

# Vital community

New Ephrata leadership looks to preserve neighborly culture

By R. Hans Miller



The Port of Ephrata, pictured, is looking to expand its rail facilities and fuel capabilities at the Ephrata Municipal Airport, said the port's Executive Director David Lanman. *File photo*

**T**he school district, city and port in Ephrata all have two things in common – relatively new leadership and a chance to leverage opportunities as the town that serves as Grant County seat grows.

Ephrata City Administrator Ray Towry, who returned to his hometown in May of 2023 for the job, said the city is filled with advantages that just need to be nurtured.

“I think Ephrata’s got a lot of things going for it,” Towry said. “Number one, I think we have a tremendous public

school system, and anyone that’s family-oriented, that’s something you’ll want to look at.”

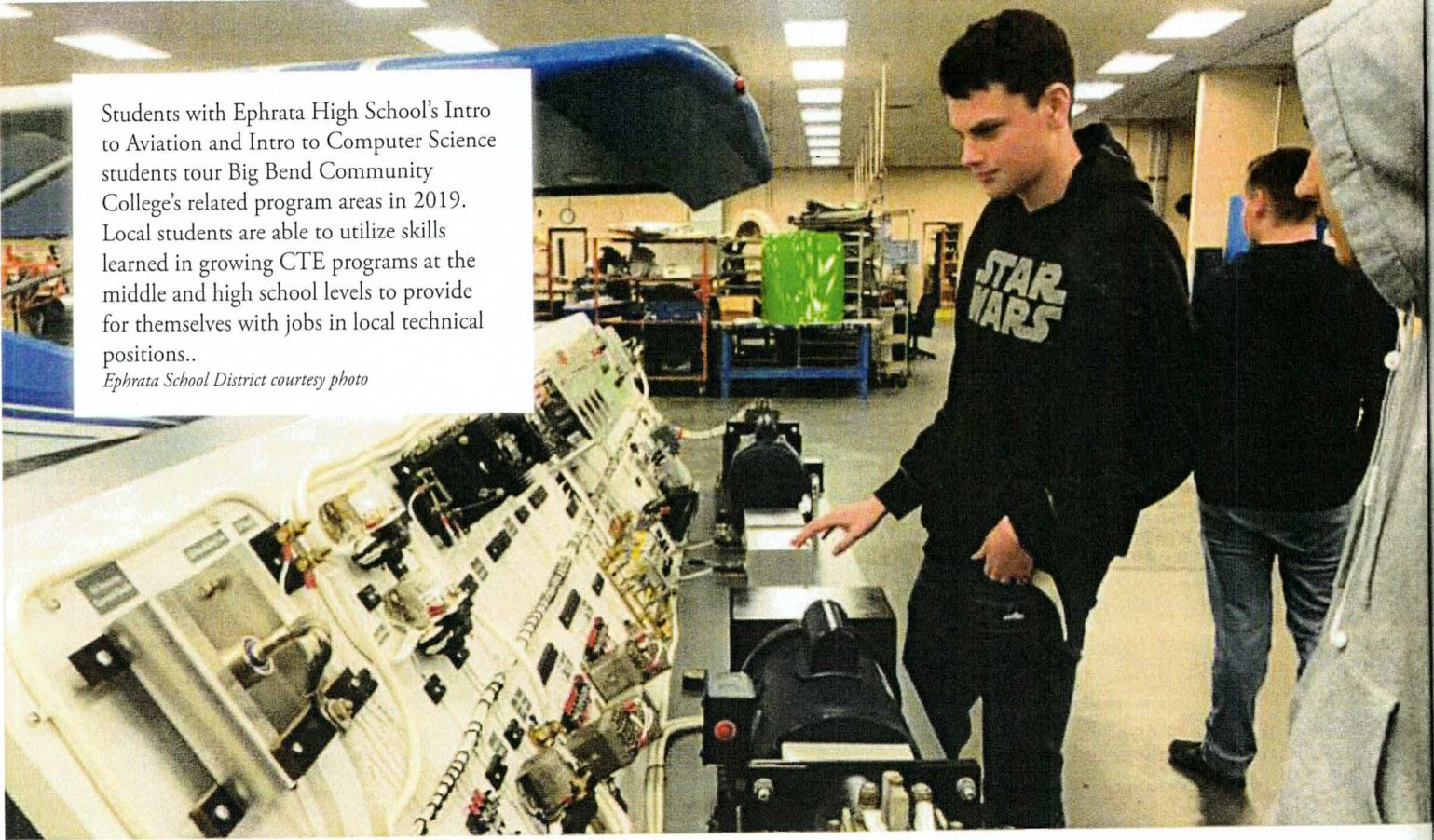
The school district’s superintendent agreed with that assessment.

## Foundation

“As a kid, I competed against Ephrata, and my wife did as well,” said Ephrata School District Superintendent Tim Payne. “And the reputation of Ephrata is fantastic as a place

Students with Ephrata High School's Intro to Aviation and Intro to Computer Science students tour Big Bend Community College's related program areas in 2019. Local students are able to utilize skills learned in growing CTE programs at the middle and high school levels to provide for themselves with jobs in local technical positions..

