

Inland Cafe to be rebuilt

By Jayson Jacobsy
WesCom News Service

The only permanent casualties of the Jan. 13 fire at the Inland Cafe might be the orange booths.

Depending on your feelings about that particular shade for restaurant decor, this might not qualify as a loss, said Kristi Hensley, who owns the Inland.

Hensley can joke about those smoke-ruined booths because the news she received Monday was the best sort — better, in fact, than she had expected.

Not only will contractors be able to rebuild the popular cafe at 2715 10th St., but Hensley's insurance company will pay her employees' average salaries while crews are putting up new walls and laying new flooring.

"It's a huge relief," Hensley said Tuesday morning. "The employees were just ecstatic."

Crews are scheduled to start work at the Inland today.

Although she doesn't have a specific timeline, Hensley said she's optimistic that the cafe will reopen before June 1.

Cloie Christensen has worked as a waitress at the Inland for almost five years.

She said the past week has been a difficult period for employees as they waited to learn whether the Inland would reopen.

"It's been a rough week, I won't lie," Christensen, 54, said Tuesday. "We've all been emotional, wondering how we're going to pay our bills."

Hensley's announcement to employees that not only were their jobs safe, but they would be paid during the rebuilding, prompted a spontaneous celebration, Christensen said.

"It felt like a ton of bricks were lifted off our shoulders," she said. "I'm very happy."

Christensen said she's eager to return to work and to serving customers.

"I love working there," she said. "A lot of our customers are like our family members. It can't get done fast enough."

Pam Dodson agrees that it will be tough to be patient while workers are rebuilding the restaurant, which opened around 1942.

Dodson, 59, is an assistant manager and waitress. She has worked at the Inland for about 13 years, starting about a year before Hensley and her husband, Chris, bought the cafe in November 2007.

As she watched with other employees as smoke poured from the restaurant the night of Jan. 13, Dodson said she "just prayed Kristi could reopen."



The fire's aftermath in the kitchen of Inland Cafe.

When Hensley told the employees that would happen, Dodson said she "just kind of cried."

"She always watches out for us all," she said of Hensley.

Like Dodson, Jodi Flynn's tenure at the Inland started before the Hensleys bought the cafe in 2007.

Flynn, 48, had already worked at the Inland for about two-and-a-half years. The Hensleys, she recalls, took over as owners on Flynn's birthday.

Flynn said that when a co-worker told her on the night of Jan. 13 that the Inland was on fire, "I didn't believe it."

But then she drove to the site.

"You feel sick," said Flynn, who works as a server. "It's kind of like my second home, and now I think I'm never going to get to go back."

Flynn said she wept that night as she watched firefighters squelch the blaze.

She cried again when she met with Hensley on Monday and heard that the Inland indeed has a future, but these tears were the product of joy rather than sadness.

"There's been a lot of tears this last week and a half," Flynn said.

Notwithstanding those orange booths, Hensley said she expects the new Inland to look very much like the old.

Most of the fire damage was confined to the rear of the building — from the front counter back, including the kitchen and storage areas.

That section will be in effect gutted, and workers will have to replace the walls, floor and ceiling.

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La Grande City Council holds council retreat

■ Goals for 2019 discussed, meeting continues tonight

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

The La Grande City Council met to discuss its goals on Tuesday for the first night of a two-night meeting.

The council lays out its goals for the upcoming year during the annual retreat. The councilors submit their own lists of what they'd like to see happen, and the proposed goals are compiled, discussed and eventually prioritized.

The first part of the meeting consisted of a discussion about what to do with the \$500,000 surplus the city did not expect to have in the annual audit recently completed for the City of La Grande.

"We have an opportunity to do things we haven't been able to do in the past," said Mayor Steve Clements.

The retreat was a work session and no decisions were made, but ideas were passed along to be considered.

The "severely understaffed" library was considered as a possible recipient of the excess money.

City Manager Robert Strobe said the city has had to cut five full-time employees since 2008, and it has gained only one back. He proposed the staffing levels of the city should be a consideration for this year's budget.

Having an excess of funds does not necessarily mean employees will be hired. The likeliest thing to happen with the money is to go toward a one or more one-time projects.

The councilors also discussed the economic development strategy for 2019. It has been a goal every year, and will continue to be. The council briefly talked

about its vision of what the city should look like in 5 to 20 years from now.

Councilor Nicole Howard asked whether the city should develop a brand for La Grande, giving the example of Leavenworth, Washington, a Bavarian-styled village in the Cascade Mountains. Howard said she was in no way asking for La Grande to become another Leavenworth, but the city could follow that example and develop a unique brand.

Newly appointed councilor Jim Whitbeck said it'd behoove the council to do something in the way of branding — otherwise, he said, they're just "winging it."

Clements said if the council wanted something clear, it must prioritize goals.

Another goal for discussion is moving toward building a new police station. The idea has been pitched multiple times in public meetings by La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey, and supported by Councilor Gary Lillard, but the specifics — cost, location, design — have not been discussed. The Union County Commissioners would be part of the plan since the LGPD, the Union County Sheriff's Office, and the Union County Jail are housed under one roof. It'd be a joint partnership between the two governmental entities.

