

The East County Journal Circulation Group II

**NEWS DIVISION
303 Breaking News Story**

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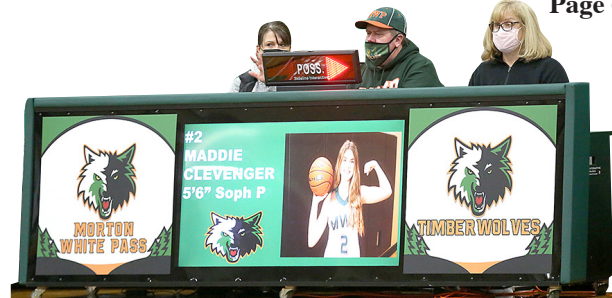
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Three survive avalanche scare in White Pass area

BY CATHY KANE
East County Journal

Little did Morton resident Jaime Fleming know a survival tip her 8-year-old son, Casey Jr., shared with her would come in handy when she found herself trapped in an avalanche while traveling from Yakima to Morton on Hwy. 12 with two co-workers last week.

“If you ever get stuck in an avalanche, spit or pee so you know which way to dig,” Casey had told his mom, explaining one of the main reasons people die in avalanches is because they become disoriented under the mound of snow and often, freeze to death while trying to find a way of escape.

Jaime Fleming recalled thanking her son, but assuring him with a smile that she would never have need for that particular tip.

On Wednesday, Jan. 5, Fleming and co-workers Jennifer Hedge and Danielle Collins made sure Hedge’s Toyota RAV4 was prepared for a winter emergency with water, food and blankets. Before

beginning the jaunt over White Pass from eastern to western Washington, they checked road conditions, which prohibited oversized vehicles, but did not require chains for standard size vehicles like their own all-wheel drive.

— “ —
It happened so fast. I looked up and literally saw the whole mountain falling on us.”

— Jaime Fleming
Morton resident on surviving an avalanche

Fleming took the front passenger seat while Hedge took the wheel and Collins settled in the back seat. For traveling, the trio wore boots, light jeans and sweaters, removing their coats for the trip. For Fleming, who had moved to Morton in 2015, this was only her second time to cross the pass.

With a minimum of traffic on the road, the three had spotted only two cars on their drive – none directly in front of them. All seemed well as they approached the tunnel just passed Rimrock Retreat.

“Coming out on the other side, we noticed snow in the road,” Fleming said, adding their vehicle got stuck in the ruts left by a vehicle that pre-

immediately ceded them.

See **Avalanche** Page 3



Jaime Fleming courtesy photo | East County Journal

On Sunday, Jan. 9, four days after the avalanche, highway crews uncovered their vehicle buried in the snow covering Highway 12.



Despite the ongoing pandemic, residents of East Lewis County maintained a busy second half of 2021 from fireworks displays in July to the annual Jubilee Days and the return of in-person learning and plenty of annual events sandwiched between.

Many business and community meetings were relegated to online gatherings, while public oriented affairs had organizers grappling with either hosting socially distanced gatherings or postponing for a year. Despite the many restrictions and closures, which were accentuated with the rise of the Omicron variant of the virus, life in East Lewis County had a semblance of a return to pre-pandemic days with libraries and senior centers reopening, and children returning to the classrooms in September.



Courtesy photo | East County Journal file photo

A 40-acre wildfire near Mineral in mid-July required firefighters from several local jurisdictions to contain it.

Part 2 of a three-part series recapping life in East Lewis County in 2021. Part 1 appeared in last week’s Journal.