*Ephrata School District courtesy photo*



to work. Our experience with (Ephrata) for a decade – decades I should say – is that this is a great, positive place to be.”

That positivity has been a key tool in the school district's successes since he came on with the district in 2019, Payne said. When he walked in the door in July of 2019, the district was facing a series of construction projects after passing a bond package to refurbish multiple campuses, he said. Soon after, the pandemic began and the district faced the challenges associated with not only two major construction projects in active campuses, but also ensuring student and staff safety were preserved.

“I'm very proud of that,” Payne said. What we've been able to do even during the middle of COVID. ... And then, even in the midst of COVID, given all the challenges, we do have two schools that are essentially remodeled, completely refurbished.”

Payne said it was the dedication of staff, teachers, contractors and the community as a whole that made those things possible. He especially credited the relationships within the district and the community for the successes so far in his relatively short, though fast-paced, tenure.

The school district is a large part of the draw for people moving to Ephrata, Payne said. The school district has a longstanding reputation for excellence, and that draws students in.

“We have more kids choosing into Ephrata (schools)

than we have choosing out of Ephrata,” Payne said. “We have employees here who said they were coming to the region, and said they looked at, ‘What is the data on school districts?’ and Ephrata's the one you want to go to.”

Payne said holding people accountable and setting high expectations for staff, faculty and students are a large part of that.

While the city's position as the center of Grant County's government sets it up with a foundation of steady and dependable government jobs, the school district and other assets such as a growing port and its proximity to other resources such as transportation infrastructure will help the city grow, while staying true to its roots, Towry said.

“I think that creates an opportunity to find businesses and encourage businesses to come in or that are already here and help them grow that already complement all of those (government) services,” Towry said. “So, I think we can go and we can do that and try and help what we have grow and help encourage others that complement (what's here) to grow as well.”

## Opportunities

David Lanman, the new executive director at the Port of Ephrata, agreed with Towry and said he's hoping to take the port to new heights – literally in some respects. The airstrip at the port has traditionally served local pilots and community groups, but he said he's set a goal of making it a



money-maker that provides the resources necessary to help Ephrata thrive.

“It’s the industrial park that’s supporting the airport right now. The port is flush and is in the black, but it’s all heavily dependent on the industrial side,” Lanman said.

That situation isn’t static and Lanman said his intention is to work with his board of directors and other community leaders to take advantage of the port’s location to make the port a profitable venture that draws businesses to the city, improving the town’s economy. With decades of experience improving airports, Lanman said he intends to build the port up in ways that will provide a welcome environment for commuter aircraft and companies to make a sort of distribution hub that will complement – and draw more – industrial activity to the port.

To do that, the port has acquired the use of a fuel tanker to provide Jet-A fuel for aircraft in the short term. That tanker will be replaced with a 15,000-gallon fuel tank that will be permanently installed. Additionally, he hopes to add length to the port’s current airstrip to allow it to handle slightly larger aircraft than it is currently capable of.

“We’ve got hold on some acreage right now and we’re going through the various studies and I’m coordinating with the FAA about the realistic opportunities of expanding the port and perhaps extending the runway and bringing in (larger) aircraft,” Lanman said.

With that effort, Lanman said he was

also proud to have been able to stop the demolition of some World War II hangars that the port is refurbishing. That project will save not only historic buildings, but also money spent to provide facilities for potential tenants at the port.

“It’s a matter of renovation, which yes, it’s not cheap, but it’s not like (inspectors) came back and said these buildings need to be condemned (because) they’re about ready to fall. That’d be a different story. But to tear down history when they could be saved, to me, is unacceptable,” Lanman said.

One tenant has also agreed to move out of a hangar and into a more traditional warehouse to expand the port’s capability of housing aircraft Lanman said he knows fly near the port’s airstrip and would find its facilities convenient, especially with the added access to Jet-A.

There is also a good location at the port to establish a business air park that would draw in companies and aircraft that need such a facility.

