

Effects of flood linger long after damage was done

The water receded two years ago but the recovery efforts are still ongoing

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
Hermiston Herald

Umatilla County continues to recover from the 2020 Umatilla River floods while trying to figure out how to better respond to the next high water event.

Heavy rains combined with a rapidly melting snowpack overwhelmed the banks of the Umatilla River on Feb. 6, 2020, destroying homes, damaging public infrastructure, displacing families and killing one person. Two years later, local officials still are picking up the pieces while trying to coordinate with a wide array of state, tribal and federal agencies.

“Recovery from a natural disaster like that is years long,” Umatilla County Emergency Manager Tom Roberts said. “It’s not something that happens, generally speaking, overnight or within months. We kind of put our five-10-year hats on.”

Pendleton City Manager Robb Corbett has spent many hours over the past few years thinking about floods, not just the Umatilla River flood from 2020, but also the McKay Creek floods from 2019. Roughly three years after the McKay floods, Cor-



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File
People survey the receding water level at Riverview Mobile Home Estates in Pendleton in February 2020.

bett said the city is on the verge of soliciting a consultant to make recommendations on how to help prevent significant flooding in the future. The consultant is grant-funded and the city is hoping to work with the Umatilla County Water and Soil Conservation District to secure more federal funding to fortify the banks of the creek.

The Umatilla River is a different beast entirely.

Unlike McKay Creek, the Umatilla is undammed

and without a reservoir. Corbett said the most direct method of mitigation would be to install a dam, but the environmental impacts of such a move make it an unlikely option. He said more plausible solutions include extending the city’s levee system to the area near the Highway 11 bridge and raising home foundations to better withstand flood waters.

But before the city can take any long-term steps to better protect people and

property during the next flood, it first needs to update its floodplain maps. Residents and property owners learned the maps were not accurate after areas flooded that were supposed to be outside the floodplain.

Corbett said the city is in the process of obtaining aerial mapping of the town, but also would need computer flood simulations and approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency before it could update the maps.

Pendleton wasn’t the only community the 2020 floods hit hard. The Umatilla Indian Reservation, Echo and the area surrounding Milton-Freewater all saw significant damage. In the latter’s case, Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran said there still are people who live along Mill Creek and the south fork of the Walla Walla River who haven’t been able to return to their homes.

Dorran has been a part of a multi-agency group

trying to coordinate the recovery effort, but the pace of progress has been slow. Dorran said the recovery’s deliberate timeline can be a tough sell to constituents.

“It’s been frustrating how long it’s taken,” he said.

Dorran referenced the Thorn Hollow Bridge, a bridge east of Pendleton that was heavily damaged during the floods and has remained unusable since then. Dorran said plans are ready and the funding is in place to replace the bridge, but construction can’t start until the county gets the green light from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and other government agencies. Dorran added he expects CTUIR to complete its review of the project soon.

At its peak, the flooding caused the Umatilla River to flow at more than 20,000 cubic feet per second, the most in the river’s recorded history.

After the flood, the city updated its “Flood Fight Procedures” to give city staff a clear plan whenever the next flood comes. Included in the plan is a detailed list of procedures for when water levels reach 9,500, 12,000 and 16,000 cubic feet per second. In the event water levels exceed 22,000 cfs, the plan only has a single sentence.

“Initiate recommendation evacuation procedures behind the levee.”

Business owner joins packed Umatilla County commissioner race

Hermiston Herald

The race for Umatilla County Board of Commissioners Position 1 continues to grow ahead of the March 8 filing deadline.

On Feb. 15, Bob Barton of Hermiston joined a field that already included four other candidates. Barton is the owner of

Barton Laser Leveling, a construction business that specializes in land clearing, excavation, demolition and site preparation. A graduate of Hermiston High School, Barton holds an associate’s degree from the Oregon Institute of Technology.

The Position 1 seat is open after incumbent Commissioner George

Murdock decided to retire. Prior to Barton joining the race, four other candidates already filed for the position: Jesse Bonifer of Athena, the owner of Advanced Tarps and Covers and an Athena city councilor; Susan Bower of Pendleton, the owner of Eastern Oregon Business Source; Cindy Timmons of Milton-Freewater, a

co-owner of Marv’s Glass Shop; and Alvin Young of Hermiston, the manager of Elmer’s Irrigation.

The only other county office up for election in 2022 is Position 2 on the board of commissioners, where incumbent Commissioner John Shafer is running against conservative activist HollyJo Beers. If no

other candidates join the race for Position 2, Shafer and Beers won’t appear on the ballot until the Nov. 8 general election. For Position 1, all candidates will compete for the top two spots during the May 17 primary. Regardless of the results, the top vote-getters will advance to a November runoff.

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