

SHEARER'S

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culture at the plant. Practices were unsafe, not necessarily because any one person was directing them poorly, but because those practices shifted towards being unsafe, he said. Dean said once people start doing things one way, they pass on those habits to new workers and behaviors become ingrained.

OSHA weighs in

Aaron Corvin is the public information officer for Oregon Occupational Safety and Health, or Oregon OSHA. He confirmed that the agency is investigating the Feb. 22 explosion and fire. He stated in an email, however, OSHA does not discuss the status or details of active cases and he would share information about it once the investigation is complete.

"In the past five years, Oregon OSHA has conducted four inspections of this site, two of which resulted in citations. One of the citations followed an accident investigation," Corvin said.

In one of the cases, he said, the employer initially filed an appeal of the citation but then later withdrew the appeal.

Missing safety meetings were among the causes for citation.

Complaints of safety problems

Dean said he brought up major safety hazards to the directors of the company while working at Shearer's.

"I couldn't get anywhere with management," he said. "They were spending millions on production and inno-



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

Much of the Shearer's debris on Monday, April 4, 2022, looks much like it did in the days after the fire.

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— Stephen Dean, former Shearer's employee

vation, but they were spending nothing on the safety department. Whereas they had an astronomical production budget, we had roughly just enough to pay for personal protection equipment."

Dean described his employment as "working from nothing" and "building a grassroots program when there was nothing to work with." He said he quit out of frustration. An "agent of change in the industry," he said he has long worked to fix

safety issues at different companies. After working with Shearer's, he felt he could not improve safety, as he could not encourage management to prioritize safety.

"It was a direct problem of management, in my opinion," Dean said, "in how they viewed and prioritized and felt toward the safety of the employees at the plant."

He said he repeatedly brought up safety concerns to senior management, but to no avail. Not only did managers

fail to make changes, they dismissed his recommendations entirely.

"Their direct, verbatim, response to me when I raised these safety concerns was to 'calm my tits; they've been doing this for 40 years.' That's the phrase they used," he said.

Meanwhile, Dean said, the company was neglecting environmental regulations, too.

The one thing he said he was able to do was to create an active evacuation plan, something the company lacked prior to his employment. He said he also organized evacuation drills.

"It was difficult to do, because it affected production," he said.

He added there were additional concerns, especially when it came to the treatment of workers.

"They'd work people till



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

A Shearer's Foods sign still stands on Monday, April 4, 2022. The company has not committed to rebuilding after a fire destroyed its Hermiston plant.



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

A toppled section of the Shearer's plant stands Monday, April 4, 2022.

they couldn't work anymore," he said. This was a safety concern, he said, because exhausted workers would intentionally break lock-out-tagout safety rules. Having broken these rules, management would punish them with three-day suspensions.

"It was motivation for them to take their breaks," Dean stated.

He said his co-workers would regularly point out their own infractions, just to

be sent home for rest or to attend a funeral or some other necessary event.

Answers forthcoming

Goff, while working on the site for the fire district, said investigators should be able to remove the roof from an area they wish to study soon, barring weather delays. Then, they should be able to have answers for the explosion by late this week, he said.

IRRIGON

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Irrigon would cost around the same price as the expiring contract with the sheriff, except for startup costs.

Startup costs include renovations to an office in the Irrigon City Hall for the new police chief. These renovations, he said, will make the office more secure. There are no plans for further construction, and there would be no jail, Palmquist said.

He said he is currently seeking quotes for renovations. He does not know how much this will cost, yet.

So plans are underway for the chief's new office, but it might take some time to fill the position, Palmquist said.

"We're still gathering stuff to put together policies and procedures," he said. Once that information is ready, the city will begin advertising. Once candidates are identified, there will be interviews and background checks. The process of hiring a police chief is likely to involve the city council, he said.

"I'll want some input

from the council," he said.

According to the city manager, this will not be the first police department for Irrigon.

"We have in the past, about 12 to 15 years ago," he said.

The city has missed accountability, responsibility and control since contracting with the sheriff's office, he said.

"Somebody who is local is more vested here," he said. He added that some Irrigon residents, including some members of the city council, have complained about the lack of response from the sheriff to people's needs.

Given the large size of the county, Palmquist said, residents could not be sure they were getting a fair share of the sheriff's attention.

Palmquist expressed cautious optimism about the success of this new department.

"We've been here before, and we're going to see," he said. "Do I count this as a bad thing? Not necessarily."

He said that he was going to "give it my 200%, and we're going to go forward."



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

A stretch of the Umatilla River Trail will follow the river linking Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield and Echo.

TRAILS

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The project also is moving from concept to implementation.

"We're refining the details and studying engineering," Waldher said. "Our implementation committee consists of two members from each of the four communities, plus two members from the county. We drove alternative routes (recently). The whole route from Umatilla to Echo will be around 25 miles long, depending on the alternatives selected."

The trails can benefit health, recreation and tourism, he said, but there are environmental and cultural

surveys to conduct, and the trails have to meet federal accessibility requirements.

While Waldher is involved, he said the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners does not want tax revenue going to the trails project, so the committee is seeking state and federal funding.

"Bringing it to fruition will be a lengthy process, but community support is there," he said.

"I probably won't live to see it happen, but I'd like eventually to extend the trail all the way to Pendleton," Elfering said. "It's county road most of the way."

You can read the Umatilla River Trail Concept Plan here.

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