



Irrigon creating one-person police department

By PHIL WRIGHT AND ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Irrigon is not renewing its contract with the Morrow County Sheriff's Office for law enforcement services.

The city council at its meeting March 15 voted instead for the city to establish a one-person police department.

City Manager Aaron Palmquist in a memo to the council explained this has been a topic of discussion in the town.

"As Irrigon grows and may

desire to take charge of their destiny, should they continue down the road of contracting or begin the step in moving in the direction of having their own law enforcement," according to the memo.

He said Mayor Margaret Anderson wanted the council to address the issue because "we are at a good time for all parties to make any adjustments if needed and desired."

The Irrigon City Council voted unanimously not to renew.

The small town on the Columbia River has been paying the

Morrow County Sheriff's Office more than \$95,000 a year to contract services, plus the purchase of a vehicle for the sheriff's office every three years, which the sheriff's office returned to the city after three years.

Irrigon now is searching for a new chief, who will be the only officer in the department. The city also will purchase a new car and renovate an office in city hall for the new department.

Under the plan, there will not be 24/7 police coverage for the town of more than 1,800 people, but per

Oregon law, the county still will have to provide some services. Code enforcement and complaints, however, would be solely the city's responsibility.

"This may be an opportunity for Irrigon as we continue to grow and become more resilient," Palmquist told the council in the memo.

Additionally, he continued, the Irrigon Municipal Court "has been a good addition and is working through to strengthen Irrigon's presence and strength in the region."

In a phone call with EO Media

on, Palmquist explained that the sheriff would not be responsible for daily patrols, unless that office decided otherwise.

Code enforcement by the sheriff for Irrigon, "was minimal anyway," Palmquist said, and he expressed confidence it could be done by a new Irrigon officer.

In addition, he said he was dismayed by the price of this change.

"The cost for service is comparable," Palmquist said. He stated that a new police department for

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Umatilla River Trails Project moves forward

By JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

The Umatilla River Trails Project is a system of paths connecting Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield and Echo to increase recreational opportunities and community livability. The project is on the way to becoming a reality.

"We've been working on the project for seven years," said former Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfering, chair of the trails committee. "Now we have the first segment pretty well settled from the Columbia River to Hermiston. It's about 7 miles, with views of the river most of the way. The stretch from Hermiston to Stanfield to Echo is still in the works."

Public input was received through a survey and a meeting in October 2019. The plan then was to select one of five routes in 2020.

"COVID put us behind schedule," Elfering said. "And the flood. But we've narrowed it down to three routes."

He explained the trail, as much as possible, uses public rights of way, such as county roads and irrigation ditch embankments.

"We want as little impact on private property as possible," Elfering said. "We won't condemn any at all. Some private landowners are welcoming. Others not so much."

And the project needs grant searchers and writers to help with funding, and Elfering said there is money available for bicycle paths. But applications must wait for the engineering report by Anderson Perry. He also said the Umatilla County Planning Department has been involved from the beginning.

"They got us a \$250,000 grant, which helped with matching funds," Elfering said.

"Umatilla and Hermiston have a lot of existing infrastructure which we can connect," Umatilla County Planning Director Robert Waldher said. "Hermiston's parks will be incorporated into the trails, as the terminus of Phase I of the project."

Stanfield and Echo are growing rapidly and developing infrastructure that can also be part of the project.

"Echo had over 400 people at its Red to Red cross-country mountain bike event," Waldher said. "That has a big economic impact."

Longer term, Waldher said, the stretch from Hermiston to Stanfield will be more of a challenge.

"It's subject to constraints, with industrial areas, the railroad and Highway 395," he explained. "But momentum is building. We have gotten technical assistance from the National Park Service and other federal agencies."

The 2020 floods washed out the pedestrian bridge over the Umatilla River, but that is in the process of rebuilding. Still, Waldher said, the project is looking at sites for another footbridge over the Umatilla River.

"The river isn't accessible on public land all along its length, so we need to cross over it," he said.

