

Morrow County voters decide on school bond in May

District's schools are in need, according to superintendent

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Schools in Boardman, Hep- pner and Irrigon need an upgrade, according to Dirk Dirksen, the superintendent of the Morrow County School District. And the district is due for a bond to pay for the improvements.

"The last bond was 21 years ago," he said Feb. 14 at a meeting of the district's board of directors. "The buildings, as far as the upkeep and things like that, has been excellent, but we have a lot of older buildings. They are feeling their age."

The board supported the proposal and voted to place a general

obligation bond measure on the May 17 ballot.

A statement from the district stated the bond measure, if passed, would raise \$138 million. This money would be supplemented with a matching \$4 million grant from the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching Program, for a total of \$142 million.

The bond would mature in 20 years or less, according to the district, which estimated the bond rate at \$2.67 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, although the actual levy rate may differ. If the measure passes, a taxpayer who owns a house assessed at \$200,000 would pay approximately \$534 per year.



Dirksen

Dating back several decades, Dirksen said, the schools do not meet modern standards. The superintendent said security needs have changed. The current expectation is for offices to be placed at the entrance of a school, where administrators can keep an eye on people as they enter. A remodel of buildings would include relocating offices, he said.

Further renovations would create separate spaces for junior high and high school students. Junior high and high school students would have their own locker rooms and gymnasiums.

Other modernizing, which would be made possible through the bond, would update and fix electrical, HVAC and plumbing systems, he said.

"We have showers that don't work, and we have bathrooms that

need to be refreshed," Dirksen said. Other shortcomings, which he pointed out, include limited electrical outlets. It is not uncommon, he said, for a classroom in his district to have only two electrical outlets. Some parts of some buildings do not have proper ventilation or heating, he said.

He said another focus would be adding classrooms to existing schools, especially out in Boardman, where he expects the greatest population growth. Adding new classrooms will keep the district from having to add modular buildings to their schools, he said.

There would be no new schools as a result of the bond, Dirksen said. The improvements made possible through this bond would revamp current buildings, doing all of the things mentioned, plus improving parking and making the

buildings more accessible for disabled students.

The district has plans to distribute flyers, create an explanatory video and share information on the district website and social media.

Dirksen said he is excited about the possibilities for improving his schools, especially since he is retiring soon. This is his last school year.

"This is my 41st year, and my entire career has been in Morrow County," he said.

He taught for 15 years and was an administrator at Riverside Jr./Sr. High School in Boardman before becoming the superintendent. He said, after years of work for the district, he would like to see his schools move forward in a positive way. This bond, he said, creates good things for future generations.

Returning to the stage — finally

Hermiston High is among local groups returning to the stage

By JENNIFER COLTON
For EO Media Group

When "The Sound of Music" closed on March 1, 2020, Pendleton's College Community Theater expected to open its next production in six weeks. Instead, rehearsals at the Bob Clapp Theatre would be canceled for two years.

"Little Women: The Broadway Musical," the first Pendleton-based theater production since the coronavirus pandemic, runs the next two weekends, Feb. 24-26 and March 3-5, in the theater on the campus of Blue Mountain Community College.

"When COVID hit, it was really scary because nobody knew what to expect," said Margaret Mayer, president of the CCT board of directors. "We had no idea it would be two years, no one knew. Here we are."

Almost exactly two years later ("Sound of Music" opened Feb. 20, 2020; "Little Women" opens Feb. 24, 2022), Mayer was back in the theater as music director for "Little Women." Caitlin Marshall is directing.

"The last two years have been really stressful. People need something that can take their minds off everything," Marshall said. "I really just feel it's important to keep some kind of normalcy with all the chaos going on."

That idea of normalcy has prompted shows to come back this month in Hermiston and La Grande, even with COVID-19 impacts. At Hermiston High School, Jordan Bemrose brought together 70 students for performances of "Beauty and the Beast."

"The biggest reason we wanted to jump back into live theater is mostly to give these fantastic students something exciting to look forward to," she said.

Bemrose added the performing arts students are talented and hardworking and need opportunities to shine.

"With online school, we missed out on so many performance opportunities that now, being back in person, we wanted to make up for that loss of time," she said. "For many students, singing, acting and playing their musical instruments is their whole life and inspiration and what they aspire to do as careers after high school."

