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Good day to our valued subscriber Rick Hansen of Pendleton

LGRFD announces new fire chief

Carpenter Craig Kretschmer will continue to build LG Rural Fire Department as new chief

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Craig Kretschmer, an experienced Union County firefighter, is also a professional woodworker who enjoys building everything from decks to furniture.

Soon he will begin crafting the future of the La Grande Rural Fire Department.

Kretschmer has been named the fire department's new chief. He succeeds Larry Wooldridge who left at the end of December to become chief of the Tangent Rural Fire Department in the Willamette Valley.

"I'm excited to have the chance to help the department grow," Kretschmer said.

Kretschmer, a lifelong Grande Ronde Valley resident, has been a volunteer for the La Grande Rural Fire Department for the past five years, the last four as its assistant chief. He previously was a volunteer firefighter for the La Grande Fire Department.

"(Serving as a first responder) is a passion of mine," he said.

Kretschmer is the owner of a home building construction company, Craig Kretschmer Contracting, which he has operated for about a decade. He plans to significantly cut back on his construction work now that he is fire chief.

The first responder said his experience of managing a small company will serve him well as chief of the fire department. Kretschmer explained what he has learned about managing budgets and a staff is knowledge he can put to use as a fire department chief.

The new fire chief has helped fight blazes over the past 15 years. He said that some of his most satisfying work was done in 2015 during the 75,000-acre Grizzly Bear Complex Fire. Kretschmer was one of a number of La Grande Rural Fire Department firefighters who helped fight the expansive blaze when it threatened homes and other structures in the Troy area. All were saved even though the fire came within 40 yards of some structures.

Kretschmer said the gratitude expressed by the homeowners made the experience a gratifying one, just like many others have been.

"Everywhere we go people are appreciative," he said.

The La Grande Rural Fire Department Kretschmer is taking over has about 20 firefighters. All of the fire department's members are volunteers except its chief.

Kretschmer, who served as the department's acting chief after Wooldridge moved to Tangent, hopes to increase the size of his staff.

> *(Serving as a first responder) is a passion of mine."*
> — **Craig Kretschmer, La Grande and Union Rural Fire Department Chief**

"I am looking to boost our numbers by recruiting," he said, adding he won't push to attract staff who are both certified firefighters and emergency medical technicians. "This will help the situation. Some people can't, or do not want, to do both."

While recruiting, Kretschmer will try to cater to skill sets of individuals. For example, if an older firefighter wants to drive a big engine but not participate in combatting blazes, he will be welcomed. Such people can be "a valuable asset," Kretschmer said, noting there are times when he might feel uncomfortable having a younger and less experienced person driving a big engine.

"I am looking to fill niches," Kretschmer said.

He was one of six applicants for the La Grande Rural Fire Chief position. Four of the applicants were from Eastern Oregon, one was from Missouri and another was from South Dakota. Four of the candidates were named finalists, and all were interviewed by a selection committee and given scenario tests to see how they would respond to an emergency.

"Craig had the highest score of all the applicants," said Sharon Hohstadt, chair of the La Grande Rural Fire Department's board.

Hohstadt added the board was impressed with Kretschmer's knowledge of the area and the work he has already done with the La Grande Rural Fire Department.

"Our volunteer firefighters are behind him," she said.

Kretschmer said Wooldridge, who served as chief for nine years, did a great job of upgrading the department during his tenure. The new chief wants to help the fire department continue to be in an upgrade mode.

"Some of our engines are old, and we need a new brush truck (for fighting wildfires)," Kretschmer said.

He said the department will be submitting grant applications in an attempt to get some of the funding needed to purchase new vehicles.

In taking his new position, Kretschmer will also be the chief of the Union Rural Fire Department, a position Wooldridge also had. Wooldridge became chief of the Union Rural Fire Department about two years ago, after Keith Montgomery, who had been the chief of the Union Fire Department and the Union Rural Fire Department, stepped down from

See **Chief** / *Page 5A*

Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Craig Kretschmer hopes to boost the size of the La Grande Rural Fire Department's staff.

Raising highway speeds increased fatalities, PSU study suggests

By Max Denning
The Observer

It has been almost three years since the Oregon Legislature increased the speed limit from 65 to 70 mph on the stretch of I-84 from The Dalles to Ontario. Late last year, Portland State University released a preliminary analysis of the first year of the speed limit increase for the Oregon Department of Transportation on I-84 and the increase on other rural highways from 55 to 65 mph. The one-year data suggest crashes have increased in areas where the speed limit was raised.