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Seeking the cause

Investigation set to conclude at end of the week

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Forty people are trying to figure out why a boiler exploded at Hermiston Shearer's Foods plant on Feb. 22, causing a fire that destroyed the building and put 231 people out of work.

Scott Goff, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 investigator, said on Tuesday, April 5, the examination of the site has been delayed. First, there was trouble because the rubble was so great it was difficult to sort through it. Also, it took time to bring together involved parties. In the past couple of days, big winds pushed back the investigation, which was the latest delay.

The examination of the destroyed Hermiston plant, which once employed 231 people, has brought people from the fire district, Shearer's, insurance carriers and representatives of involved equipment and contractors, according to Goff.

Speculation on the cause

Though the direct cause of the explosion is yet unknown, one former Shearer's Foods employee claims lax safety measures might have contributed to the explosion.

"I saw a lot of things," Stephen Dean said. "I spoke with several peers that I had that no longer work there about how many conversations I had about that place being a time bomb."

According to Dean, when he heard of the explosion and the resulting fire, the first words that came out of his mouth were, "I told you so."

He said he was surprised the fire, which destroyed the building, sent a handful of people to the hospital and left 231 people out of work, was not worse. After all, no one died.

He said he was plant safety manager, working directly with the management team. He said he "provided safety culture and influence and direct safety policy and procedure" for about one year, from early 2018 to early 2019.

The Hermiston Herald contacted the Shearer's corporate office to verify Dean's employment. Shearer's management, though, stated the company would not share employment information out of respect for employees and their confidentiality.

Dean, however, was able to present a letter of hire and his own resignation letter as evidence he had worked there.



Equipment was in place to remove sections of debris from the destroyed Shearer's Foods plant in Hermiston on Monday, April 4, 2022.



Big winds beat down on the Hermiston Shearer's site on Monday, April 4, 2022. Investigators had to pause their examination as a result.

Early in his employment, he said, he did some in-depth looks into the facility to identify risks and hazards and found some he deemed as "high risk" and "high consequence." He was particularly worried about oil fires, he said.

While he was at the plant, Dean said, there were "a bunch of mini-fires," which were the result of material building up in ovens. In policies and procedures, he

said, workers were supposed to rake out the ovens when in a safe state. According to Dean, procedures changed so workers were using compressed air to clean the ovens instead.

"You don't put compressed air onto fires," he said.

He said this is just one example of the

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Stanfield city manager finalist for Warrenton job

By ETHAN MYERS
EO Media Group

Stanfield City Manager Ben Burgener is a finalist for the job of Warrenton city manager.

The city of Warrenton last week announced Burgener made the cut. He is set to be interviewed and evaluated by city staff, city commissioners and residents in the coming weeks.

Prior to being city manager in Stanfield, Burgener was the city administrator in Ada, Minnesota, and the finance manager and admin-

istrative services manager for the Utah Department of Transportation.

Warrenton's next city manager will take over for Linda Engbretson, who announced her retirement last year but agreed to work on an interim basis until her replacement is hired.

Engbretson has spent over 25 years with the city, including time as the city recorder. She took the city manager job on an interim basis in 2016 after Kurt Fritsch resigned, but was offered the position perma-



Burgener

nently later that year. Jensen Strategies, a Portland consulting firm that specializes in local government administration, was hired to search for and vet applicants.

The consultant received applications from nine people, said Erik Jensen, the founder of Jensen Strategies.

"This is a candidate's market," Jensen said. "There are a lot of positions open and it has made it very competitive for employers."

The pool was narrowed down to two, but the other candidate withdrew, Jensen said.

The consultant lists compensation for the position at \$110,000 to \$140,000 a year. Jensen Strategies also is helping Seaside in a city manager search to replace Mark Winstanley, who is retiring.

While there is no certainty on the timeline in Warrenton, Mayor Henry Balensifer said he hopes to have the next city manager hired before June.

A community panel is being formed to assist with the evaluation.