July

- East Lewis County celebrated the 4th of July with a Freedom Festival in Mossyrock featuring a pancake breakfast, patriotic parade, activities, games, music and food at Klickitat Prairie Park; outdoor picnics and activities at Jubilee Park, Gust Backstrom Park and the Interpretive/Vistor Center in Morton; a swap meet in Randle and the Packwood Improvement Club annual chicken barbecue along with live music at the Packwood Community Park. Fireworks displays were sponsored by Mossyrock, Randle and Packwood fire departments.
- The Lewis County Board of County Commissioners approved a proclamation upholding citizens’ Second Amendment rights to bear arms.
- The Veteran Connection Café reopened at Mountain View Timberland Library in Randle. Since opening in

- November 2019, the Veterans Administration has confirmed an additional \$96,000 tax-free dollars a year in benefits have been distributed to East Lewis County veterans, according to Timberland Library manager Mary Proffit.
- The Mineral wildfire on 40 acres outside the town was 75 percent contained on July 13 with the assistance of fire departments in Mineral, Morton, Glenoma and Eatonville.
- “Mary Poppins Jr.” brought down the house at the Roxy Theater in Morton. The Onstage Youth Theatre Education production, under the direction of Jessica Scogin, packed the theater for all performances.
- With 2,500 handwritten museum gifts and accessions to catalog digitally, new Cowlitz River Valley Historic Society members brought much needed help.
- Sean Schwalbe opened the

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Recent heavy snows are reminder of potential avalanche dangers

BY BUDDY ROSE
East County Journal

Recent snow and rainstorms caused serious flooding in parts of Lewis County and restricted travel over White Pass as well as many other roads in our area this past week. Mixed in with those issues were several days of very high avalanche danger in the Cascade and Olympic mountains. Luckily, no fatal accidents involving avalanches occurred during this period.

Avalanches are one of the primary causes of death to winter recreationists. Every year, there are many injuries and a few deaths to skiers and snowboarders as a result of falls or collisions between individuals or with trees or other objects. Hypothermia also results in a few fatalities each year to those recreating outdoors. However, avalanches typically result in as many or more deaths than all of those other

causes combined.

So far this winter, there has been one avalanche death in Washington. A skier at Crystal Mountain perished in early December when he and a group of five others were all caught in a large avalanche in the backcountry area outside of the ski area. There was a close call at Alpentel on Jan. 2 when two backcountry skiers in a group of five were caught in an avalanche. One was buried with only his hand showing and was luckily excavated within a few minutes. Elsewhere in the U.S., there have been another seven avalanche fatalities this winter; three in Colorado, two in Montana and two in Idaho. Of those, two were skiers, three were snowmobilers and two were hiker/snowshoers.

Last winter, there were 32 avalanche fatalities in the continental U.S. with another five in Alaska (one occurred in Washington). That was the highest number of

avalanche deaths recorded during the last 30 years. On average, there are about 25 avalanche deaths per year in the U.S. In Washington state, the 30-year average is 2.5 such deaths per year, ranking it fifth in the nation, behind Colorado, Alaska, Montana and Utah. There have been 77 avalanche fatalities in Washington since 1990, with a total of 806 across the entire U.S. during that period.

Washington state is notorious for having the worst single avalanche disaster in U.S. history. It occurred on March 1, 1910 at Wellington, near the west end of Great Northern Railway’s Cascade Tunnel beneath Stevens Pass, when an avalanche swept two trains off the tracks and into the Tye River, killing 96.

Avalanches can occur whenever there are physical differences between layers of snow that have

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City of Morton 2022 budget approved

BY CATHY KANE
East County Journal

After the second reading of the proposed 2022 City of Morton budget during the public hearing on Tuesday, Dec. 28, 2021, the budget was unanimously approved by all councilors present during the city council meeting that immediately followed at the Bob Lyle Community Center.

The balanced budget calls for revenues and expenses totaling \$2,254,533, divided into eight categories – current expenses (\$875,849), city streets (\$70,000), cemetery (\$37,176), drug fund (\$100), tourism (\$31,030), capital projects fund (\$30,030), water (\$744,303) and sewer (\$466,045). The budget is available at city hall for public viewing.

