

❄️ FEBRUARY ❄️

Family Foods closes its doors

By **Cherise Kaechele**
The Observer, Feb. 2

Market Place Family Foods posted a sign on the door Feb. 1 saying the store is temporarily closed and in transition. The future of the building was up in the air.

Marco Rennie, who operated the Family Foods store in La Grande, said Troy Berglund, the owner of the La Grande store and of Mt. Joseph Family Foods in Joseph, would likely file for bankruptcy.

"There's no equity or ownership (to the store) now," Rennie said.

The goal was for the store to remain closed for only three months. This allows a group of people, including Rennie, developer Al Adelsberger and Union County Chamber Executive Director Bob Kavanaugh, to secure a new owner and find a wholesaler to fill the shelves of the grocery store.

Thursday, the Family Foods staff in both Joseph and La Grande were laid off.

Kavanaugh said about 10 employees lost their jobs at the La Grande location. WorkSource Oregon, the state's public workforce

system, was called in to help the former employees. The organization has an emergency response team that attended the announcement of the closure.

"They helped them all with the unemployment applications (and) resumes, and will help with future employment," Kavanaugh said. "Within 90 days, we would like to bring those guys back if we can get this to work. They worked their hearts out."

Rennie said they'd reach out to Community Connection's food bank to take the perishable food still in the store so it doesn't go to waste.

Market Place Family Foods opened with high hopes in October 2016, but the store wasn't able to gain enough momentum to succeed. Rennie said the problem comes down to difficulties Berglund had with the store's wholesaler.

Berglund came to the Market Place project with the success of Mt. Joseph Family Foods behind him. He invested his entire life savings into the two stores, Rennie said.

"He owned the Mt. Joseph Family Foods store for 12

years," said Rennie, speaking for Berglund who was not at the store at the time of the interview.

"The location (in Joseph) had failed two previous times before he came in," he said. "He built a business that made four times what it had been making."

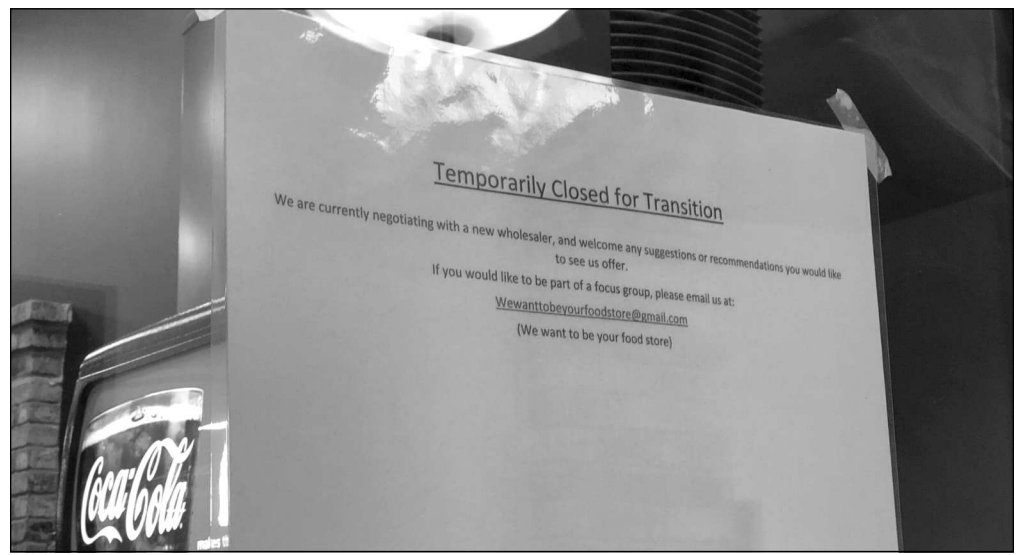
According to Rennie, Berglund came to La Grande looking to expand the distribution of the smoked products he had created in Joseph. When the opportunity to open a second grocery store presented itself, "He was encouraged by people in the community to pursue that," Rennie said.

