

Hermiston starting to feel the effects of rising gas prices

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

As gas prices rise, some Eastern Oregon government officials are starting to take notice.

In Hermiston, regular unleaded is creeping up around the mid-\$4 per gallon for regular unleaded. Diesel is around a dollar more per gallon.

The AAA Gas Prices website, gasprices.aaa.com, listed the average price of gas in Umatilla County as between approximately \$4.39 to \$4.58 per gallon, lower than most of the state.

The average price for regular unleaded in Oregon on Friday, March 25, according to the website, was approximately \$4.72 per gallon. The same website listed the per gallon price for the same gas as approximately \$4.01 a month ago and \$3.16 a year ago.

“From a straight city operations perspective, we’re certainly taking those things into account in our budgeting for the upcoming year for fuel costs of operating vehicles,



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

Ezekiel Murguia drives a truck as he works on a project at the Hermiston Municipal Airport. Laborers were milling and grinding the old asphalt at the airport on a \$2 million project Thursday, March 24, 2022. This project “will certainly see some cost escalations” because of rising fuel prices, according to Mark Morgan, assistant city manager.

but where we’re really feeling it the most is in some of our capital construction projects,” Mark Morgan, Hermiston’s assistant city manager, said.

He explained that the city was recently notified of a diesel fuel surcharge for asphalt for the foreseeable future.

Projects like paving, he said,

are very oil-intensive and are “certainly seeing more inflation than others.”

“One of the ways that we manage that is that if we start to feel pressure on a price is that we will break a project down into component parts, and try to identify what are the most critical parts, then when we bid the project, we will list some of the smaller parts as alternatives,” he said. “That way, we have the ability to complete the core project on budget by just jettisoning some of those extra components that might be able to be pushed off for something in the future.”

He added that, when taking this approach, “you also always have to be cognizant of whether that part that you’re pushing off to the future may actually come down in price in the future, or you may be shooting yourself in the foot by making it more complicated and more expensive in the future.”

Gas prices, then, are a growing consideration for the city. According to Jason Edmiston, Hermiston

chief of police, his department, too, is affected, though he added that officers “have not changed our practices or services per se.”

“I have encouraged our officers to be more cognizant about vehicles left running for extended periods,” he said.

“We take great pride — as the larger expense to the City General Fund — to ensure we are under budget each year,” the chief stated. “As of today, we are 6.4% over budget in fuel which equates to roughly one month of usage. This year will be the first in a long time where I will be requesting a supplemental increase to offset that deficit.”

Hermiston police are not the only ones thinking about pump prices, as Umatilla’s police chief is paying attention, too.

“All I have done with my staff is to make them aware of the rising costs and asked them to minimize usage when they can but right now our operations have not been affected,” Darla Huxel, Umatilla Police chief, said.

Merkley speaks to Umatilla County at virtual town hall

Health care and Russia were among the discussion topics on March 22

By ANTONIO SIERRA
Hermiston Herald

COVID-19 may be transitioning to an endemic phase, but health care still was on the top of many Umatilla County residents’ minds at a Tuesday, March 22, virtual town hall hosted by U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley.

“I am sick and tired of COVID. I’m hoping we’re at the end of the tunnel,” he said. “We thought this a year ago and it turned out omicron was waiting for us.”

Good Shepherd Health Care System CEO Brian Sims said he was concerned rural hospitals wouldn’t have the infrastructure to handle the next health crisis should it occur. Merkley said he

was pushing legislation that would direct money toward preparation for further mutations of the virus.

“I feel like it’s carrying an umbrella,” he said. “(When you) carry an umbrella, it won’t rain. I’m hoping if we prepare right, we won’t get a dangerous new mutation.”

In addition to housing and affordable child care, Cathy Putnam, a board member for Agape House, said there were plenty of county residents in need of mental health services but not many places to provide them.

Besides hiring more school counselors, Merkley said he would like to see a public education campaign about the negative effects of electronics, which he said were preventing youth from developing



Merkley

social skills.

Greg Goad of Pendleton told Merkley that Pendleton was suffering from the effects of pharmacy consolidation. With Bi-Mart closing its pharmacy last year, Pendleton has only three pharmacies, and Goad said wait times for prescriptions had increased significantly since then.

“What about next year if they do it again?” he said. “If we get down to one supplier, I’m afraid that costs are going to go through the roof.”

Merkley said he needed to study the issue more closely to determine why pharmacies were closing, but he added the economy was becoming too centralized among large corporations.

