Black employees, "and this seemed specifically targeted at them." Since 2017, the company has reported hiring six employees who self-identified as Black or African American.

Last year, the sisters sent complaints to Oregon's Bureau of Labor and Industries. In its response, Clayton Hermiston agreed Pierce reported offensive language written in the bathrooms to management.

"Each time this has occurred, (Clayton Hermiston) has fully investigated the incident and took steps to prevent future occurrences, including by restricting access to Sharpie markers," attorney Krishna Balasubramani wrote to BOLI investigators, adding the company "has never been able to identify who wrote the offensive racial slur on the wall or even determine whether it was an employee or a visitor that did so."

The sisters claim the bathrooms were repeatedly defaced with swastikas and the n-word. At the time, Pierce was a janitor who cleaned these spaces. Williams worked on finishing the mobile homes and cleaning them. The complaint alleges Williams was subjected to an excessive workload and sexual harassment by a coworker. The lawsuit names individual supervisors for allegedly aiding and abetting the behavior.

According to attorney

Meredith Holley, Williams wrote a letter in August addressed to Warren Buffett himself, asking for help.

"Due to my legitimate complaints ... I have been retaliated against through bogus and untrue disciplinary write ups," reads a copy of the Aug. 8 letter provided by Holley.

Three weeks later, Williams was written up again. The document, also provided by her attorney, barred her from continuing to discuss "this or any prior incidents, curse, or otherwise disrupt your team in any way."

"You will also not send any more letters or complaints to Home Office unless it (sic) a new or different issue."

Williams refused to sign the formal reprimand. She was fired 10 days later.

In its response to the BOLI complaint, Clayton Homes denied reprimanding Williams for contacting the corporate office. It asserts she was terminated "for legitimate, non-discriminatory reasons."

Clayton Hermiston told state investigators that Pierce was fired for "hostility and aggressive, insubordinate behavior." Pierce alleged she was terminated for intervening in a meeting to support her sister in making discrimination claims.

Last month, the state labor agency suspended its investigation without reaching a determination because the women withdrew the complaints to pursue a federal lawsuit.

Clayton Hermiston has reported having about 190 employees. Nationwide, Clayton Homes' building affiliates employ more than 12,000 people, according to the company's website.

# County approves contact tracers, COVID-19 billboards

By BRYCE DOLE  
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday, July 21, approved payments for COVID-19-related billboards and contact tracers.

Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director, requested the county extend its contract and fund four billboards that for months have included COVID-19 and vaccine messaging. The commissioners unanimously approved the payment of \$25,440 for the billboards to stand for another year.

In addition, the commissioners approved the health department's request to employ its seven contact tracers permanently.

The contact tracers have worked in the county since May 2020. The health department has enough funding from the Oregon Health Authority to finance the positions through summer of 2022, Fiumara said. The commissioners approved the request unanimously.

The meeting then moved on to local community grants and payables. The commissioners approved \$35,000 in federal stimulus funds for a city park in Adams and \$75,000 for flood control in Echo.

"These will help communities in most incredible ways," Commissioner Dan Dorran said.

Commissioner George Murdock noted residents and infrastructure in Echo have been in "desperate" need of support after the

2020 flooding event. Dorran said they are more than desperate.

"There are property owners losing ground right now without the engineering to support the permits," he said, adding the funding will assist 61 ranchers and 131 land owners.

"This is critical to not just one or two people," Dorran said.

And at the top of the meeting, the Umatilla County Public Health Department received recognition for its service during the COVID-19 pandemic from the Pendleton Honor Task Force.

Susan Bower, president of Eastern Oregon Business Source and Umatilla County commissioner candidate, represented the organization that on occasion has called attention to honor local individuals or groups. The health department had at least 16 personnel present at the meeting.

Bower said the team at the health department had done an "absolutely out-

standing job" during the past year and a half.

Murdock added his praise to the department.

"I certainly will be happy when COVID is in our rearview mirror," he said. "But I will say, if there's one positive upside, it has been a new spotlight on public health. It's been an afterthought by the state of Oregon. Now, I don't think it will ever be again."

In all, Umatilla County has reported 9,079 COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began — more than 11% of its population — and the second-highest case rate among counties in Oregon, according to the OHA. The county continues to report infection rates higher than densely populated urban areas of Western Oregon.

Less than 40% of Umatilla County residents have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The county's vaccination rate ranks sixth lowest in Oregon, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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