Berglund paid \$8,000 for a feasibility study through Western Family, his wholesaler at the time, to see whether a grocery store would be successful. The study estimated the store in La Grande would generate \$3.5 million per year.

"He made the decision to pursue the store based off the study," Rennie said.

Berglund filled the shelves with products the wholesaler recommended.

"Within a week, people were saying the store wasn't



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

A sign posted Feb. 1 at Market Place Family Foods in La Grande announced a 90-day closure during which the store will undergo a transition. Mt. Joseph Family Foods in Joseph also closed its doors.

what they expected it to be," Rennie said. "People had very specific expectations for the store, and those weren't met."

The wholesaler didn't have the products shoppers wanted, he said.

"Shortly after that, I came on board," Rennie said. "Berglund) shared the feedback (with me) and the wholesaler made commitments they didn't follow through with."

Now, the Family Foods name is gone, and Rennie was hoping he would still be helping with the project of getting another store in its place by the end of the 90

days.

Berglund was not a part of the project.

"At the end of the day, we couldn't go far enough, fast enough," Rennie said. "We are currently working with a new wholesaler to provide us with a foundation of everyday products, and we welcome any suggestions or recommendations (the community) would like to see us offer."

Kavanaugh said he was "cautiously optimistic" that they'll be able to find an owner and a wholesaler who will sell the right products. "We have the right people

who are willing to open the grocery store (if they have) the right products," he said.

"That corner where the grocery store is has to be successful. It has to be. We need to have a grocery store in there with the products the community wants."

Kavanaugh said what they plan to have is a store with higher quality items that people can't get at Safeway or Walmart.

Rennie said they were also looking to partner with bakers and culinary professionals and may collaborate with an events coordinator.

A warm place to sleep

■ Warming station's first week went smoothly

By **Dick Mason**
The Observer, Feb. 7

People in search of a sanctuary from cold winter nights in La Grande now need to look no further than the Zion Lutheran Church.

The Neighbors Together of Union County Warming Station is now operating in the meeting hall of Zion Lutheran Church, 902 Fourth St. The warming station served between one and four people a night. The operation of the shelter, which opened Feb. 1 and has the capacity to serve at least 20 people a night, has gone smoothly.

"It has been a great experience so far. This is super exciting," said Cami Miller, volunteer manager of the warming station.

Miller has been moved by how gracious people staying at the shelter have been. Case in point: three men who experienced car trouble while traveling through La Grande en route to another area where they had jobs lined up stayed at the new warming station Sunday night and Monday morning. On Monday evening, they walked about two miles from the Greyhound Bus station on East Penn Avenue where they had purchased tickets to the warming shelter to thank the staff.

"I will never forget what they did," Miller said.

The warming station operates nightly from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. It remained open through March 31 and reopened on Nov. 15 for the 2018-19 season.

The shelter provides visitors with all they need for a comfortable night including mattresses, blankets and food. All items were donated by community members and groups.

"The community has done a wonderful job of stepping up," Miller said.

Miller met with experienced leaders of warming shelters in Hermiston and Hood River before developing

plans for the La Grande warming station. She wanted to get advice and insight from them because of their experience. Hermiston's warming shelter has operated for seven years and the Hood River one for almost as long.

"I wanted to learn about their procedures and policies," Miller said.

She learned of the importance of having a quality staff. This inspired her to make sure that all volunteers at the warming shelter have the appropriate background checks and training. As a result, the volunteers have been receiving instruction on mental health de-escalation.

"They learn how to calm down people who are agitated or upset," Miller said.

The new warming shelter has 42 volunteers now and more are being trained.

Miller said she has learned a critical part of operating a warming shelter is to set boundaries that nobody is allowed to cross. For example, guests of the warming shelter are told they can not loiter outside the Zion Lutheran Church. If they do, they will lose the privilege of staying at the shelter.

