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Weekend

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Good day to our valued subscriber Retta Hoxie of La Grande

COMMISSIONER REFLECTS ON CAREER

La Grande designated as 'rent burdened'

■ Steve McClure retiring after nearly three decades of service

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Steve McClure was a bit bleary-eyed the morning of Nov. 9, 1960, when he walked into his first-period class at Elgin High School.

The 14-year-old freshman had reason to be. McClure had been up late following the returns of the presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, one which JFK narrowly won.

"I was listening to a radio. I had (the volume) very low (to avoid awakening anyone)," McClure said. "I was up until 2 a.m."

McClure's fascination with politics displayed in 1960, seven years before he would be 21 and old enough to vote, still burns brightly today.

"I have always been a political junkie," McClure said. "It is a part of who I am. I've always been interested in the politics of the world."

About five weeks from now, on Jan. 7, 2019, McClure will leave the political arena for the first time in 35 years, when he steps down from his position on the Union County Board of Commissioners. McClure has served as a Union County Commissioner for almost 28-1/2 years and before that was a member of the Elgin School Board for seven years.

McClure said he did not run for re-election partially because of health concerns.

"I've enjoyed my time on the commission. Now it is time for someone else to do the job," said McClure, who will be succeeded by Matt Scarfo, who was elected in May.

McClure likes the give and take of politics because he sees it as the

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■ Meeting conducted to discuss barriers, solutions to local housing situation

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

The La Grande City Council held a work session Wednesday night to discuss problems — and solutions — to La Grande's designation by the state as a "rent burdened" city.

According to a packet of information provided to the city council, Oregon House Bill 4006 requires cities with a population of more than 10,000 that are classified as "severely rent burdened" to complete a survey and hold a public meeting to discuss the causes, barriers and possible solutions to the housing situation.

Wednesday night was the public meeting, which brought together representatives from the Department of Human Services, Northeast Oregon House Authority, Community Connection, Head Start and rental owners and property managers.

City Planner Mike Boquist said a city is considered "rent burdened" when at least 25 percent of the town's population is spending more than half of their income on rent. According to the council packet, 28 percent of La Grande's residents, a total of 673 households, fall into the "severely rent burdened" category.

Given that La Grande is a college town, this is not surprising. Comparatively speaking, all of the towns with colleges in Oregon are considered rent burdened. Eugene is at 39 percent, and Corvallis is at 41 percent of its population.

Boquist told The Observer on Thursday that although the towns are required to hold a public meeting, very few have done so. La Grande's Wednesday meeting was one of the first in the towns listed in this category, and consequently he did not have an example of how to conduct the meeting.

Many of the suggestions given to answer one of the three questions — what are the causes, what are the barriers and what are the solutions — turned into comments or statements.

Dale Inslee, of the Northeast Oregon Housing Authority, said one of the repercussions of not having housing available is the town loses its workforce.

As it now stands, if companies were to come to town and bring in people new to La Grande, there would not be enough housing available.

The property owners in the room were asked how many vacancies they had. All of them reported very little if any.

The discussion of existing barriers in La Grande included comments on what is required of people who are applying for low-income housing. One barrier is that those who qualify on the basis of income are not always able to pass a background check. If there is any kind of a red flag in their background, that adds an extra barrier to them getting housing they can afford.

Eastern Oregon University students were brought up in the discussion of the barriers faced by the rent burdened population. It was said many students decide to pay rent during the summer to keep their apartments even while they're not in town because of how difficult it is to find an affordable place to live.

EOU requires freshmen to live on campus or have proof they're living with their parents, but because the cost of living in

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Observer file photos
Union County Commissioner Steve McClure stepped into his role in 1990. Since then, he's become the leading voice about the county's history for the board of commissioners. He will be stepping down on Jan. 7, 2019.



Observer file photo
Commissioner Steve McClure attended the 30 year celebration of the ATV program from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department at Mt. Emily Recreation Area in 2016.

State works to address housing shortage

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

Representatives from the Oregon Housing and Community Services conducted a public meeting to help foster the Oregon statewide housing plan, which is touting some big goals for the next five years.

Though it was completely coincidental, two meetings this week revolved around the housing crisis. One focused on the issue in La Grande, while the other focused on housing across the state.

Those who had attended Wednesday's / La Grande City Council work session, which focused on the city being classified as "rent

burdened" joined City of La Grande representatives and community members Thursday at Cook Memorial Library — where four representatives from the Oregon Housing and Community Services department presented its plan to decrease the housing shortage throughout the state.

According to the OHCS, more people are moving to Oregon than ever before. The number of people in Oregon who fall in the upper income brackets is also increasing, but the benefits of this expansion have not been distributed equally.

"Demand for housing has outpaced the supply of new housing coming on the

market; the rising cost of new construction and the limited capacity of localities to plan for housing needs has further limited the growth of new housing supply," according to the plan. "Average home prices and rents have risen faster than incomes for middle- and low-income people and people of color. The unsurprising outcome is an affordability crisis that affects all Oregonians and disproportionately impacts people of color and residents of rural communities."

OHCS has a five-year plan that includes helping the homeless population, improving housing for extremely low income individuals,

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



MONDAY

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