See **Speeds** / *Page 5A*

Newest commissioners attending County College

Scarfo, Anderes report positive first month in new positions

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer

The two newest faces in the Joseph Annex have been hunkering down to learn as much as they can, as quickly as they can about being a Union County Commissioner.

Anderes

Scarfo

Union County commissioners Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes recently returned from their first session of County College, hosted by the Association of Oregon Counties at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Designed primarily for new commissioners and high-level staff, the program offers a comprehensive overview of the responsibilities and authorities of a county, and a county commissioner or judge, including law, government ethics, public meetings and records, parliamentary procedure and much more, according to the AOC website.

Scarfo said it's for new county commissioners in the state — like the "freshman" class.

Anderes and Scarfo will continue to take classes with the other commissioners through this year in Corvallis as well as in Salem.

Anderes said it was a good starting point.

"There was a history lesson on the structure of county government," Anderes said. "There was also ethics training, and a good portion of (the session was) dedicated to the role and relationship between OSU extensions and all 36 counties. We talked about all the different programs they have and to some degree the county support or mission between the two entities."

Scarfo said the experience showed him that networking would be instrumental in his new role.

"If I take anything away from this, it's all the contacts I'm making with the other commissioners," he said. "It's very beneficial. We're all going through the same issues and we're all new to

See **County** / *Page 5A*

Teens likely to form lifelong nicotine addiction through vaping, says CDC

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns vaping, the latest trend to sweep the nation, can lead to a lifelong nicotine addiction and unknown health effects.

Electronic cigarettes — otherwise known as e-cigarettes, vaporizers or vapes — "are electronic devices that heat a liquid and produce an aerosol, or mix of small particles in the air," according to the CDC.

While e-cigarette creators often claim they market their products only toward adult smokers, many teens are drawn to tasty flavors like creme brulee and mango.

In a survey of high school juniors in Union County, the number of students who said they have smoked a vape increased from 16 percent in 2016 to 17.4 percent in 2018, according to the Union County Safe Communities Coalition. Some students are reportedly violating no tolerance policies at their schools by bringing their vapes onto school grounds and smoking them in bathrooms and in class.

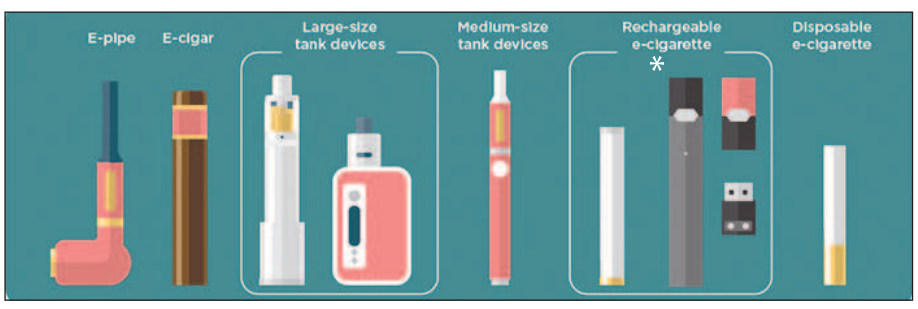
While vaping has been around for five or six years at La Grande High School, Principal Brett Baxter has noticed a recent spike in students smoking vapes on school property and in the building itself.

"There's definitely been a renewed interest this year, but the difference is the students are bolder about it," he said. "Vaping concerns me because you can hide it and there's a perception that it's not dangerous at all."

The CDC reports nicotine ingestion can harm brain development in adolescents, as the human brain isn't fully developed until age 25. Consuming nicotine at an early age can solidify neurological pathways, leading to a lifelong addiction. Even if the e-cigarette contains no nicotine, the liquid aerosol can include harmful ingredients such as ultrafine particles, flavoring chemicals linked to lung disease, volatile organic compounds and heavy metals, according to the CDC.

DeAnne Mansveld, prevention programs coordinator at the Center for Human Development and member of the Union County Safe Communities Coalition, said because there are so many unknowns about the

See **Vapes** / *Page 5A*



Art courtesy of the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention

E-cigarettes and vapes come in all shapes and sizes. Some, like the *Juul, are camouflaged as USB drives for discreet smoking.

INDEX

Classified	4B	Horoscope	5B	Record	2A
Comics	3B	Lottery	2A	Sports	6A
Crossword	5B	Obituaries	3A	Sudoku	3B
Dear Abby	10B	Opinion	4A	Wonderword	3B

WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight: 28 LOW, Freezing fog

Thursday: 46/34, Rather cloudy

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Call The Observer newsroom at 541-963-3161 or send an email to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page 4A.

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