

Hermiston HERALD OPINION & READER'S FORUM

Founded in 1906

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2, 2022

A4

OUR VIEW

Response to Shearer's fire reveals our character

If it isn't one thing, it's another. Disease, deaths, car accidents and more have beset our community.

Last week, yet another terrible happening occurred. And, once again, we would like to express our gratitude to the helpers.

An explosion at Shearer's Foods in Hermiston resulted in a fire that consumed its building. Thick, black smoke poured from the wreckage and rose high over the town. People from towns dozens of miles away, said they could see the smoke.

At the scene, workers were quick to evacuate by car and by foot. Other individuals got as close as they were permitted to meet their loved ones and see that they were unhurt.

It is amazing that injuries were minor. The fire resulted in a destroyed building. Its ruins were largely flattened. It is now a heap of twisted metal. We wonder how people made it out with their lives, let alone their health.

We have some idea how lives were saved, though. According to firefighters, Shearer's was on top of its game, at least in regards to the evacuation. Management accounted for all of its workers, and they were able to notify firefighters. This being the case, firefighters did not have to enter the inferno for rescues.

The heroic firefighters from Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 and other responding agencies did have opportunity to show their mettle,

however. Brave firefighters worked throughout the day and much of the night to put water on the fire and keep it from explosive tanks nearby. They worked in cold conditions, fighting an impossible fight with the fire. Exhausted, they only quit when their water valves began to freeze. By the time they quit for the night, the nearby tanks were safe, and there was little to do, except to let the fire run its course.

Umatilla County firefighters were not done for good, though, as they returned the following day to put out remaining fires at the sight. With heavy equipment, they lifted fallen walls to gain access to burning hot spots.

With the fire extinguished, inves-

tigators will get to the bottom of this happening. This will be only part of our efforts as there is much more work to be done.

Hermiston will need to find a way to make up for what has been lost. Shearer's Foods, local government, schools, employers and more will need to support displaced workers. They will need good jobs, which match the ones lost and they need money to live until they obtain those jobs.

What we have lost as a community — in the Shearer's fire and other recent tragedies — is upsetting. How first responders have acted gives us hope. But it is what comes next that will show us the resiliency and value of our community.

COMMENTARY

Inconvenience of winter can pay dividends later in the year



MARC AUSTIN
EYE TO THE SKY

Winter weather can be very inconvenient. The intrusion of cold air, coupled with either fog or low clouds, makes for dreary outdoor weather, which isn't optimal for being outside.

When storm systems sweep in, whether it's cold enough for snow to fall in the low elevations or not, there are frequently major travel impacts through the mountain passes, and if snow happens to impact any of the airports in the region, these travel impacts can have a domino effect. No matter how you slice it, winter weather can be downright annoying at times.

It also can present some great recreation opportunities if you happen to enjoy winter sports like skiing, snowboarding or snowmobiling, but that's for another article. We

often hear the statement "keep the snow up in the mountains where it belongs" for that very reason.

As frustrating as it may be trying to plan outdoor events or slipping and sliding as you make your way through town, winter is critical for the stability of our climate in the Inland Northwest. Unlike areas west of the Cascades that regularly receive precipitation into the spring and summer months, areas east of the Cascades struggle to get much beneficial rainfall after mid-June, leaving multiple consecutive months of hot dry weather.

While this is a normal seasonal cycle, if we don't get enough precipitation (rain, snow, ice, etc.) during the winter, we find ourselves experiencing unusually hot dry summers and worsening drought conditions. This can also lead to longer, more active wildfire seasons.

The western U.S. has been in the midst of a multi-year drought. Drought is no stranger to the region, largely due to the dry continental nature of our climate and the

rain shadow (area that receives little rain due to blocking by mountains) east of the Cascades. Despite these influences, extreme to exceptional drought year after year is rare, and it has a number of negative effects on the region.

For one, drought is profoundly impactful on agriculture, including crops, livestock and farmers and their families. These directly impact the regional and national economy, especially items the Inland Northwest is known for, such as wheat, peas, apples and potatoes. Another more short-term aspect of lacking precipitation in the winter months deals with wildfires and their frequency during the summer and autumn months. With little soil moisture, the vegetation that fuels wildfires, such as grasses, shrubs and even trees, dry out and cure much more rapidly.

