



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald
A camera and sensor are on a light post at Funland Playground on Friday, Dec. 10, 2021. Each light post has two cameras that record 24 hours a day.

Funland gets boost in security

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Funland Playground in Hermiston is getting more measures to keep vandals and trespassers at bay.

Brandon Artz, director of Hermiston Parks and Recreation, said the park is a community gem and he wants to keep it from unnecessary damage, particularly in the wake of a recent social media storm about the park.

A warning of possible theft

The initial Facebook post was from a sharp-eyed community member who noticed bolts were loose on a piece of equipment, the treasure chest. This citizen voiced concerns to parks and rec on Facebook. Artz said the public grew worried someone was preparing to steal the chest, then it disappeared from the park, which seemed to confirm some suspicions.

However, Artz said, the culprit was parks and rec. After recognizing the chest was loose, he said he had staff remove the chest until it could be properly reinstalled.

Even after Artz issued the explanation, Facebook commenters voiced distress about security at the park.

According to the director, though, there is plenty of security for the playground and more on the way.

Playground security

Each light pole around the perimeter of the playground has two video cameras recording 24 hours a day. And the light posts have sensors that turn on at night and set up a "geo-fence."

The geo-fence, Artz explained, is a set of lasers. When someone breaks the beams, an alert goes to the Hermiston Police Department.

"The first week, the cameras were tripped and alerts were sent to the PD," he said. "A person with eight unrelated warrants was arrested here."

Artz said police arrested the trespasser on the warrants.

Playground dangers

More recently, Artz said, a local noticed two dogs loose and growling at children. Artz heard the report, checked the cameras and took screenshots of a dog urinating on a piece of equipment fashioned to look like an onion. Nothing escapes the watchful eye of the cameras or the department, the director said.

In addition to theft and unleashed pets, he said there are other concerns. Rough usage, as when adults overextend the rocking horses, is troublesome. The orbit spinner is sometimes abused, too. Also, he said he sees vandalism as an issue.

Vandal strikes

Walking through the playground, he pointed at one piece of equipment with damage he said he suspected is the result of a strike from a baseball bat. Artz expressed frustration over

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Clinic addresses disparity in COVID-19 vaccinations

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Walking to the door of a recent pop-up COVID-19 vaccination clinic in Hermiston, Maria Ugarte admitted to feeling emotional about getting a shot.

"I'm scared," the Umatilla resident said. "But I'm going to get done with it. I'm going to get the shot."

Ugarte's story

Initially afraid of how the vaccine would affect her disabled daughter, she and other family members did not get vaccinated. She said she thought her family would not need to be vaccinated, as long as they followed other guidelines. So, they were careful to wear masks, wash their hands and social distance wherever possible, Ugarte said.

And still, the infection reached their home, she said.

She said she got sick and was bedridden for 21 days. Also, her daughter came down with COVID-19, Ugarte said, and she had a bad experience at Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston. The hospital was stretched thin at the time of her daughter's arrival, she said. Ugarte described the hospital as lacking beds and equipment, as other patients were also being treated.

"I thought I had lost her," she said. "Thank God she's OK."

After they recovered, family members started getting vaccinations, she said. Ugarte got her first Pfizer shot in October. She said she wanted to wait until she was feeling well before getting the necessary second shot. It is only now, she said, that her "foggy brain," fatigue and cough, symptoms of COVID-19, have passed.

"I just want to tell everybody that this thing is freaking real," she said of COVID-19, "and they should be afraid because they can die of it."

Setting up for the shot

New Horizons drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Hermiston provided its space for the clinic. Center Director Jose Garcia greeted Ugarte and welcomed her to fill out paperwork and then get her shot.

This was Garcia's fifth vaccination event at New Horizons, he said. He provided space for health care providers to vaccinate individuals. Meanwhile, he offered visitors air purifiers, hand sanitizer, masks and more. He passed out information about COVID-19 prevention in English and Spanish. He set out boxes of food, made available by Agape House in Hermiston.

County public health boss looks into the numbers

According to Joseph Fiumara, public health director for Umatilla County Public Health, around 34% of Hispanic people in the county are vaccinated against the coronavirus. In contrast, 43% of the county's white population is vaccinated, he said. These numbers may not be precise, he said, because they are from a survey in which Hispanic people were overrepresented.

Another survey, conducted over the phone, showed a higher percentage of Hispanic people than white people are vaccinated, he said, but he was not confident



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald
Jose Garcia carries a vaccination clinic sign Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, while setting up for a free COVID-19 vaccination clinic at New Horizons drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Hermiston.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald
Jose Garcia, right, and Andrea Odle, the Oregon Health Authority assistant regional COVID-19 testing and vaccine coordinator, talk to the Spanish language radio station Radio La Ley during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, in Hermiston.

these numbers accurately represents the entire county.

The best numbers, he said, show Hispanic people are less vaccinated than other groups. Still, he said, the county is closing the gap on this difference and more Hispanic people are getting vaccinated.

The director gave reasons for the disparity. For one, he said, the difference between ethnicities in vaccination rate "started that way." The virus hit the Hispanic community very hard, he said, infecting workers in agriculture and food processing, jobs people cannot do at home.

Vaccines during the onset of their rollout went to hospital workers, first responders and teachers, he said, jobs that tend to have more white people.

There are other barriers to vaccination among Hispanic people, he explained, such as wariness of a new vaccine, distrust of government and a language barrier.

As his department and others have tried to address issues of vaccination among Hispanic people, the difference between ethnic groups is closing, he said. Twenty-four percent of all vaccinations are being given to

Hispanic people, who represent 28% of the population, he said.

The director credited the work by community organizations, which have educated individuals and made vaccinations more available than they had in the past. Vaccination events, often staffed by Spanish-speaking people, are taking place. Also, several local businesses have hosted clinics for workers to get vaccinated while remaining on the clock, Fiumara said.

Worries with vaccination

At the New Horizons event, Garcia agreed with Fiumara's assessment of barriers to vaccination. He added, though, there are other concerns, including immigration.

Some people, he said, do not want to get vaccinated because they are undocumented. They worry about putting their names down on lists the government can track and later use to deport them. Also, Garcia said, many people are in the process of gaining citizenship and they worry that receiving any aid at all, even vaccination services, will cancel

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Bringing in the green

Christmas tree sellers face higher costs, competition with artificial trees

By ERICK PETERSON and BEN LONERGAN
Hermiston Herald

Despite industry-wide supply chain issues, increased wholesale prices and more competition, local Christmas tree vendors reported they have plenty of tress, but prices at some lots are higher than in past seasons.

Mike Frink, the tree lot coordinator at the Hermiston Kiwanis Club tree lot, said Dec. 4, his lot had sold more than 100 of its 430 trees. The lot, in the parking lot of

the Hermiston Community Center, has been selling trees since the late 1970s, Frink said.

Organizers planned to close their lot on Tuesday, Dec. 14. By early this week, they had sold nearly all of their trees.

In the early 1980s, when Frink was selling trees, they cost around \$20 or \$30. Now, they carry prices between \$40 for a traditional Douglas Fir to \$140 for a 10-foot tree. In this price range, there are a variety of types — Douglas fir, grand fir, noble fir and Nordmann fir.

Frink said the Nordmann trees are popular and new to the lot this year; there were only a dozen

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Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald
Kiwanis member Mark Rose unwraps a Christmas tree Dec. 4, 2021, before adding it to rows of trees at the Hermiston Kiwanis Club Christmas tree lot in the Hermiston Community Center parking lot.

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