



Cheryl Schweizer/Columbia Basin Herald

New Royal City Police Chief Rey Rodriguez served as the interim chief since November 2019.

Othello to keep schools on blended schedule

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER
Staff Writer

OTHELLO — Othello schools may remain in a hybrid model through the end of the school year, with the goal of returning to complete in-person instruction at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year.

Assistant superintendent of teaching and learning Pete Perez said district officials will review conditions every two to three weeks. If conditions warrant, school officials may increase the number of students getting in-person instruction.

District officials will report current conditions and recommendations at the remaining Othello School Board meetings through the end of the school year in June, Perez said.

Othello students returned to school for in-person instruction half-time in January, called the blended model. The state ordered schools closed in March 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak, and stayed closed through the end of the 2019-20 school year.

Othello schools originally were scheduled to reopen in the blended model in August, but a surge in coronavirus cases pushed that back. Kindergartners through third-graders started in-person learning briefly in November, then went back to all-online instruction until January.

Perez presented the results so far to school board members at the March 8 board meeting.

"We've really been living in the blended model for several weeks now. We are not seeing outbreaks of illness in our schools," Perez said.

The prospects for increased in-person instruction for the rest of the 2020-21 school year depend, in part, on the grade level. Perez said the schedules at Othello High School and McFarland Middle School were written to meet conditions in the middle of the pandemic.

"You cannot undo that work, particularly at the secondary level," Perez said.

The rules for kindergarten through sixth grade might allow district officials to expand in-person instruction, but there would have to be changes in social distancing rules, he said.

"If we get some flexibility

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In the right place

Royal City's new police chief has found his niche

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER
Staff Writer

"One thing I've never doubted about the community, is that they've always supported us."

— Rey Rodriguez
Royal City Police Chief

ROYAL CITY — Royal City Police Chief Rey Rodriguez said he decided early on Royal City was the place for him.

"I've been here since 2009. A little bit into my career, I decided to stick it out in Royal City," he said.

"The school district, the community, definitely grew on me," he said.

Rodriguez was hired as the RCPD chief earlier this month. He replaces Darin Smith, who retired in January.

Rodriguez had been acting as interim chief since November 2019, when Smith went on medical leave.

Rodriguez said he didn't intend to spend his whole career in Royal City when he joined the force, but he decided the town was the place he wanted to be.

"I absolutely love the community. Everyone knows everybody," he said. And its residents support each other. "Everyone says, 'Hi.' They know my kids, I know their kids. So it's a tight-knit community, and that's what grew on me. As well as the school district," he said.

Rodriguez and his wife, Myra, have four children.

He credited his brothers Juan and Rick with getting him interested in law enforcement.

"I'm the youngest of six kids and the youngest of three brothers. My oldest brother got into law enforcement, and my middle brother looked up to him and got into law enforcement. I looked up to both my brothers and got into law

enforcement," Rodriguez said.

Both his brothers work for the Moses Lake Police Department. When he was in high school he would ride along with them, and got a close look at the job.

"I definitely knew this was what I wanted to do," he said.

He started as a reserve deputy with the Grant County Sheriff's Office. He was hired as a provisional, or full-time temporary officer, in Royal City before being hired for the permanent position.

"What got me into it was helping the community," he said. "When we go to a call, it's usually people at their lowest points or not in a normal situation ... and helping them through that," he said.

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Othello School District looking for bus drivers

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER
Staff Writer

OTHELLO — Driving a school bus is pretty fun, says Holly Gross, assistant transportation director for the Othello School District.

Gross sometimes works as a substitute driver, and the children on the routes can be skeptical of the sub.

"Do you know where you're going?" she said kids

have asked her.

District officials are looking to hire more bus drivers — substitutes as well as those who drive daily. Marian Shade, the district's director of transportation, said finding enough bus drivers is a challenge.

"The problem is a continuing problem, and it has been for years. Just a driver shortage," Shade said.

District officials are look-

ing for up to 10 bus drivers. Shade said she needs three people by the end of the 2020-21 school year.

Gross said even though bus driving is five days per week, it's not an eight-hour job, and drivers work a split shift. That may discourage some potential drivers, she said.

Many people who become school bus drivers tend to stick with it, Shade said. She

cited the retired police officer who had other part-time jobs before he started driving a school bus. He told Shade he would've become a bus driver much earlier had he known how much he would enjoy it, she said.

Shade was attracted to the job because it gave her the chance to be home when her kids were home, she said.

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Othello Police Department swears in a new officer

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER
Staff Writer

OTHELLO — Tyson Cox, 37, is the newest officer in the Othello Police Department, as he was sworn in March 8 by Othello Mayor Shawn Logan.

Law enforcement is a family profession. Cox's brother Ryan is the Soap Lake chief of police, and his father, Claude, was a police officer. In fact, his father was his first police chief, Tyson Cox said.

The Medical Lake native has been in law enforcement six years, he said. His first job was with the Sauk-Suiattle Tribal Police, he said, and he attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs Police Academy. After about 18 months with the tribal agency, he worked for about four and a half years in Mabton.

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New Othello Police officer Tyson Cox (left) has his badge pinned on by his dad Claude during an Othello City Council meeting last week.

Cheryl Schweizer/Columbia Basin Herald

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And there's actually a really good incentive to be a bus driver.

"The incentive would be getting to work with kids," Shade said.

Over time, the bus drivers get to know the kids on their routes, and the kids come to trust the bus drivers. Shade, who's been driving since 1991, said she saw many of the kids on her route grow up from their first days of kindergarten to high school graduation.

"They're like your own kids," she said.

Bus driving requires two characteristics, Shade said.

"You have to like kids. And you have to be patient," she said.

The bus drivers don't always know the children's daily experiences, at home or at school, she said.