This leads to an earlier onset of conditions favoring the spread and maintenance of wildfires, meaning the fire season is longer than it otherwise might be given a wetter winter. Those that live in fire-prone

areas are at a greater risk of experiencing fire near their homes. Even those who may not be directly impacted by fire are likely to see indirect impacts to air quality due to expansive smoke, as many in the Pacific Northwest have experienced over the last few years.

So the next time you're itching to head outside and catch some sun, but instead find yourself facing fog and low clouds, or snowy icy conditions, take a minute to appreciate the winter weather. It really is our water-supply lifeline, aiding our agricultural interests, alleviating or regulating drought and preventing our fire and smoke seasons from becoming so severe.

Marc Austin is a warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Austin leads outreach and weather preparedness programs, and engages the media, emergency management and public safety communities in building a weather ready nation.

COLUMN

Serving others without being elected



TAMMY MALGESINI
INSIDE MY SHOES

While Nick Kristof's hopes to be elected the next governor of Oregon have been dashed because of residency requirements, it is my hope he will continue to pursue central issues of his short-lived campaign narrative. Honestly, I think he's in a better position as a private citizen with friends and supporters with deep pockets to affect change.

And he won't be "distracted" with other day-to-day obligations of being governor. He can take the time to focus on such topics as poverty, homelessness and addiction — several of the key points he discussed during his abbreviated run for governor.

While I've never had the ambitions, pocketbook or connections to run for governor, back when I was young, full of energy and had time I was willing to share, I ran for a seat on the Hermiston School Board. I thought I would

have made a good addition with innovative ideas, a connection with a portion of the community and I was married to an educator.

After I didn't garner enough votes to be elected, I lost interest and focused my attention elsewhere. Maybe my 20-something ego was bruised — I have never run for a position again. Instead, I dove into efforts that didn't require being "chosen" to participate.

In retrospect, I probably dodged a bullet. The first city council meeting I attended in Irrigon as a reporter lasted more than three hours. And a couple of years later, I experienced a similar scenario during a Hermiston School District work session and board meeting.

One thing I learned through this process is I appreciate fellow community members who are willing to give of their time in hopes of making a difference in our community. While I appreciate those who step up to serve, I challenge our elected officials to remember they represent their constituents — and to reach out for public input.

Another thing, that still seems

strange is the Hermiston School District and the Hermiston City Council meet on the same night. Why is that?

In an election night interview on Nov. 6, 2018, Mark Gomolski, who was serving on the school board while running for a seat on the city council, said regardless of the outcome of the race, he would continue to encourage the organizations to find a way to meet at different times so residents could attend both. It also would be beneficial for the two governing bodies, he said, as they continue to partner on projects such as using the aquatic center to host free swimming lessons for students.

"If we're going to be doing partnerships like that, I think we should be attending each other's meetings," he said.

And here we are more than three years later with both groups still meeting at the same time.

Tammy Malgesini, the Hermiston Herald community writer, enjoys spending time with her husband and two German shepherds, as well as entertaining herself with random musings.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thank you, Hermiston

One of the beautiful things about Hermiston that has been revealed over the past two years is the community's dedication to putting small differences aside and focusing on the big issues.

These have been difficult and trying times for everyone. We have all had different beliefs and ideas about how to respond to the virus, protect our families and endure setbacks.

But in Hermiston I have seen people committed to living together, despite these differences. The schools are a common space where all our children learn and grow together. I have seen the investment from people across the ideological spectrum to ensuring our students are receiving the best education possible.

I want to share my deepest thanks to the Hermiston community for stepping up for kids through this pandemic. We are truly a diverse community, and that diversity has been an important part of our strength.

I am so grateful to live and work in a community willing to put our future first.

Tricia Mooney
Hermiston

Congratulations Hermiston

I would like to congratulate all those involved with the grounds and appearance of Hermiston High School. They have kept the campus looking immaculate no matter the weather, the pandemic, or time of year.

Congratulations also to coach Jay Ego and the Hermiston High girls basketball team. That was a wonderful win in a big-time league.

Mike Mehren
Hermiston

Hermiston HERALD

VOLUME 115 • NUMBER 9

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Periodical postage paid at Hermiston, OR.
Postmaster, send address changes to Hermiston Herald, 333 E. Main St., Hermiston, OR 97838.

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The Hermiston Herald (USPS 242220, ISSN 8750-4782) is published weekly at Hermiston Herald, 333 E. Main St., Hermiston, OR 97838, 541-567-6457.