

# Hermiston Herald hires new editor

Erick Peterson, 45, is eager to report on Hermiston's diversity, more

By **BRYCE DOLE**  
STAFF WRITER

HERMISTON — Erick Peterson, a Hermiston resident with years of journalism experience, has joined the Hermiston Herald as its new editor and senior reporter.

Peterson, 45, started his new role with EO Media Group on Monday, Aug. 24. In addition to Hermiston, he will cover neighboring communities in both Umatilla and Morrow counties, including Boardman, Stanfield and Umatilla.

"We are excited to have Erick on board," said Andrew Cutler, publisher of the Hermiston Herald. "He brings a fresh set of eyes

to the Herald and we are excited to see what ideas he has moving forward."

Peterson was born in Southern California and was raised in West Richland, Washington. Growing up reading the Tri-City Herald, Peterson came to love newspapers while delivering them to his community's doorsteps during his first job. He believes newspapers are integral institutions for keeping the public informed and holding power to account.

"The uglier side of the world needs to be brought to light so it can be repaired," Peterson said. "And reporters have a very important job in exposing that."

Peterson graduated from Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy. But it wasn't until he went

to China that he decided to pursue a career in journalism. For 10 years, he traveled through the country and wrote for magazines and newspapers, covering community news, business and travel stories.

Peterson returned to the United States and found a job as an editor at the Review Independent in Toppenish. After working for the Yakima Valley Publishing newspaper for a few years, he left to obtain a certificate in instrumentation and industrial automation, but quickly decided that career wasn't for him. Meanwhile, he reported freelance stories for the agricultural newspaper the Capital Press, which, like the Hermiston Herald, is a member of the EO Media Group.

After meeting his wife, Peterson moved to Hermiston four years ago and began

working as a cashier at the local Safeway. He left the job shortly after the pandemic started to take care of his family and help his stepson through online school.

Amplifying the voices of people in his community is what inspired Peterson to apply for the position with the Herald. He said he's thrilled to be joining a paper that has a history of strong local journalism, particularly under the leadership of former editor Jade McDowell.

"The paper's got a terrific tradition," he said. "It's been worked by some fantastic people. Jade is in that tradition. And I want to continue that tradition. I want to contribute to a proud newspaper."

Peterson is married to Nancy Peterson, a longtime Hermiston resident, disability services employee

at Columbia Basin College and Hermiston city councilor. Peterson will not cover city council because of his wife's role.

"We had long talks during the interview process about the potential conflicts of interest that could come from that," Cutler said. "It's important that readers know we take that seriously — whether perceived or real. So Erick will not cover anything to do with the city council."

Peterson added: "There's going to be a lot of questions as to how objective I can be, and I can start off by saying I can't be trusted to be objective" covering city council, he said. "I love my wife more than anything. I love her more than any job I'll ever have. I'm excited about the possibilities of this job, but I love my wife way more than I love anything else."

There are many topics Peterson hopes to bring to the table as the paper's new editor, including the pandemic, climate change, agriculture and religion. In particular, he looks to report on Hermiston's diversity, telling stories about the town's underrepresented and marginalized communities.

"Erick's experience as a journalist, both in the inland Northwest and overseas, gives him a broad perspective that will serve him well as our editor in Hermiston," said Kathryn B. Brown, vice president of EO Media Group and publisher of The Other Oregon.

Peterson emphasized he wants to get to know communities in and around Hermiston. He hopes people will reach out with story ideas or just to introduce themselves.

## Hermiston agrees to help fund bridge analysis

HERMISTON HERALD

The Hermiston City Council approved a plan to jointly fund a look at putting a bridge across the Umatilla River.

City Manager Byron Smith told the council that since 2001 the city's transportation systems plan has considered a bridge over the Umatilla River, and now the city's needs for that bridge have multiplied over the past 20 years, and those needs are going to increase.

Hermiston continues to be the fastest growing community in Eastern Ore-

gon, with a population now exceeding 19,000. According to Smith's memo to council on the bridge project, the city is tracking to reach nearly 23,000 residents by 2030.

The project would analyze putting in a bridge to align with either Elm Avenue or Punkin Center Road. Smith said the analysis would cost \$130,000, and Umatilla County and the city of Umatilla already are on board with sharing the cost. Umatilla has agreed to put in \$30,000, Umatilla County has agreed to shoulder \$50,000, Smith said, leaving Hermiston

to put in the remaining \$50,000.

The city has chased federal grants to pay for this examination, Smith said, but continuing to go that route would "really slow things down a lot." And the \$50,000, he added, is about the same amount the city would pay if it obtained a grant.

Councilor Jackie Meyers said this idea has been on the city's burner for 20-plus years, and now it's time to flesh out the technical work of determining which spot is going to work the best.

The council voted 8-0

in favor of a memorandum of understanding outlining the joint funding of the engineering analysis, which the firm Anderson Perry & Associates will do.

The council also met in a closed-door session to discuss the contract with the city manager. Smith has served in the role for seven years. After the session, the council voted unanimously to extend Smith's contract through Aug. 24, 2023, adding one year to his contract. Mayor Dave Drotzmann expressed his appreciation for Smith and his leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Umatilla County's COVID-19 death toll rises to 108

HERMISTON HERALD

The Oregon Health Authority reported two more Umatilla County COVID-19 deaths Monday, Aug. 23, raising the county's death toll to 108 since the pandemic began.

