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WEDNESDAY • January 23, 2019 • \$1.50

Good day to our valued subscriber Christopher Rush of Pendleton



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Elgin High School construction class students cut mud away from the frame of their project home in Indian Valley Estates in order to pour concrete. The mud onsite has deterred their progress so far.

Elgin High School students constructing a community — one nail at a time

■ Students earn class credit while learning the construction trade

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

For two hours a day, four days a week, Tristan Simpson, Clayton Hannond and Justin Ousley, juniors at Elgin High School, earn credit for getting their hands dirty outside of the classroom.

Simpson, Hannond and Ousley are three of about 20 students who are enrolled in Elgin High School's construction class, which is currently focusing on two projects in the city — renovating the old city hall building next to the Opera House into a museum, and building the first home in Indian Valley Estates, Elgin's newest subdivision.

"It's good to get out of the school and do hands-on work instead of just sitting at a desk all day," said Simpson when asked why he decided to enroll in the elective.

Other than to get some fresh air, all three students joined the program to earn valuable experience so they can get "a great paying job" after high school.

Principal of Elgin High School and Elgin School District Superintendent Dianne Greif also acknowledges the benefits of learning a trade.

"(The construction class) is a great opportunity for kids to learn a trade so they can go into the workforce after graduation," she said. "There are a number of contractors in the county that are looking to hire."

Elgin Mayor Allan Duffy sees this construction

class not only as a way to improve the lives of Elgin High School students, but also as an avenue to help the city grow.

"The city wants to boost them up as much as we can, because the program is valuable for their learning and there are positive effects on the community from it," he said.

Indian Valley Estates features 19 one-acre lots, two of which have already been sold. John J. Howard Real Estate is currently selling the blocks of land for \$50,000-55,000 each. Chuck Anderson, general contractor with ACS Contracting, owns the 19 acres, which were annexed to the city limits in the summer of 2018.

With the addition of this subdivision, the City of Elgin currently has the most residential development compared to its population out of all cities in Union County, according to numbers obtained from officials in each city of the county.

The house in Indian Valley Estates will be the second home built by Elgin High School's construction class. The class was added to the high school's list of electives in 2015 after the Oregon Department of Education awarded Career Technical Education Revitalization grant money to the Elgin School District. Out of the \$389,000 grant, \$87,000 went to materials for the construction class to build its first home in Elgin, which sold for \$168,000.

Profits from the sale went directly back into the construction class program and is being used to

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Local federal contractor could be hurt if shutdown continues

■ Shutdown impacts about 150 local government employees

By Dick Mason
The Observer

For the sake of about two dozen Grayback Forestry Inc. employees who live in Union County, the partial federal government shutdown needs to end before March. As the company's president, Mike Wheelock, knows all too well, that's just five weeks away.

Grayback has a contract with the federal government to do forest thinning and restoration work, including prescribed burns, in Northeast Oregon starting in March. Grayback crews will not be able to begin work until the shutdown is over. This means between 20 and 30 Grayback employees in Union

County could be in limbo waiting to see if they will have work. It is unlikely employees of government contractors will receive back pay for work missed during the shutdown since Congress has passed no legislation guaranteeing this.

Wheelock said if the shutdown ends before March, his crew will be doing thinning and restoration work in Northeast Oregon all spring.

"We will (if the shutdown ends) be working right up to fire season," said Wheelock, who lives in Grants Pass.

Grayback Forestry is headquartered in Grants Pass and has bases in La Grande, John Day, Medford and Missoula, Montana.

Wheelock said he had wanted his company to do extensive forest thinning work in Southern Oregon this winter but it has not



S. John Collins/WesCom News Archive

A file photo of a Grayback Forestry employee.

been able to yet because of the shutdown, which is the longest one in U.S. history. He said this work was part of a backlog created when Grayback crews

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Parent company of The Observer files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy

Observer Staff

The Observer's parent company, Western Communications, filed for protection Tuesday under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. Through the process, Western Communications plans to reduce debt and strengthen operations at its news organizations in Oregon and California.

"This is the only way we can preserve our creditors' investments and our owners' interests in valuable community assets," said Betsy McCool, chairwoman of Western Communications. "Common to our industry, we will put great energy into creating a new future for our media company."

Western Communications previously filed for Chapter 11 protection in August of 2011 following a three-

year dispute with the Bank of America, the company's largest creditor at the time. The company emerged from Chapter 11 protection in April 2012. In addition to The Observer, Western Communications owns four newspapers in Oregon and two in California, including the Baker City Herald, and The Bulletin in Bend.

The Chapter 11 process allows companies to reorganize while remaining in operation.

"This will give us time to further restructure our organization for a changing media world, a process we have been undergoing, as most newspapers have," said John Costa, president of Western Communications.

"That restructure is critical to continuing to serve our local communities in California and Oregon," Costa added.

EOU moves forward with OPM partner

■ Louisville-based company Learning House was selected after four companies visited campus

By Max Denning
The Observer

More than five months after deciding not to partner with Pearson Online Services as its online program management company, Eastern Oregon University has chosen to explore the possibility of working with Learning House as its OPM.

After four companies visited EOU this winter to meet with the university's OPM team — which was chaired by Holly Chason, director of institutional research at EOU, and included faculty, staff, administrators and a student — the university decided to move forward with Learning House. Learning House, based in Louisville, Kentucky, also visited EOU's campus in 2017, before the university chose Pearson to explore a partnership with.

Chason did not respond to a request for comment.

Tim Harrison, senior lecturer in EOU's computer science program who was on the OPM review committee, said Learning House's services will differ significantly from the work Pearson wanted to do.

"At the time they were looking at Pearson, we were looking at an OPM to do everything," Harrison said. "This time, we were looking for something more selective, where we could sort of have it cafeteria-style. We will start using some of the services and expand to other services later."

Allen Evans, a professor of teacher education and member of the OPM team, said EOU will partner with Learning House in three major areas.

"The approach that we wanted (covers) recruitment, marketing and retention," Evans said. "Learning House can provide other things, but I think they were more interested in working with what we wanted to happen."

Tim Seydel, vice president of university advancement, said EOU is continuing to explore partnering with an OPM in order to gain students.

"Ultimately it comes down to growing our enrollment and finding the best ways we can serve students," Seydel said.

In July, The Observer reported faculty members were skeptical of the plan to partner with Pearson. Bill Grigsby, associate professor of sociology, said he also has issues with the plan to explore a partnership with Learning House.

"None of the numerous concerns laid out in the faculty senate committee report last year have been addressed," Grigsby said. "And while faculty and students had represen-

“None of us — I hope — aspires to become an online diploma mill with adjunct faculty and students located anywhere.”
— Bill Grigsby, associate professor of sociology at EOU

tation on a committee this time, (the committee's task) as I read it wasn't 'Is this a good idea?' but rather 'Pick the next suitor.' And once again, the suitor is a subsidiary of a multinational publishing conglomerate."

Learning House was purchased in October 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, a global publishing company that produces a wide variety of titles from textbooks and scholarly journals to the For Dummies books.

Learning House acts as an OPM primarily for small colleges across the country. In a case study on its website, Learning House touted increasing online student enrollment at Concordia University-Saint Paul (Minnesota) by 174 percent from 2012 to 2018. EOU's strategic plan calls for an increase in "online full-time equivalent enrollment to 5,000" by 2029. For comparison, online full time enrollment at EOU is less than 1,000 as of 2018.

Evans said he thought the decision to move forward with Learning House would face less

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Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
34 LOW
Mainly cloudy



Thursday
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Partly sunny

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Issue 10
3 sections, 24 pages
La Grande, Oregon

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