With the lingering impacts of COVID-19, the Hermiston production required masks to rehearse on stage and careful tracking to avoid quarantine that could cancel rehearsals — or performances. That



Samantha Steffey, right, and Pablo Galindo perform as Belle and Gaston Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, during a rehearsal for Hermiston High School's production of "Beauty and the Beast" at the high school. The show's final performace was Feb. 19.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald



Aaron Thacker performs as Beast on Thursday Feb. 17, 2022, during a dress rehearsal for Hermiston High School's production of "Beauty and the Beast."

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald



Aurelio Marin performs as Lumiere on Thursday Feb. 17, 2022, during a dress rehearsal for Hermiston High School's production of "Beauty and the Beast."

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

same fear became a reality this month for Eastern Oregon University's "We've Got Your Number," a choreographed choral performance. Several students tested positive for COVID-19, and the show was postponed two weeks to Feb. 25 and 26. That delay pushed "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," a stage musical planned to open March 10, into EOU's fall term.

"It's exciting to be back and yet it's frustrating at the same time. The biggest problem with bringing theater back is COVID is still doing everything it can to prevent it from coming back," said Ken Wheeler, associate professor of theater at EOU. "As much as things are getting better and we're seeing the sun at the end of the storm, it's still affecting it."

For tickets to "We've Got Your Number," visit www.eou.edu/music.

Returning to the stage during a pandemic requires flexibility and creativity.

When the pandemic hit, the Elgin Opera House's spring 2020 production of "Matilda" was only weeks

away from opening. Instead of opening that March, the show was postponed for a year and a half.

In between, the Opera House tried outdoor productions as well as a fully recorded production of "High School Musical Jr." During this musical, rehearsed in the winter of 2021, actors were split into cohort groups that rehearsed and recorded on different days with no live audience.

"When we announced we were recording 'High School Musical,' we thought we'd get just a few people audition," said Terry Hale, Elgin Opera House executive artistic director. "We had 70 or 80 kids from five different counties. That's how important this is."

Hermiston High School also saw large participation numbers with "Beauty and the Beast," a show they've been rehearsing since the middle of November.

"(I wish people knew) how hard these students work and how much time, effort and talent are needed to put a full show together," Bemrose said. "It takes weeks to

learn lines, music, choreography, organize props and set, and get all of the moving pieces together, including the orchestra, who rehearse separately and join us during our dress rehearsal week. We rehearse at least two hours after school during our production months, and dress rehearsal week we rehearse after school four to five hours finalizing everything."

Those hundreds of hours do not include the extra pandemic struggle of rehearsing with masks or returning to the stage after a two-year hiatus.

"Everyone is out of practice with the process, but we'll work at overcoming those handicaps just so we can put the show on," Wheeler said. "There's nothing that beats a live shared experience in a darkened theater. That communication between the actors and the audience, there's nothing that compares to that. We're striving to get back to that as soon as possible even if we have to take strange precautions to be able to do it. It's worth it."

In Baker City, Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre

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has presented a few shows — the children's theater presented "Jungle Book" in the fall of 2021, and "Pride @ Prejudice" wrapped up a two-weekend run Feb. 20.

"Because theater is known as collaborative art, it was one of the few art forms almost totally shut down during the pandemic," said Abby Dennis, EORT artistic director. "Since our art form requires being around others, theater people were completely cut off from being able to work through the overwhelming emotions from the past two years."

Bemrose said seeing a show come together is the greatest reward of theater, along with how accomplished the cast and crew feel. Hale said it is the way the performing arts bring joy and life to those on and off the stage.

"As a society, we focused so much on being afraid of death (in the pandemic) that we stopped doing the things that brought us joy, the things that made us alive," Hale said. "One of the best ways to celebrate life is through the arts. If people keep coming out, we'll keep doing it."

Dennis said returning to the stage is "bittersweet."

"I love being able to entertain my community, but it hurts to think of everything we've lost over the past two years," she said.

EORT's 2022 schedule includes "Women Playing Hamlet," "God of Carnage," and the children's theater will present "The Enchanted Bookshop" and "Macbeth."

In Pendleton, tickets are still available for "Little Women" for both weekends, Feb. 24-26 and March 3-5. For information, go to www.elginoperahouse.com.

"It's going to be an amazing show," Marshall said. "Come fall in love with these sisters and have a great night of theater again — finally."

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