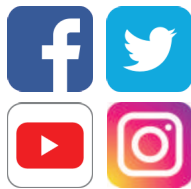




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UNION COUNTY CARRIES

Union County residents possess concealed carry licenses at nearly double statewide rate

By Max Denning
The Observer

Three to four times a month, Trevor Winder makes the trek from Portland to Northeast Oregon to teach concealed carry classes to approximately 30 people who want a concealed handgun license. Captain Craig Ward of the Union County Sheriff's Office said he holds classes about once a month. While the state Legislature considers tightening gun laws, individuals in Northeast Oregon continue to get their CHL at a higher rate than the rest of the state — nearly double, in fact.

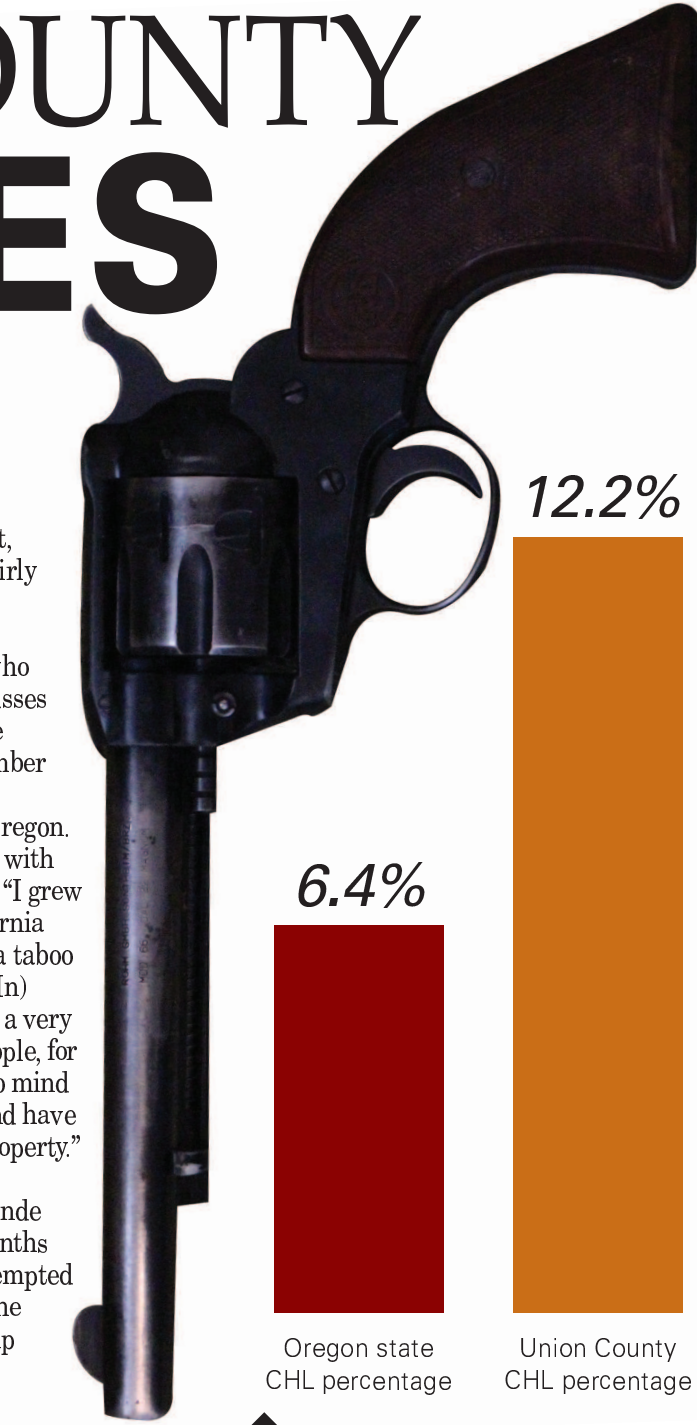
Ward, who has been with the sheriff's office since 2000 and in law enforcement for more than 30 years, estimated that in 2018 there were approximately 3,300 people with concealed handgun licenses in Union County. The county's population in 2018 was estimated at 26,885, meaning more than 12 percent of the county has obtained a concealed handgun license. In Oregon, Ward said the most recent statistics he's seen indicate 269,000 residents possess a CHL, meaning approximately 6.4 percent of the state's population has a CHL.

Winder's CHL license class for Oregon is simply a firearm safety class approved by the National Rifle Association, which is all the training Oregon law requires for individuals who want to receive a CHL. There are a number of qualifications participants must meet to obtain a CHL including being at least 21 years old, never being convicted of a felony and not being required to register as a sex offender in any state — among many others.

If these numerous qualifications are met, receiving a CHL is fairly simple and many in Eastern Oregon take advantage. Winder, who has been teaching classes for four years, said he believes the high number of CHLs is due to the lifestyle in Eastern Oregon. "I think it has to do with culture," Winder said. "I grew up in Southern California and guns are kind of a taboo thing down there.... (In) Northeast Oregon it's a very rural market, and people, for the most part, want to mind their own business and have their own personal property."

Winder moved to Portland from La Grande approximately six months ago, and when he attempted to hold classes there, he was unable to drum up much interest. "I think there are a lot of Second Amendment supporters out here (in the Portland metropolitan region), but their voice gets a little squashed in this area, so they keep to themselves," he said.

