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FRIDAY-SUNDAY • January 18-20, 2019 • \$1.50

SPORTS

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Weekend



Good day to our valued subscriber Jerald Clegg of Elgin

Fire chief search continues

By Dick Mason
The Observer

The La Grande Rural Fire Department is making progress in its search for a new chief.

The fire department's board of directors has narrowed its list of candidates for the fire chief position to four finalists.

The board is seeking a successor to Larry Wooldridge, who left at the end of December 2018 to take a position as chief of the Tangent Rural Fire Department in Linn County. Wooldridge had been with the La Grande Rural Fire Department for 10-1/2 years, the last nine as its chief.

Craig Krestchmer, assistant chief of the La Grande Rural Fire Department, is leading the fire department until a new chief is named.

"I want to give him credit for stepping up greatly. Everybody (with the fire department) has stepped up (to fill in during the absence of a fire chief)," said Sharon Hohstadt, chair of

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Commissioners discuss Greenway

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

At Wednesday's meeting, the Union County Commissioners told Karen Howton, Island City's city recorder, they wanted to speak to the

Oregon Department of Transportation about the Greenway project before committing to anything.

The Greenway project is a bike and walking trail that was started in 2012. The City of La Grande completed the first phase: the path currently begins at Riverside Park, crosses the Grande Ronde River, then continues as a paved trail about one-quarter mile east along the river. In 2016, Island City was awarded a \$1.1 million grant from ODOT specifically for the next phase of the project: extending the trail to a pond in eastern Island City north of Highway 82. However, the project has stalled, mainly due to concerns from property owners along the proposed routes. If the grant money is not used for the Greenway project, Island City will have to return the funds.

The clock is ticking. The funds must be used to complete the Greenway by spring 2020. If Island City fails to comply and is forced to return the grant money, future projects may be at risk, as the state will likely be reluctant to again grant funds to the region.

Howton said she wanted to get a commitment from the commissioners that the work Island City has been investing in this project will not be in vain.

"This is a huge undertaking," Howton told The Observer Friday morning. "We want to get the public involved with all the partners (Island City, Union County and La Grande). We want this to be a community project."

However, Island City is going to need more than just a commitment to the process. Howton said the city does not have the money needed to fund the entire project. The favored route is estimated to cost \$1 million more than the grant awarded to Island City.

At the meeting — the first with the newly sworn-in Commissioners Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes — Howton focused on one particular route: the two-bridge route, which would require two bridges to be constructed. One would take travelers to the north side of the river at a site where there is a severely eroded bank and private property. A second bridge would take users back to the south side of the river to avoid an unimproved area.

This option would have limited impact on residential property and require little money to

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THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE:

Funding rural school maintenance a challenge

■ State education leaders say capital funding is Oregon's next 'great equity issue'

By Max Denning
The Observer

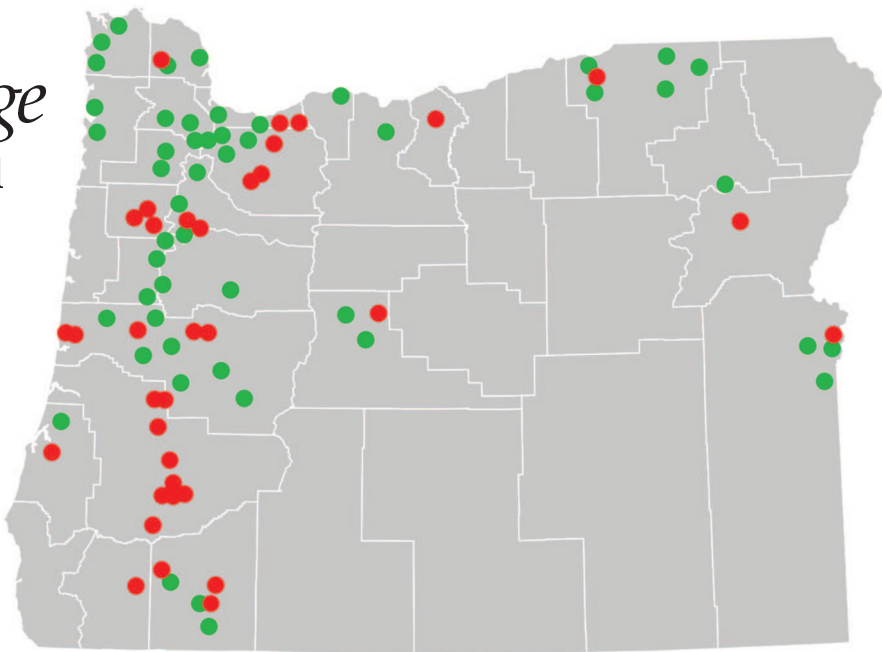
While school districts in the state's metropolitan areas pass high-priced bonds with regularity, communities in rural parts of the state must include only what is "absolutely necessary" to pass bonds — and even then it most often is a struggle.

