

Senator drops into Hermiston, Pendleton

Wyden visits Umatilla County, discusses Latino issues, veteran affairs, drone testing

BY ANTONIO ARREDONDO
Hermiston Herald

Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden on Thursday, July 7, swung through Umatilla County, as he visited the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee and learned more about the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range.

It was a busy day for Wyden in Eastern Oregon. His day began at 8:30 a.m. with a meeting with the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Council at the Hermiston Public Library.

“There’s a lot of hate in the world towards immigrants right now,” City Councilor Maria Duron told Wyden. “About how we’re here to take other people’s jobs. I would like for that to turn around.”

Wyden used the meeting as one to build ideas, aiming to work with the committee to solve problems. He suggested designating Duron as someone who could find immigrant success stories to tell.

Other issues also arose.

Some Hermiston Latino residents may not understand how to file taxes and delegate that task to their children.

“The children end up educating their parents and play a third parent role,” City Councilor Roy Barron said. “We want the next generation to be successful and balance those roles.”

Mark Gomolski, vice-chair of the committee as well as the executive director for Agape House food bank, raised concerns about food access. While



Antonio Arredondo/Hermiston Herald

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, center, addresses the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee before a discussion Thursday, July 7, 2020, at the Hermiston Public Library in Hermiston.

Agape House receives food from several vendors, it gets very little Hispanic food. Gomolski often has to travel to fields to distribute what little rice and beans he has.

Wyden agreed with most of the points made and challenged the group to take the next step.

“We need to start talking about what the legislative steps are,” Wyden said. “I don’t think we can recreate a big bill right now, I don’t think we can, but we ought to get started.”

After an hour, Wyden closed the meeting with the committee by offering his support. As a child of immigrant parents who escaped the Nazis from Germany, he related to many of the issues that the Hermiston Latino community is still

dealing with today, including Duron’s point made at the beginning of the discussion.

“A lot of people are angry about immigration, but they forget where they come from,” Wyden said. “Unless you are Native American, you are part of the immigrant experience like the Wyden family.”

SENATOR MAKES MORE STOPS

Wyden held a press conference in the morning at the Oregon National Guard Aviation Facility at the airport in Pendleton to discuss the VA’s Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission’s proposals to reclassify the Walla Walla veterans facility as a community-based outpatient clinic and move its 31-bed residential rehabilitation treatment

program 180 miles north of Walla Walla to Spokane. That proposal would have caused Eastern Oregon veterans to have to drive 180 miles to Spokane for other care.

“I’m also a veteran,” Pendleton Mayor John Turner said, “and I use the VA in Walla Walla all the time, and I know that there are hundreds of veterans in Oregon who do the same.”

Wyden recently held town halls for Eastern Oregon veterans, their families and veterans service providers to ask top VA officials about the proposals to change the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla. In the end, a bipartisan Senate committee, including Wyden, blocked the commission, secur-



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden speaks Thursday, July 7, 2022, at the Oregon National Guard Aviation Facility in Pendleton.

ing the Walla Walla center for years to come.

Ken McCormack, chair for the Veterans Advisory Council in La Grande, covered some of the staffing issues the VA has faced, a problem Wyden said he would look into.

“I want to pledge today that I will keep watchdogging this issue on behalf of rural veterans,” Wyden said, “because I know that there are a lot of questions.”

PENDLETON UAS RANGE

Wyden headed to the nearby Eastern Oregon Regional Airport for a meeting to discuss drone testing and its economic impact on the airport.

Wyden remarked he was shocked when driving in, noting the newly-built Radisson Hotel. It’s certainly a far cry from what the airport used to be, a sentiment Steve Chrisman, Pendleton economic development director and interim airport manager, agreed with.

“The airport was dying, there was no hope in generating oper-

ations,” Chrisman said.

Chrisman estimates Pendleton’s UAS range is one of the best in the nation, and the burgeoning work at the range is driving the construction of the Radisson and more.

The drone tech is something that interests Wyden.

“I am a privacy hawk,” he said, “I think we’ve seen the needs for some of that recently, but part of privacy policy is not freezing technology out, but about how we use technology.”

The technology not only has increased airport revenue, it also increased interest. Sitting next to the senator and local officials were four interns — recent Pendleton High graduates interested in the program.

With all that interest comes some complication.

“It’s all about the red tape,” UAS pilot and instructor Michael Avery said. “If it wasn’t for the (certificates of waiver or authorization) with the UAS, we wouldn’t be able to get off the ground.”

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