Guests are also told they cannot be given rides by shelter volunteers.

Two trained volunteers are always at the warming station when it is open, Miller said. This guarantees that at least one volunteer will always be up, since one can sleep while the other is working.

The warming shelter is based at Zion Lutheran Church because it stepped forward when Neighbors Together was having difficulty finding a site. The Housing Collaborative earlier recommended a warming station be established after which the Zion Lutheran Church offered space.

Colleen Nelson, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, was very pleased with how the new warming station is operating.

"We have had very positive feedback," Nelson said.

EOU discusses online partnership

By **Cherise Kaechele**
The Observer, Feb. 2

Eastern Oregon University began to look into partnering with Pearson, an online program management company designed to increase the online enrollment and retention rate.

On Feb. 1, EOU Board of Trustees heard from David Vande Pol, the school's executive director of regional outreach and innovation, said he'd like to begin a conversation with the board about making the partnership a reality.

"EOU needs help," said Sarah Witte, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. "That's the 'lend me your ears' statement. One of our greatest challenges is online enrollment. We need a different approach. We need out-of-the-box thinking."

She said there needs to be some investment made if the university is going to meet its goal of 5,000 full-time equivalent online students by 2029.

"This is a momentous moment," Witte said.

Vande Pol said the current moment requires innovation. "Innovation is hard work. It makes you unpopular, and it's risky," he said.

However, he said, that is what is required in order to develop strategic partnerships, increase enrollment and retention and make brand recognition even better at EOU.

He said the way to accomplish these goals is to take hold of the growing trend of working adults pursuing degrees online.

"There's a vertical line that continues to grow — working adults who need bachelor's degrees," he said. "Five thousand is a challenging number but attainable — just not how we're doing it now."

Pearson is one of the top seven online program management companies in the nation, Vande Pol said.

The OPM company would provide marketing, recruitment and retention services.

"They would have a team specifically working for EOU," he said.

Pearson would handle the operational side of the online programs at EOU, he explained. The faculty would continue to teach the classes.

This is not a unique path to take in the higher education field, he said. Dozens of schools utilize OPMs.

Vande Pol noted EOU has seen six years of declining enrollment.

"We feel confident that Pearson has the ability to turn this around," he said.

The contract with the OPM company would be for 10 years. Pearson would pay for the starting costs and then receive a portion of the enrollment fees from students who enroll at the university because of Pearson's services.

Cyril Juanitas Jr., vice president of business development at Pearson, said at the meeting the university will retain complete control over admission tuition rates and will still have control over the course content and how many students are enrolled in a class.

Overall, the board of trustees responded positively to Vande Pol's proposal. Some had hesitations, though.

Trustee George Mendoza said he liked the university is looking toward the future with this partnership.

"We need to keep moving with our goals," he said. "But are we keeping the EOU culture intact? I don't want us to lose our identity."

Rob Bishop, vice president of business development at Pearson, told the board this is not outsourcing.

"We're going to be creating new jobs," he said. "It's augmenting you. The students will still come through your system."

Dixie Lund, former president of the university, said she was fascinated by this proposal.

"Online classes were evolutionary 30 years ago," she said. "It was a thorn in the side of the financial aid office, the bookstore and the faculty."

However, she said, things were looking up when the university added the online component — for a while.

"Things have changed," Lund said. "We can't do what we have been doing."

Lund asked whether EOU's regional directors would be impacted by this partnership. Those employees are off-site in other areas of the country recruiting students.

President Tom Insko replied the directors are an integral part of the staff and its strategy.

The two key questions centered on how a partnership with Pearson would affect the faculty and what financial impacts it would have on the university. The faculty would not be impacted other than having more students enrolled in online classes, which could bring in more professors to fill the need, the Pearson representatives claimed.

Online growth will have a tremendous impact on how EOU grows, Insko noted.

"The objective is to do what's right for Eastern Oregon University," he said.

The trustees agreed the potential partnership needed to be an ongoing conversation.

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