In Eastern Oregon, it often takes two decades (or, in Baker's case, seven) for a school district to pass a bond. In 2014, the La Grande School District passed a school bond on its third try in eight years. In 2016, the Umatilla School District passed a bond on its third try in 10 years. In Baker City, voters rejected a bond in 2018 for the third time in 12 years. Meanwhile, some ur-

ban school districts are passing bonds every eight to 12 years.

In November 2018, 11 Oregon school districts had bonds on local ballots — six of which passed. The districts were scattered across the state, from Ashland to Astoria to Baker City. Ashland School District asked for \$109 million from its taxpayers to raze and rebuild a new middle school, completely renovate an elementary school built in 1948 and upgrade technological infrastructure across the district. Although Ashland had approved a bond in 2006 to rebuild another elementary school, the 2018 bond passed overwhelmingly, with almost 69 percent of the vote.

The Baker School District, on the other hand, was asking for \$48



Max Denning Graphic/The Observer

The above map displays the passage and failure of school bond measures since the May 2016 election. A red dot means the bond failed, and a green dot means the bond passed.

million to build a new elementary school and renovate its high school to allow seventh and eighth grades to be on the same campus. Baker City taxpayers hadn't approved a school bond since 1948, and this time around a bond in Baker failed again, receiving just 31.6 percent of the votes — marking 70 years since the school district last successfully passed a bond.

While Baker School District's inability to get a bond passed by voters is an extreme even in Eastern Oregon, where a distinction may be more easily made is what school leaders decide to include in their bonds. Heidi Sipe, superintendent for the Umatilla School District, said when her team was deciding what to include in its \$10.5 million 2016 bond they

looked at what maintenance they absolutely couldn't put off.

"We made sure we were only seeking absolutely necessary improvements," Sipe said. "The majority of those were system improvements: HVAC, plumbing. Things that absolutely needed to happen."

Sipe recognizes the economic differences between taxpayers in her school district, which she called one of the poorest in the state, and more wealthy districts in urban parts of the state. "The thing I've seen about Umatilla time and time again is when there's a need, people will absolutely step up and make personal sacrifices for the benefit of kids," Sipe said. "But it's important for (the school district) to remember we better not ask unless we truly need it and we better be careful with the amount we're asking for, because we never want to take advantage of that kindness."

Doug Hislop, former superintendent of the Imbler School District, said when he helped Imbler pass its bond in 2010 to construct a new elementary school, he knew he needed to spend the money wisely.

"You don't want to have a Taj Mahal when you get done, if you tell them you're going to build a functional, efficient facility," Hislop said.

The Oregon Department of Education does not fund school maintenance except through the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching Program, in which the state is willing to give funds to school districts that pass bonds. In 2018, the state provided six school districts with a total of \$27.77 million for capital improve-

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Observer file photos

Money from a bond passed by La Grande School District voters in 2014 paid for the construction of a new Central Elementary School, bottom, which opened in 2017. It replaced the old Central Elementary School, top, which was torn down about a year ago.

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Friday
37 LOW
Cloudy, late rain



Saturday
44/37
Periods of rain



Sunday
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Occasional rain

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Issue 08
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La Grande, Oregon

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