In Oregon, no other state's concealed handgun license is recognized, and if an individual with any other state's CHL brought a concealed firearm into Oregon could lead to criminal charges. Oregon's CHL also has limited reciprocity, with only 13 other states recognizing a concealed handgun license from Oregon.



Oregon state vs. Union County population with concealed handgun license

"We strongly support the Second Amendment and the right of peaceable and law-abiding citizens to be able to defend themselves." — Craig Ward, captain of the Union County Sheriff's Office

NEOPT offers Union County citizens rides to medical appointments

Three programs offer free or reduced fare for those who need transportation

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

If you are in need of transportation to medical appointments, the Northeast Oregon Public Transit wants you to know it is there to help. Angie Peters, NEOPT's Union County public transit manager, said anyone within the county can use the three programs offered by the transit organization, and NEOPT can also connect riders to other transit services. "Those in outlying communities can come in using Rides to Wellness, for example, then while they're in town, they can transfer to the paratransit system (that will get them to major areas in La Grande)," Peters told The Observer. "Then the medical (programs) can take them back home."

Rides to Wellness was

established in 2014 to provide medical-related transportation on an on-demand basis to anyone who needs it. The program aims to improve access to primary and urgent care, resulting in fewer missed appointments and enhanced health. Because the Rides to Wellness program is largely paid for by grants, riders pay only a small fare. Peters said riders are able to travel outside of Union County, up to 140 miles away. For those who need to travel farther — like to Boise or Portland — NEOPT may be able to arrange a ride through the Angel Flights West, a program using volunteer pilots who transport people to medical appointments. The flight is free to those who qualify and the NEOPT can set it up. In addition to Rides to Wellness, there are two other



Wayne Long, a Rides to Wellness driver and disabled veteran, prepares the vehicle used to transport veterans as part of the Veteran Rides to Wellness program.

NEOPT programs in which the rider can potentially travel for free. To take advantage of the Veterans Rides to Wellness, those who have served in the armed forces must prove they are veterans through identification or paperwork. "They cannot be eligible for the Veterans Affairs mileage reimbursement system," Peters said. "They can call us and we will find out whether they are eligible." Peters said the veteran can

be any age — she's even set up rides for those in their 20s — they just need to prove they are a veteran first. This service also gives veterans rides to Portland or Boise at no cost, she said. NEOPT's third medical transportation program provides for people on the Oregon Health Plan. Peters said the NEOPT is happy to see if it can help anyone who needs a ride. "We try to fit them into whatever program is available," she said.

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Chamber of Commerce elects new director

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

The Union County Chamber of Commerce named La Grande native Suzannah Moore-Hemann as its new executive director Tuesday afternoon. Moore-Hemann will replace Bob Kavanaugh, who served as the chamber's executive director from 2016 to December 2018. Although Moore-Hemann doesn't have any specific projects in mind just yet, she said she wants to focus on connecting the cities of Union County and listening to community members in order to "increase their engagement."

"The board and I have a shared interest (in achieving) a cohesive Union County, so we're asking how the chamber can help facilitate and do things to make all of the towns feel included," she said. "The other thing that I think is hugely important comes from a lot of the volunteer work I've done, (which is the importance of the chamber) being member driven and making sure that we do strategic planning and envisioning in ways that

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Educators remark on 180-day school year

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Local education leaders have mixed sentiments about Gov. Kate Brown's proposed mandate of a minimum 180-day school year in Oregon. They do agree on this, however — the process of putting it in place would be filled with financial complications. "It would be a heavy lift," said Larry Glaze, director of operations for the InterMountain Education Service District and former La Grande School District Superintendent. A major reason is many Oregon school districts have four-day weeks, which adds up to approximately 150 school days a year. These school districts would be forced to switch to five-day weeks to meet the 180-day minimum.

Earl Pettit, superintendent of the Cove School District, said it would be difficult for school districts on four-day weeks to shift to a five-day week. Pettit knows it would be a painful process for his school district, which has been on a four-day week for about three decades. "It would create havoc. (The four-day week) has become part of the culture of the school and the community," he said. Many other school districts in Union and Wallawa counties would also experience the pain Pettit discussed. Like Cove, the Elgin, Enterprise, Joseph, North Powder, Union and Wallawa school districts are on four-day weeks. Imbler students attend school for 4-1/2 days a week. Pettit, in his second year as Cove's superintendent, is a member of the Governor's 180-Day Work Group, a coalition of between 30 and 40 educators from around the state meeting to evaluate Brown's proposal. La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza and North Powder School District Superintendent Lance Dixon are also members of the work group, which last met Jan. 10. Pettit said the general consensus of the group is that if there is to be a 180-day minimum school year, the plan developed for it should come with alternatives. "They all agree there would have to be built-in flexibility," Pettit said. "Nobody (who has spoken at the work group meetings) wants a straight 180-day school year." Mendoza agrees that flexibility would be important. He said he would like to see a plan through which school districts would receive the funding needed to extend their year to 180 days but not be required to use it to reach that mark. The La Grande superintendent envisions school districts being able to use the funding to increase instructional hours and hire additional staff to target

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
37 LOW
Bit of rain, snow



Thursday
46/36
A little rain

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