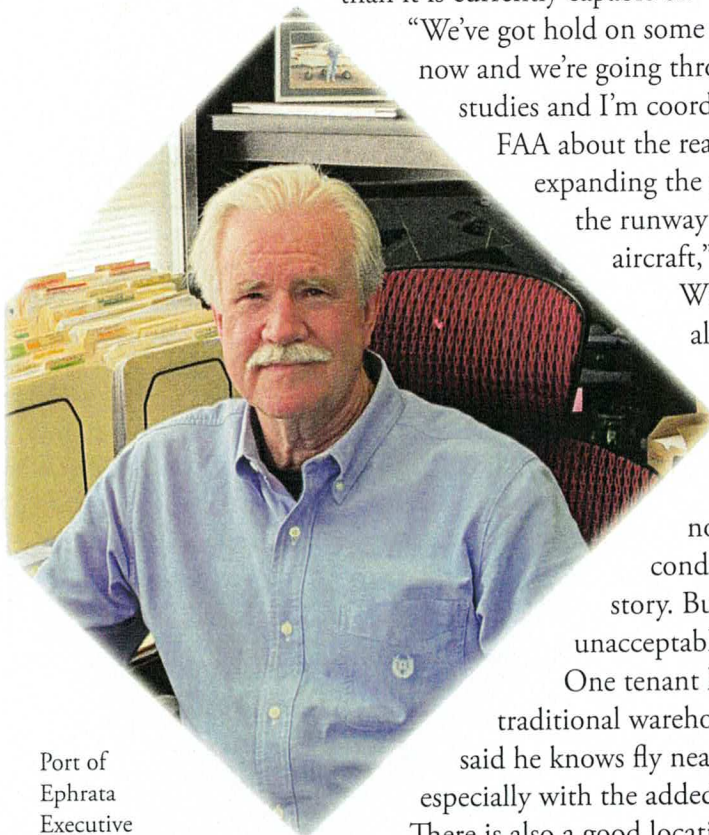
Lanman said the port also has access to rail and is a hub for motor traffic as well, making it easy for products to be delivered and distributed from the area.

The port will also be easier for commuters to access once upgrades to the downtown Amtrak station are completed. Work began in 2023 on that project.

Lanman knows the Port of Ephrata isn’t likely going to be the trade and research hub that Moses Lake’s port is, but he said it’s a matter of growing the port into what it has the potential to be – an economic force for the benefit of Ephrata and the



Ephrata  
City  
Administrator  
Ray Towry.  
*R. Hans Miller photo*



Port of  
Ephrata  
Executive  
Director David  
Lanman.  
*R. Hans Miller photo*

surrounding area.

“What we’re trying to do is just be economically viable and contribute to the community, the county, the (Columbia) Basin,” Lanman said. “That’s our objective. All power to Moses Lake, but we, I think, have a responsibility here to take advantage of this infrastructure and have it producing for the county and the community – specifically in Ephrata. And so, there’s jobs to be brought here, and there’s money to be spent here.”

Towry said the port district isn’t alone in its efforts to build up the economy and the community. The city is doing whatever it can to create an environment that welcomes business. Efforts are underway to upgrade city streets, many of which have been refurbished already. The city is also upgrading water and sewer infrastructure to ensure it can meet growing needs.

### Future growth

The education system in Ephrata is looking to build students up to be able to take advantage of local jobs in town so they don’t have to leave in search of a career.

To accomplish that, Ephrata School District Career and Technical Education Director Sarah Vasquez is tasked full-time with ensuring students get the opportunity to learn career skills, which is something new that Payne wanted to establish.

“In my time here, you’ll see a big push on the CTE side,” Payne said.

The district is speaking with a variety of stakeholders in its future, including parents, economic organizations such as the Port and the Grant County Economic Development Corporation, Big Bend Community College and other resources to ensure students get those opportunities the future holds.

As industry grows, the city is going to need additional housing, Lanman said, but it’s got sites available to meet that need. The idea is that developers will realize the opportunities the city presents and move forward with projects.

“We know that there’s over 400 different plots of land that are permitted for housing that haven’t been touched yet because the developers are sitting back and waiting

to see where this area is going before they commit on development,” Lanman said. “We’re trying to give them a reason to start development.”

That development will need to include growth in diverse housing inventory with apartments, duplexes and single-family homes having a place in the community.

One of the most exciting things Towry said he sees is the desire in the community for fresh approaches to ensure growth happens in a way current residents appreciate as well. An effort to identify growth opportunities that maintain Ephrata’s culture of positivity and neighborliness is underway thanks to the efforts of Sarah Morford, the school district’s public information officer, and Wendy Brzezny, director of clinical integration at Thriving Together NCW, an organization working to support area communities’ health and quality of life.

While the group is young, having started in September of 2023, it leverages input from leaders such as Towry, Payne and Lanman and groups such as the local EDC to identify advantages and develop strategies to grab ahold of opportunities and build a future for Ephrata, Morford said.

“As (Brzezny) and I put this group together, it was really understanding that there’s a lot of

good things that are happening in Ephrata, but sometimes people just don’t know about it,” Morford said. “Or, conversely, groups aren’t connecting.”

The idea now is to make networking and advancing opportunities happen through a locally-grown effort that looks at opportunities provided by good schools, an active port district, a proactive city leadership and a community with a positive culture and develop it.

Towry said the city’s role in such grassroots endeavors is to support it by having smooth processes for issues such as permitting and having city staff that are service-oriented. It’s about a simple hometown welcome that wants to succeed and thrive. A city government can’t be everything to everyone, he said, but it needs to allow the community and businesses to thrive.

“What we can do is support people as they work to build a thriving business and there are different ways we can do that,” Towry said. “It’s about helping people get to ‘Yes.’”

**“We’re not going to be able to use it all to start with, but as this area is growing, we need to be able to grow our medical services to support that.”**

Theresa Sullivan,  
Samaritan Healthcare