



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Volunteers organize to-go meals Thursday, Nov. 25, 2021, at the Hermiston Community Fellowship Dinner at Hermiston High School, Hermiston.

Thanksgiving:

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He said this was a mammoth undertaking, which was made possible by sponsors and volunteers. Subaru Corporation was a particularly generous donor, according to Humphreys, as it gave \$9,000, which alone was more than the cost of the Thanksgiving meals.

Humphreys said the Thanksgiving dinner cost \$6,000. Donations from companies and individuals made it possible to buy new equipment, including a trailer and maybe an oven, which would make the event more self-sufficient. No longer will community dinners need to “begging

for and borrowing” materials to host their events, he said.

Any funds left over will go toward future dinners, he said, while senior centers and other groups in need get any leftover food.

In a normal year, according to Humphreys, around 150 volunteers are needed. This year was different, as there was no table service and cold meals were handed to passersby, so there was a need for only 50 volunteers.

Next year marks the 40th Community Fellowship Dinner. Humphreys said he expects 2022 to revert to regular times with the community meeting as they did pre-pandemic.

“We’ll do whatever is necessary to make that possible,” he said.

Bazaar:

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“It has not stopped,” she said as a half-dozen customers approached.

Among the bazaar shoppers was April Huckstep, from the Tri-Cities. A weekly bazaar shopper, she had checked out food, salsa, handcrafts and other homemade gifts at the event. To her, shopping locally is a more personable experience. It makes holiday gifts meaningful. On Nov. 27, she purchased for her daughter a wooden Mickey Mouse ornament to remind her of a recent trip to Disneyland.

A few feet from Huck-

step stood dozens of stacks of paintings. They were Donna Anderson’s, who was showing her work for the first time at the bazaar. After surgery last year left Anderson immobilized, painting became her “saving grace,” she said.

“It gives me peace,” she said.

Now, Anderson’s house is filled with countless paintings, so her family convinced her to start selling. That’s why she came to the bazaar, where she said she sold a few paintings. She said she enjoyed the friendly atmosphere, chatting with locals about what they’re buying and with vendors about their passions.

Police:

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recalls a time when positions brought in hundreds of applications for a single opening, giving law enforcement agencies a wide variety of potential applicants to choose from. Those numbers have dwindled over the past year — and Doby personally has had to actively pursue an applicant and ask the person to apply for the job.

The Baker City Police Department is not alone in the struggle to find qualified applicants.

“I’ve been with the city of La Grande for 28 years, and 20 to 25 years ago we would see 150 applications for one opening for a police officer position — and that has been trending in what I feel is a negative direction for a long time,” said La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell.

Bell’s department is having only slightly better luck

hiring, with nearly 15 qualified applicants vying for two open positions, but those application numbers still are a far cry from their previous numbers, according to Bell. To make matters more difficult, the number of law enforcement officers retiring or resigning has increased, Bell said.

“The last 18 to 24 months, we have seen a lot of our long-time employees — police officers — retire and so we have been doing more hiring than what maybe we would, or have over the course of the last 15 to 20 years.”

To attract lateral transfers — poaching police officers from other regions — Bell created a \$6,000 hiring bonus for certified experienced police officers, hoping to draw in officers from across the state. So far, that effort “has not garnered any certified officers,” Bell said.

Lateral transfers are valuable for police departments

due to the amount of training required for new officers. It can take up to nine months to transform a new recruit into an independent and capable police officer, Bell said.

“Five to eight years ago we started retiring police officers — and you can’t quickly replace the experience and the wisdom that those career police officers possess,” Bell said. “You genuinely can’t just replace a police officer, it’s a lengthy road.”

Dealing with a public image problem

While hiring woes are not limited to one career, police agencies are facing yet another hurdle in their attempts to hire new officers — a growing sentiment that paints police officers in bad light.

“Everybody is having a hard time finding people who want to work, and especially this profession right now. It’s probably not the most sexy profession,” said Pendleton

Police Chief Charles Byram.

Byram, along with Bell and Doby, noted the public image of police deteriorated in the wake of massive protests and riots across the nation following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. Images from major cities showed police clad in riot gear blanketing city blocks in tear gas, as well as several incidents of assault against members of the media.

“What we’re seeing is — essentially since George Floyd we have seen a marked decrease in the number of people interested in applying to be police officers,” Bell said. “Law enforcement has really been beat up in the course of the last 18 to 24 months.”

That sentiment has been muted in more rural areas, where police enjoy a strong support from local residents who, by and large, have a favorable outlook towards police according to Bell.

Much of that favorable opinion may stem from the active community involvement from police officers in rural communities.

“We have to become embedded in our community, I mean people know us; we’re only 17,000,” Byram said. “Somebody is going to know you. You’re only a few degrees of separation away from someone you’re arresting.”

Holding the line on values

The chiefs said they still are accepting applications for the open positions, but not everybody can become a police officer. They still need to meet the basic physical and psychological standards set by the agencies and the state, as well as background checks and medical screenings.

“The one thing that I won’t do is sacrifice our standards just to make a hiring decision, I won’t do it,” Byram said. “Usually if

you do that, then you’re setting yourself up for disaster; and right now, in this line of work, I’ll protect the brand all day. If we have to run short for a little bit, that’s fine. But our values, our mission, our beliefs aren’t going to be sacrificed just because I need another body on the road.”

Byram said anyone who is interested should apply, and if anyone would like to see what the daily lives of a police officer entails, they would be more than welcome to join an officer for a ride-along or come and chat with the police chief about the job.

“Quite honestly, you know, I’m open for all comers,” Byram said. “Whether you have experience or not, it’s one of those things where we’re also good at training cops.”

—Hermiston Herald editor/senior reporter Erick Peterson contributed to this article.

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