

Shearer's

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the Oregon Food Bank supplied the food for the employees.

Large pallets of food lined the west end of the building going around to the east end on March 4, Gomolski said. The Shearer workers arrived at the Agape House, opened their vehicles and had them filled, he said.

There were 35 volunteers, Gomolski said, and seven of the volunteers came from Shearer's.

The event, which was 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., provided food to 127 Shearer's families, he said. Many of these people seemed very upset, Gomolski said.

"There were people crying as they were getting food here," he said.

Gomolski said there is a possibility of holding another food drive in April.

Job fair coming next week

Since the start of the fire, local government has been in communi-

cation with Shearer's to see what can be done. Mark Morgan, Hermiston assistant city manager, is one of those officials who has expressed a desire to help.

"We've been in coordination with the Shearer's folks, as well as all of our other partners here on the state, local and federal level," he said.

Morgan said the city has been working with the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce on its planned job fair.

He said planning for the fair was delayed while waiting to find out whether Shearer's would hold onto its employees and rebuild. Now that Shearer's released those employees, the city and the chamber is pushing forward with the job fair.

"I've been in touch with all the wonderful companies in Hermiston," Val Hoxie, executive director of the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, said, as she helped organize the fair.

On the afternoon of March 8, she said 14 employers confirmed partici-



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

The wreckage of Shearer's Food in Hermiston has been shifted some by March 9, 2022. More work needs to be done for a full investigation, however, according to the state fire marshal's office.

ipation at the fair, and she said she expects more to join. Some participating companies, which will be looking for new employees, are Lamb Weston, Amazon, Tillamook, Rogers Toyota of Hermiston and Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

The job fair is Wednesday, March 16, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395.

Hoxie said Workforce will be present, too, as representatives will be on hand to answer questions about unemployment issues.

Employees enter strong job market

Former Shearer's workers may not be looking long for work, according to Craig Smith of Food Northwest.

He said Food Northwest did not have an association with Shearer's. It does, however, have connections with several other local food processors around the region. Already, he said, he has heard a lot of eagerness in hiring the Shearer's workforce.

"We have a lot of companies in that area that are looking for people," he said, including Lamb Weston, Port of Morrow, Boardman Foods, Tillamook and Oregon Potato.

"There are some really large companies out there that are literally begging for employees," he said.

He said the misfortune of losing jobs could become opportunities for people to find something new and better.

Hermiston looks to the future

Morgan expressed confidence the displaced laborers would find new work at the upcoming fair.

"I know there's been significant interest from employers looking to hire some of these folks coming out of the Shearer's facility," Morgan said.

The assistant city manager also articulated his belief the community will recover.

"We're strongly committed to making sure that we can see some reinvestment here in the community and that type of operation here as quickly as possible," he said.

He also plugged Hermiston as an excellent place for business.

"I think it's proven that our region has some of the best workforce," he said, "as well as assets in the form of water and utilities needed for processing operations."

Smith

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made an offer to purchase the Malheur Enterprise. Other than being publicly 'mocked' by the seller, no reply to our offer has been received. Moreover, Gregory Smith and Company has not publicly stated its reason for purchasing the paper. It is unfortunate, some speculate to the negative."

Smith's history with the Enterprise

A two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee with The Oregonian, Zaitz, along with his family, bought the Malheur Enterprise in 2015.

Zaitz eventually took over the paper's editorial operations and worked toward growing the weekly's presence. Zaitz expanded the newsroom and started collaborations with national news organizations as the Enterprise collected new accolades and awards.

Today, Zaitz said the Enterprise is profitable and growing. As he neared his 50th year in the journalism business, Zaitz said he decided to sell the paper because he felt it was the right time to hand over the Enterprise to a new generation.

"We're not going to sell to anyone that shows up with a check or a suitcase full of \$20 bills," he said. "The Malheur Enterprise is an essential source of local news and is a role model for local journalism. So it's import goes



Hermiston Herald, File

Les Zaitz works in 2018 at his newspaper, the Malheur Enterprise in Vale. He put the paper up for sale in early 2022, and Rep. Greg. Smith, R-Hepppner, a frequent subject of the Enterprise's investigative work, sent Zaitz an email offering to buy the paper. Zaitz, however, is not selling to Smith.

beyond just reporting on Malheur County. Its import is also helping show newsrooms large and small how to do effective local journalism that generates business success."

When Smith made an offer to buy the Enterprise, Zaitz said he took it seriously.

Elected in 2000, Smith is the longest-serving legislator in the Oregon House of Representatives. Although his district's lines have shifted significantly over the years, Smith always has rep-

resented a chunk of Northeastern Oregon from his home in Heppner.

But being a legislator is only a part-time position. His full-time work involves him serving a number of economic development positions throughout Oregon, both within and outside his legislative district. Some of his titles include being the project manager for the Columbia Development Authority in Boardman, the director of the Eastern Oregon University Small Business Development Center

in La Grande and the economic development director in Malheur County.

His status as an influen-

tial lawmaker who also is in charge of raising money for local projects and institutions around the state has earned him scrutiny in the media. The Willamette Week referred to Smith as the "best compensated lawmaker in Salem" while also noting his actions were "perfectly legal."

The Enterprise also has done reporting on the connections between Smith's personal business and his work in the Legislature, in addition to focusing on his work in Malheur County, publishing stories on his contracts with the county and his handling of local economic development projects.

Zaitz declined to provide further details on the editorial that prompted the exchange with Smith before it was published, but later summarized the Enterprise's various dealings with Smith over the years.

"He complained that our reporting on him represented criminal conduct," he said.

"The sheriff looked into that and essentially laughed him out of Malheur County on that allegation. He has publicly ridiculed the Enterprise

and has made representations that raise questions about whether the Enterprise is paying its taxes. This is a man who has a pattern of taking aggressive actions against the newspaper that is doing no more than reporting on matters of public importance."

After Smith made his offer, Zaitz followed through on his promise and shared excerpts from the exchange on the Enterprise's Facebook page and asked readers what they thought. As of the evening of Thursday, March 10, nearly 70 people have commented on the post. Almost all the comments either opposed Smith buying the paper, expressed support for the Enterprise's current ownership or both. Many questioned Smith's motivations.

Even if Smith doesn't get involved in the Vale media business, he'll continue to be a prominent figure in Eastern Oregon for the foreseeable future. No one filed to contest Smith in either the Republican primary or the general election, all but assuring him a 12th term in Salem.

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