



City council decides to give voters the choice on recreational pot

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer, April 6

The members of the La Grande City Council said democracy is key as they chose to bring a ballot initiative to the voters that would allow the sale of recreational marijuana within city limits.

During the 2014 Measure 91 vote, the majority of voters in all the towns in Union County shot down the legalization of selling pot for recreational use.

Recently, however, the council began discussing the subject again due to the close margin in La Grande in the 2014 decision and a potential citizens initiative. Through work sessions, the council decided to bring the discussion forward and give the public an opportunity to state their opinions during the city council meeting on April 4.

During the public testimony period, resident Brent Clapp addressed the councilors, telling them he believes the state has not done its due diligence to regulate this industry.

“But the train is coming,” he said. “It’s coming to La Grande eventually. As a city, if it takes more money for law enforcement, then we better figure out how to

manage (the dispensaries and) zone them. The city will have to do the job of the state locally.”

Councilor Mary Ann Miesner said after the public testimony period had ended that she agreed with Clapp that the marijuana train is indeed coming.

“I don’t think we’re ready for it,” she said. “I think we need to get ourselves in order before it arrives.”

Mayor Steve Clements, however, said it’s already arrived.

“It’s already here,” he said. “I’m ripped down the middle with this.”

He said he’s torn because of factors like the democratic process and the knowledge that the product is already here. La Grande voters also already voted, and shot down, the sale of recreational marijuana.

“The passion that revolves around this is drastic,” Clements said.

And it was the passionate residents of La Grande who voiced their support and concern over the initiative.

La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey was asked to speak at the beginning of the discussion.

Harvey said in Baker County, the town of Hun-

tington, which legalized recreational marijuana dispensaries, had a 101 percent increase in calls for law enforcement service between 2014 through 2017. There has been a 326 percent increase in traffic stops during that time. By comparison, in Halfway, which does not have a dispensary, there has been only a 2 percent increase in calls for service during that same period of time.

Harvey said during an approximate six-month time period starting in mid-2014 in La Grande there were 18 incidents of businesses being broken into and burglarized. When the two suspects were eventually caught, Harvey said, they admitted to breaking in so they could get money to buy pot.

“We’ve seen the impacts,” Harvey said.

Resident Ashley O’Toole pointed out how little time it takes the city council to approve liquor licenses for local businesses. The abuse of alcohol tears families apart, he told the council. It can lead to spousal abuse and is known to cause disease and cancer, whereas medical marijuana has been shown to treat some types of cancer.

“It (is) so easy for you to approve liquor license(s),” he said. “I’d love to see how many people break into homes and businesses for booze money.”

O’Toole then said the focus of the meeting should not be on the pros and cons of marijuana, but instead on whether to allow the voters to decide.

Resident Marie Rampton said La Grande has already voted on this and it was voted down.

“As you know, it doesn’t just take a parent to raise a child,” she said. “It takes a town.”

She said in Colorado, which legalized marijuana before Oregon, there has been an increase in pot use among youth.

Union County Sheriff’s Deputy and School Resource Office for the La Grande School District Cody Bowen confirmed he has seen more young people using marijuana since it was legalized in the state.

He said what he’s seen at schools is “alarming.”

“I have a multitude of cases day after day of students bringing marijuana to school,” Bowen said.

Some students get it when their parents leave it out, he said. It’s become something

that gives certain students status points among their friends.

Bowen said there was a kindergarten student who came to school high because she had eaten a cookie with marijuana in it the night before and had to be taken to the emergency room.

Once everyone had a chance to speak, the councilors continued the discussion among themselves.

The councilors were given three options to choose from for this initiative: the first was to put the initiative on the ballot for voters to decide; the second was to wait to see if a private citizen put it on the ballot, and then the council would be given the chance to have a counter initiative on the ballot; the third was to table the decision indefinitely.

Miesner said she would rather wait to see if there was a citizen’s initiative before taking any action.

Councilor Troy Pointer said if the voters pass the initiative, the city needs to prepare itself for shutting down the pool, the library and the parks to pay for the extra law enforcement that will be needed.

Councilor Justin Rock

said people have the right to decide.

“I’m not in favor of (marijuana), but I’m also not in favor of taking away people’s right to vote,” he said.

Councilor Nicole Howard said it really shouldn’t be up to the council to make the final decision.

“I think that on a matter such as this, where attitudes are informed by a range of economic, political and social beliefs, it would be irresponsible for the council to deny the citizens of La Grande a say in the matter,” Howard said.

When Miesner once again said she thinks the council should wait to see if a private citizen comes forward, Councilor Corrine Dutto disagreed.

“I think this is bigger than us,” she said.

Councilor Gary Lillard said the public has been very vocal about their stances on this issue.

Miesner made the first motion to choose the option of tabling the decision, and it was shot down 2-5 with Miesner and Pointer being the affirmative votes.

Howard made the motion to choose to let the voters decide, and that was passed 5-2, with Miesner and Pointer voting against.



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

LGPD Sgt. Kris Rasmussen speaks to a driver who was caught using a cellphone while driving on April 16. Rasmussen was one of 11 officers who participated in a Distracted Driving Campaign along Adams and Island avenues.