"We want to be the bright part of their day," Shade said. "You might be the only smile they see that day."

Training is provided at low cost to prospective drivers. Drivers must pay for some procedures that are part of the background check, Shade said.

Some people hesitate because they think driving a bus will be difficult, she said.

"Most people are afraid of the bus, but it's just like driving a car. With 78 students behind you," Shade said.

The training covers how to maintain order as well as how to drive the bus.

Individuals who want



Othello School District employee Marilu Torres cleans a school bus.

Ed Petersen/courtesy photo



An Othello School District student rides the bus to school.

Ed Petersen/courtesy photo

more information on the job, or to apply, can go to the district's website,

www.othelloschools.org/careers, or can contact Shade through the dis-

trict office, 509-488-2659.

Gross is a Royal City native who drove a bus for the Royal School District for 18 years, she said. She's been working for OSD for about three and a half years.

And she is an Othello alumna.

"I rode our buses," she said.

She didn't plan to make a career out of driving the school bus, she said, intending to stay with it only a few years.

"Now I can't imagine being anywhere else," she said.

Cheryl Schweizer can be reached via email at cschweizer@columbiabasinherald.com.

Othello PD to expand detective division

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER Staff Writer

OTHELLO — The Othello Police Department will expand its detective division to address changes in patterns of crime.

Othello Police Chief Phil Schenck said crime, especially violent crime, is increasing nationally, and he anticipates — and is seeing — an increase in violent crime in Othello also.

The detective division will be expanded from one to two people, Schenck said, and a sergeant will be added. The new detective will be transferred from within the department, and a new patrol officer position is open,

and Schenck said he expects to hire someone to fill it as well.

The personnel changes prompted changes in the department's contracts with the unions representing officers and sergeants. Othello City Council members approved the changes at their March 8 meeting.

The contract will include another work option, allowing some officers to work the equivalent of a 10-hour day, four days per week. Schenck said the detectives usually aren't needed on weekends, but are needed for duties that happen during the week, such as court appearances.

The new contract also will add some flexibility for the department's school resource officer, he said.

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there (in social distancing rules) and the numbers continue to be low in Othello, I think we'll have to respond, specifically K-6, to see if we can bring more kids on campus," Perez said.

"Our recommendation as of (March 8), is that we would hold off until August of 2021, run a significant and robust summer school program to ramp up, and hope that the vaccines are widespread enough, the numbers are down enough, that we could come back to a better educational system in the fall of 2021," he said.

Board member Lindsay Prows said she had talked to about 40 to 50 people with children in school, and all but one of them preferred to stay with the current schedule through the end of the school year. She asked if district officials would be willing to expand in-person instruction at the elementary level this

school year, if conditions permit.

"When it's time, we should bring kids back. We closed pretty quickly, I think we should be prepared and ready to go back when we get the clearance and guidance that we can do it safely," Perez said.

Loryn Maples and Elise Garza, the student representatives to the board, said the OHS students they have talked to prefer to stay with the blended schedule through the end of the current school year. The switch from all-online to blended instruction caused a lot of stress, Garza said, and another switch would just add more stress.

High school students are at school half-days, with online instruction the remaining half. Maples said it gives kids more time for homework, school activities and jobs.

"I don't want another change," she said. "I think we found a good system, I think we found what works. I think we should just stay where we are."

CHIEF

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"Recently, what I love about it is, some people who when I started here back in 2009, weren't making very good choices. And to see them now, having a family, having a full-time job, and coming up to me and saying, 'Hey, thank you for doing this for me, even though I was a knucklehead back in the day, thank you for straightening me up, helping me through it,' and they're doing very well now. Being able to see that is a major pro in my career," Rodriguez said.

Police work is as much about — or more about — adjudicating disputes as solving crimes, he said.

"We have to listen, we have to know what's going on and be able to solve what's going on," he said. He estimated 80 to 90% of police contacts in Royal City are cases of adjudicating disputes.

Royal City has remained supportive of its police department, even as it's a challenging time for police officers everywhere.

"That is very satisfying, very humbling, knowing that we still have support from our community. That's one thing I've never doubted about the community, is that they've always supported us," he said.

Being the interim chief, and now the chief, was and is a whole different role, he said. Smith's medical leave meant he wasn't available to answer questions, but Rodriguez said officers from other agencies rallied to help him.

"I had very, very, very good



Royal City Police Chief Rey Rodriguez stands at his swearing-in ceremony on March 9.

Courtesy photo

support from local agencies around here," he said.

Chiefs and administrators from the Quincy Police Department, MLPD and GCSO all answered questions and showed him the procedures, he said.

"Those people definitely made it easier to transition to what I'm

doing," he said.

The department will add a new officer at the end of March. The city also is in negotiations with the Royal School District to hire a school resource officer.

Cheryl Schweizer can be reached via email at cschweizer@columbiabasinherald.com.

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The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) is a non-regulatory approach for complying with state requirements to protect critical areas on agricultural lands. It allows critical areas to be watershed-based, using a collaborative stewardship planning process that relies on incentive-based practices for protecting critical areas, promoting viable agriculture, and encouraging cooperation among diverse stakeholders.

Adams County has entered into partnership with Grant County Conservation District (GCCD) to help implement the VSP. The city has 7 years to demonstrate that current levels of stewardship are protecting critical areas. More information can be found on the Grant or Adams CD websites, as well as the Adams County website. Please contact John Roos at GCCD to get details about the program. Call 509-765-9618 or email: John-Roos@ConserveWA.Net.

In order to participate GCCD will need your Parcel numbers or map so they can determine if critical areas exist on or in proximity of your farm. Information remains confidential. To begin contact John Roos or submit an online form at: www.columbiabasinncds.org/vspsign-up.

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