The disclosure comes as the county reported 69 new COVID-19 cases, a slight decline from the record-breaking surge seen in previous weeks.

The first victim is a 54-year-

old man who tested positive Aug. 14 and died Aug. 17 at Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston. He had unspecified underlying health conditions.

The second victim is a 66-year-old man who tested positive July 19 and died Aug. 13. The state has yet to determine where he died. He had unspecified underlying health conditions.

The county has reported nine COVID-19 deaths during the past week, a new pandemic record.

## Locals react as Taliban seizes Afghanistan amid U.S. withdrawal

By **BRYCE DOLE AND NICK ROSENBERGER**  
STAFF WRITERS

Veteran communities in Eastern Oregon were among the many who felt mixed emotions with the rapidly unraveling situation in Afghanistan.

Kerry Thompson, Eastern Oregon University's Hermiston Center military-veteran coordinator, has been in total disbelief at the pullout from Afghanistan and said he's heartbroken.

"I ask myself, is it all for nothing?" Thompson said. "Over 2,000 American lives lost over there, trillions of dollars we spent and my heart really goes out to the Afghan civilians. They have to be terrified of what they're going through right now."

Thompson said his son had served in Afghanistan as well and they both had friends who died while serving. He said he is worried about the American troops trying to get everyone out right now.

"Do I think we needed to still be there?" he asked, "No, I do not. The way that we left I think is going to be a stain on America."

Thompson, who served in the Army from 1987 until 2008, was part of the first ground forces in Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division in 2001 and 2002. He was deployed two times, once to Iraq and once to Afghanistan.

He said the pullout could've been done more systematically. To him, it felt like one day troops were there and the next day they weren't.

"I haven't been in the Army for 13 years, but I've never seen anything like this," he said.

For veterans who are struggling with recent news rolling out of Afghanistan, "be proud of yourself and what you've done," Thompson said. "And don't be afraid to reach out to anyone if you need help."

President defends decision to withdraw Veterans and their families nationwide are reeling from the recent news of the Taliban's rapid seizure of Afghanistan after the United States began withdrawing troops.

On Monday, Aug. 16, President Joe Biden defended his decision to withdraw the troops.

"We gave them every tool they could need. We paid their salaries. Provided for the maintenance of their airplanes," Biden said of the Afghanistan government, which crumbled in a matter of days. "We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide was the will to fight for that future."

Biden echoed a sentiment held by many veterans and their families across the nation: "How many more generations of America's daughters and sons would you have me send to fight Afghans — Afghanistan's civil war, when Afghan troops will not?"

Duane Carter, a Hermiston resident and veteran of the United States Army, 24th Infantry, served in Operation Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia and Desert Storm in Iraq. Carter said he has grown numb to the news.

"It didn't surprise me," he said of watching the Afghan government crumble. "But at least we're getting out of there."

But scenes from the Kabul Airport, showing Afghan citizens desperately climbing onto aircrafts to escape, did surprise Carter. Some citizens who clung to planes fell to their deaths, according to news reports.

Carter said he "had no doubt" the Taliban would reaffirm its grip on the nation after the U.S.'s departure. But what was surprising, Carter said, was the speed at which the Afghan government fell.

"I feel sorry for all the guys who served over there, lost their lives, got wounded," he said. "This must crush them. There was a lot of time and effort over there. And it's just gone."

The most important thing now, Carter said, is to "get all the troops out" safely.

"We've already lost too many people," he said.

### Local leaders speak out

Now a refugee crisis is sweeping the world, as Afghan citizens desperately seek a way to escape the country.

Oregon Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, is one of a handful of Republican legislators who have so far signed a letter that seeks to create a safe

passage for Afghan refugees.

The letter, sent to Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, calls on the Biden administration to "lift the refugee admission caps and take other emergency humanitarian actions that will save lives at this pivotal time." It says the state must "take all the necessary steps to be prepared to resettle families when they arrive."

"It's not right, morally, to abandon our friends in tough situations," Hansell said.

Hansell said he would support efforts aimed at expediting the process of getting Afghans safely to the U.S. He said he has grown "concerned" and "frustrated" with the U.S. government's actions leading up to the Afghan government's collapse.

Pendleton Mayor John Turner, an Iraq veteran and

retired colonel and infantry officer who served in the 1st, 3rd and 4th Marine divisions for 28 years, said he thought the collapse of Afghanistan was very predictable.

"I think any of us that were paying close attention were a bit surprised by the rapidity of how the Afghan government fell," he said. "I don't think anybody was surprised by the fact that it actually fell."

Turner said it was an



Shekib Rahmani/The Associated Press

**Hundreds of people gather near a U.S. Air Force C-17 transport plane at a perimeter at the international airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 16, 2021. That day, the U.S. military and officials focus was on Kabul's airport, where thousands of Afghans trapped by the sudden Taliban takeover rushed the tarmac and clung to U.S. military planes deployed to fly out staffers of the U.S. Embassy, which shut down Aug. 15, and others.**



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