Briana Spencer, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, asked Merkley what he would do to advance treaty rights

and ensure the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs had long-term access to water. The Central Oregon tribes recently issued an emergency conservation order after a fire shut down its water treatment plant.

With prices remaining high after a recent surge, Umatilla Mayor Mary Dedrick asked what Merkley is doing to lower gas prices.

In the short term, Merkley said there’s not too much that can be done. While the U.S. is releasing oil from its strategic reserve, it’s unlikely to make a dent in prices at the pump since the market for oil is set globally. Long term, the surge in gas prices should provide the country with an impetus to transition away from fossil fuels, a move that could potentially hurt Russian president Vladimir Putin.

“If the world gets off of fossil fuels, they won’t be able to make nearly so much money,” he said.

“Russia would never have undertaken this invasion of Ukraine if they hadn’t built up a massive foreign reserve based on selling petroleum.”

Merkley spent a good portion of the town hall criticizing Putin for the invasion of Ukraine and he also fielded a question from Spencer about Brittney Griner, the WNBA player who was detained by Russian authorities while playing in the country and has yet to be released.

Spencer wanted to know how Americans should balance drawing attention to the situation with trying to ensure her safety while she remains detained.

Merkley said drawing attention to Griner’s detainment could further damage Putin’s reputation, but noted the kind of man the U.S. was dealing with.

“I doubt he’s inclined to be very helpful,” he said.

Hermiston principal a finalist for Pendleton superintendent

Hermiston Herald

Kevin Headings, the principal of West Park Elementary School in Hermiston, is a finalist for the top job in the Pendleton School District.

Four months into its superintendent search, the district is down to two candidates.

On Thursday, March 31, the district will host finalists Headings and Kim Casey to introduce themselves to the community. Each finalist will get 45 minutes to talk about themselves and field questions from the public 3:30-5:15 p.m. at the district office, 107 N.W. 10th St.

Headings got his bachelor’s degree from Bethel College in Kansas, where he also started his teaching career as a middle school teacher. He soon transitioned his education career to Oregon, working as a teacher in the Lebanon School District and for Western Menonite High School in Salem.

Headings started his career in public school administration as a K-6 principal in Stanfield in 2005. Headings ascended to the superintendent position in 2009 and led Stanfield for several years before moving to West Park in 2013, where he’s remained ever since. He holds a master’s degree in educational leadership from the University of Oregon.

Casey is the principal of Grandview High School in Grandview, Washington.

Casey is based out of Grandview, a town of nearly 11,000 people situated halfway between Kennewick and Yakima. She got her start as a high school business education teacher, but also taught at the post-secondary level through stints as an adult education teacher at Yakima Valley College and as an adjunct professor at Eastern Washington University.

Casey transitioned to administration in 2013 when she became prin-



Headings

Casey

working on her superintendent credential from Washington State University.

The Pendleton School Board will deliberate about the candidates following the final round of interviews and could make a decision on April 1 at the earliest. The board expects to formally hire a new superintendent at its April 11 board meeting.

Both Headings and Casey are vying to replace Superintendent Chris Fritsch, who announced his impending retirement in November. The new superintendent is expected to start their position on July 1.

Road rage killer gets 25 years in prison

By PHIL WRIGHT
Hermiston Herald

The Washington man who murdered a driver near Hermiston in June 2020 is going to prison for at least 25 years.

Jaime Farfan, 26, of Mesa, Washington, on Feb. 23 pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in the shooting death of Tracey Scott Medows, 29, of Hood River. Circuit Judge Dan Hill on March 23, in Umatilla County Circuit Court, Hermiston, sentenced Farfan to 25 years in prison before he will be eligible for parole.

Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus

said Farfan killed Medows out of road rage.

Medows on June 20, 2022, was driving on Interstate 84 when he called 911 to report the driver in front of him was brake-checking and driving erratic, Primus said. Medows tried to get away and pulled off at I-82 and Lamb Road.

Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan said Medows provided dispatchers descriptions of the vehicle and suspect and also used his cellphone to video Farfan.

Officers found Medows’ body after 8:30 that night following a

report of a man needing medical attention. He died from being shot.

The sheriff’s office advised local law enforcement about the scenario, and police in Washington arrested Farfan within hours. Tri-Cities news outlets reported Farfan was involved in a road rage incident June 7 in the Richland area.

Primus explained Farfan’s guilty plea came out of a settlement conference, and the sentence is as harsh as Oregon law allows.

“That’s the max sentence for murder in the second-degree,” he said.

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