There was talk about whether to have an underlevy this year — taking money from the Urban Renewal District to put into the general fund — and that discussion will likely be expanded on at tonight's Urban Renewal Agency's, which is made up of the council members, portion of the retreat.

The city council will hold work sessions in the near future on specific topics that have been given priority for 2019.

SHUTDOWN

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had to spend a considerable amount of time fighting forest fires last summer.

"We wanted to catch up this winter," Wheelock said. "It is frustrating."

Furloughed federal employees are likely also frustrated, even though Congress recently passed a bill guaranteeing they will receive back pay for all the work they missed once the shutdown is over.

"I think more than anything, they just want to get back to work," said Mike Burton, a non-furloughed federal employee who is based in La Grande, where he works for the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Union County has an estimated 107 federal employees who have been furloughed and Wallowa County has about 46, according to Chris Rich, regional economist for the Oregon Employment Department. These employees are among

about 190 who work for the federal government in Union County and 60 who work in Wallowa County. These estimates are based upon March 2018 data from the Oregon Employment Department. It is applicable to today, Rich said, because in March there are few if any seasonal employees working, just like now.

Rich said the vast majority of the federal government employees in both Union and Wallowa counties work for the U.S. Forest Service. The number is just over 90 percent in Union County and just under 90 percent in Wallowa County.

The annual average wage of these employees, according to 2017 data, the most recently available, was \$64,484 in Union County, where wages ranged from \$48,319 to \$70,854. The annual average wage for federal employees in Wallowa County was \$56,719, with wages ranging from \$39,584 to \$63,192.

The average annual wages of federal employees

are substantially above the average of other employees in Union and Wallowa counties. The average annual wage of non-federal employees in 2017 was \$38,095 in Union County and \$34,884 in Wallowa County, Rich said.

Statistics indicating how many furloughed federal workers have applied for state unemployment benefits in Union and Wallowa counties are not yet available, but statewide statistics indicate that from Dec. 21, 2018, to Jan. 10, a total of 1,900 federal employees applied for state unemployment benefits, this was up 1,450 from the same period a year ago.

Rich believes there is a good chance that much of the increase from a year ago is a result of the government shutdown.

Many people in the community, Burton said, are worried about furloughed federal government workers and have offered to help them.

"Our neighbors are concerned," Burton said. "We have a generous community,"

ELGIN

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kickstart the project at Indian Valley Estates. Instructor Matt Adams said it will take two to three years to complete the house because students have only eight hours a week during class time to dedicate to the construction.

Adams said his class is responsible for building everything in the house that doesn't require a license, including electrical work, plumbing and the heating and cooling system. For the first house, Adams asked the computer-aided design and

drafting class at Elgin High School to lend a hand with tricky design elements such as cabinets, which were then crafted by the EHS advanced woodworking class. He expects both groups to be involved with the house at Indian Valley Estates as well.

Anderson is impressed with the growth of Adams' program over the past four years and hopes it continues to prosper.

"(Programs like this) bring the community, the school and everybody together," he said. "Not every kid is going to go to college, so I think it's a great way to teach them a trade and give them a jumpstart in life."

EOU

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resistance from faculty because it offers non-intrusive services on a smaller scale that is a better fit for EOU's vision of its future than a Pearson partnership would have been.

"I think, in general, there will be less push-back, if any at all, with Learning House," Evans said. "I think the faculty will be more comfortable working with them, simply because they're going to

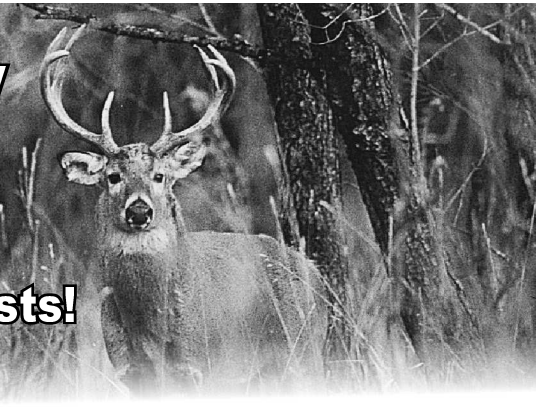
work with what we want to have done and not necessarily (be) telling us what we need to be doing or how we need to be changing our programs."

Harrison echoed Evans thoughts.

"This (Learning House) approach doesn't have much of an effect on how any professors teach their classes," Harrison said. "They can teach their classes for the online campus any way they want." Yet, Grigsby remains skeptical of an OPM partnership.

"Administrative leadership hasn't shared any understanding of how this might fundamentally alter the university's rural and personal character and its historic economic role in the community and region moving forward," Grigsby said. "Online higher ed is a highly competitive market. Students past, present and future have a stake in the outcome. None of us — I hope — aspires to become an online diploma mill with adjunct faculty and students located anywhere."

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