Police crack down on cellphone use

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer, April 18

Area law enforcement took part in a distracted driving patrol for an awareness campaign April 16.

More than 50 drivers were pulled over during the Distracted Driving Awareness Campaign, which was aimed to deter motorists from using their cellphones while driving. In 29 of those stops, the driver was using a cellphone while driving, according to a press release from the La Grande Police Department.

On Monday morning, law enforcement from LGPD, Union County Sheriff’s Office and Oregon State Police were situated in the “four corners” of La Grande — mainly in the Adams Avenue area and Island Avenue, where traffic is heaviest from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m.

LGPD Sgt. Kris Rasmussen was one of the 11 officers on duty for the campaign. The Observer

participated in a ride-along during the duration of the event to get a better look at how many drivers are using their phones.

Rasmussen, who has been an officer for 21 years for the LGPD, said resources currently don’t allow for the officers to focus strictly on traffic stops. This was the first time in a while that she’s been able to do this many traffic stops, she said.

Rasmussen said the main emphasis of the campaign was not to ticket drivers for their phone use but to educate them.

“We want the least amount of enforcement to change behavior,” she said.

Law enforcement hopes a warning about the cellphone use will be enough to deter drivers from doing it again. However, drivers who have been issued citations in the past are more likely to be issued a citation rather than a warning because they haven’t learned to heed the

message.

Such was the case on April 16. Rasmussen pulled more than five drivers over for using their cellphones, but she ticketed only one of them. That driver had been issued a ticket for cell phone use previously. Otherwise, the drivers got warnings and were very respectful toward Rasmussen as she explained the campaign.

“Dispatchers will tell (officers) of previous entries,” Rasmussen said, referring to the warnings the drivers have on their record. “If a warning is good enough, then that’s what we issue.”

One of the challenges involved in spotting a driver is the fact the officers must physically see the cellphone being used — it can’t just be a driver is looking down at their lap. That makes things more difficult for officers.

“I see way more drivers using their cellphones when I’m off duty than when I’m on duty,” Rasmussen said.

EOU considers Pearson partnership

By Alyssa Sutton
The Observer, April 13

At the April 12 meeting of the Eastern Oregon University Board of Trustees, President Tom Insko and Executive Director of Regional Outreach and Innovation David Vande Pol presented their most recent progress in attaining an online program management partnership for the university.

Insko’s and Vande Pol’s teams made the decision that Pearson Online Learning Services is the OPM company they wanted to work with.

“A (request for proposal) was issued in August and followed established EOU guidelines,” Tim Seydel, EOU’s vice president of university advancement, told The Observer. “The Learning House and Pearson Online Services were invited to campus for initial presentations to university leadership. Following onsite visits with both companies, we then elected to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of services and opportunities with Pearson.”

According to Vande Pol, the reason for partnering with an online program management company is simple: to increase enrollment.

“The message is clear,” he said. “Enrollment is down with no evidence of an uptick in sight nor additional help from the state coffers. (Universities) are recognizing that they are having decreasing enrollment and there are more programs in demand in the online space.”

Vande Pol said there has been a shift in demographics, and what was previously re-

garded as the non-traditional student has become the traditional student.

More and more students are earning at least part of their degrees through online programs.

“Things are only going to get more competitive in the online space, especially for smaller universities without brand recognition,” Vande Pol said, explaining why he believes the university should partner with an OPM.

“Only the nimble and innovative will survive, and hopefully thrive,” he said.

Insko said when Pearson first brought their proposal to the table, it didn’t meet his expectations, but that they were responsive to what he was looking for.

“They went to work on it and they’re coming back Monday,” he said.

Pearson staff have visited the campus four times to date, and Insko said they have been having “various degrees of conversation” with both administration and faculty.

Vande Pol told the board he contacted multiple other universities that have partnered with Pearson — including Ohio University and Washington State University, which are current partners, and Dartmouth, which hasn’t yet agreed to partner with Pearson, but was considering it. All had responded favorably. Vande Pol said other partners he spoke with have run into issues with Pearson by not negotiating enough in the beginning and as a result are now losing out on some of their tuition revenue,

and intellectual property has been an issue for a few partners.

According to Justia.com — a website specializing in legal information retrieval — Pearson has been involved in 250 intellectual property lawsuits.

The Observer contacted Bob Daemmrich Photography, one company that had filed a lawsuit against Pearson.

“I can’t say much about it,” said Bob Daemmrich, owner of the Texas company, who filed a copyright infringement suit against Pearson. “We came to a satisfactory settlement.”

Vande Pol said he asked the partnering universities why they chose to work with Pearson.

“They said it’s because it’s the most risk averse approach, and because (Pearson) put the capital up front and they don’t get paid unless they perform,” he said.

The trustees had a few questions about Pearson, mostly about what the process would be once integration began, and why Insko had created such a short timeframe to determine if a partnership with Pearson would be beneficial for the university.

“I think we have a sense of urgency to address our enrollment issues,” Insko said. “The longer we wait, the more risk we have.”

Insko said he would like the decision to be made before the next school year, and since there is only one more board meeting scheduled before summer when many leave campus, he may call a special meeting.



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