Newly elected council member Jaime Fleming was administered the oath of office by Mayor Dan Mortensen. Fleming will fill Position 2 formerly held by Peppy Elizaga. Richard Vanderlip, who was re-elected to Position 3 and Caro Johnson, who was elected to Position 5 were not in attendance and will be sworn in during the next meeting.

The council addressed concerns from two citizens regarding the brownish appearance of water which recently occurred in the city water system. Mortensen noted that the mixture of chlorine and iron produces a chemical reaction, which turns the water brown. Mortensen said the water is safe to drink and use, but not aesthetically pleasing and has an acidic smell.

He added updates on the water system will be posted on the City of Morton Community Facebook page and the reader board at the Hwy. 12 and Second Street entrance to Morton.

Also on the agenda:

- Local property owner Daren Jones appeared before council to discuss Mobile Home ordinance 2021-08.
- City engineers Gray & Osborne’s Waste Water Treatment Facility Progress Estimate 8 for \$426,245.68 was approved, pending the completion of paper work.

The next Morton City Council meeting is set for 6 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 24 at the Bob Lyle Community Center.

White Pass Ski Area opens with new owners

BY CATHY KANE
East County Journal

Recreational winter activities at White Pass Ski Area (WPSA) has been secured for families for many years to come with the transfer of ownership to a partnership of five Yakima residents on Dec. 21. The ski area was originally opened in 1955 by a group of Yakima outdoorsmen, who were interested in creating a local space for the fledging sport.

“All five of the new owners grew up skiing at White Pass and

are now introducing the winter sport to their own young families on weekends throughout the season,” according to a press statement.

The new owners plan to keep the current staff, management and policies in place with the emphasis on family-friendly activities, including snowboarding, snowmobiling and wildlife watching along with skiing lessons for all ages and childcare. Cross country skiing and snowshoeing also are available.

“Our goal and motivation to

become involved with White Pass is to keep it locally owned and operated, and to ensure that it maintains the skier-friendly, relaxed, home mountain environment we have all come to love and appreciate,” owner Andrew Sundquist said, on behalf of his partners.

The ski area, featuring 1,402 acres, eight lifts, two lodges, eateries and a gift shop, is open daily from 8:45 a.m. to 4 p.m. Lift tickets are required for all skiers age 9 to 72 and must be purchased online in advance at shop.skiwhitepass.com/online-lift-tickets.

Avalanche: ‘The snow kept coming and coming’

Continued from page 1

“We realized we were completely stuck and called 911 instantly.”

Realizing their danger, Fleming and Collins exited the vehicle and “went into a survival mode,” beginning an attempt to extricate the vehicle from the snow by digging with their hands “quickly and quietly” while Hedge stayed on her cell phone with the Yakima 911 dispatcher.

“It happened so fast. I looked up and literally saw the whole mountain falling on us,” Fleming said, noting she and Collins were pulled toward the back tires, which were still spinning in the snow.

“We got buried in the

avalanche and didn’t know when the snow was going to stop. The snow kept coming and coming, burying us deeper in. I felt the only thing that kept us from going over the cliff was holding on the door handles,” Fleming said.

Ensnared in the snow, Fleming remembered “the snow was so quiet, but so loud. You could hear the mountain falling. Everything was pitch black.”

As snow came down two more times in avalanche style, “It was like being on the back side of a waterfall” with snow instead of water cascading before them, she said.

At one point the car “seated and dropped. We were very close to the

edge. It was all so dramatic and fast.”

Still connected to 911 which had dispatched a Search & Rescue unit, Fleming said they continued to dig through the snow, which was now above them.

They were buried under several feet of snow for a little over an hour.

“We dug, dug, dug until we got to the top. We saw headlights above us and a guy reached down and pulled us out and said, ‘go, go, go.’ We ran,” she said.

“I remember looking back and seeing a man standing outside his car as the mountain came down between us,” Fleming said, adding she later learned the man was believed to have been able to drive back



Jaime Fleming courtesy photo | East Lewis County

Morton resident Jaime Fleming said her son, Casey Jr., 8, once told her a survival tip when caught up in an avalanche. She never realized how valuable that information was until she got trapped in an avalanche on Wednesday, Jan. 5.

through the tunnel to the eastern side of the pass.

A mother and her 7-year-old son, who were also rescued, were loaded on snowmobiles with Fleming, Hedge and Collins to caravan back to the eastern side.

The trio spent two days a few miles from the avalanche at Silver Lake Resort where they ate and stayed under blankets for warmth through the power outage.

On Saturday, Jan. 8, Fleming returned home

to a hot shower and warm hugs from her husband, Casey Sr., and her two sons. On Sunday, Jan. 9, Hedge’s car was located with an estimated 18 feet of snow on top of the car.

“To the passenger side there was a mountain, and to the driver’s side there was the guardrails and a straight drop off to the lake.

“Dani and I were on the outside of the driver’s side when the snow fell. I am so glad to be alive and safe,” she said, noting the prayers she cried out during the whole ordeal were answered.

“God is so amazing and knows how to humble us when needed.”



Jaime Fleming courtesy photo | East County Journal

The depth and severity of the snow can be seen with the back end of their vehicle exposed by highway crews on Sunday, Jan. 9.

Last call for Crab Feed tickets

BY CATHY KANE
East County Journal

The last day to order tickets for the Packwood Improvement Club’s (PIC) Crab Feed is Thursday, Jan. 13 at noon at Packwood Spirits, 13042 Hwy. 12, according to President Ron Blankenship at Monday night’s PIC meeting. Approximately, 125 tickets have been sold for the Jan. 15 event.

Tickets are \$40 and include the crab feast, raffle and silent and live auctions. Doors and the no-host bar will open at 5 p.m. and dinner will begin at 6 p.m. Tickets must be purchased in advance.

Tickets will not be sold at the door, he emphasized. Guests will be asked to wear masks except when seated at their tables.

Auction donations are appreciated and can be left at the Packwood Fire Hall, according to Sheryl Hall. Ideas includes hotel stays, gift baskets, wine, hand-crafted items, gift certificates, jewelry, purses and tools.

Blankenship noted that while the town has been quiet due to the closure of White Pass, Friday night Bingo continues to draw a good crowd with kitchen sales registering \$150 and bingo \$300, with all proceeds benefitting the club.

Bingo will not take place this Friday, Jan. 14, but will resume on Friday, Jan. 21.

Presiding over his first meeting as president, Blankenship credited his prede-

cessor, Lee Grose, for his good job in conducting the monthly meeting.

While used to chairing meetings for several groups like Search and Rescue, Blankenship said Grose “taught me a lot about meetings.”

New members are welcome, he said. Dues are \$10 annually. Meetings are hosted at 6 p.m. on the second Monday of every month at the Packwood Community Hall, 12935 Hwy. 12. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, Feb. 14.

Avalanche survival tips

An avalanche can often prove deadly for those caught up in one, but there are steps to take to increase one’s survivability:

- **Move Sideways** – The center of the avalanche is generally the most powerful, so if you feel the slide begin, immediately move to the side if you can. Stay poised and don’t lose your footing.
- **Carry an Avalanche Beacon** – This allows first responders to find you quickly.
- **Grab Something** – In small and medium-sized avalanches, it will allow you to remain static and keep your sense of direction.
- **Surf and Swim** – Keep your head up and surf/swim with the current of

the snow.

- **Make an Air Pocket** – Cup your mouth with your hands to create a small pocket of air and dig out a hole in the snow around your face. This can keep you alive for up to 30 minutes.

Source: *Outdoorsman Review*

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ARTrails of Southwest Washington is a community of emerging and established artists who live and work in the greater Lewis County area. Through the annual open studio tour, ARTrails provides an opportunity for the public to meet artists in their studio/workplace and to observe work in progress. ARTrails promotes the arts and the work of member artists through exhibits, workshops, and educational programs in coordination with area businesses, schools, and organizations.