



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Craig Kretschmer built these turnout racks for the La Grande Rural Fire Department. Soon, his plaque and helmet will be updated to reflect his new position as chief.

## SPEEDS

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“These preliminary findings of the analysis are consistent with other related research and analyses have found increased crash frequency and severity with increased speed limits,” the PSU report concludes.

Tom Strandberg, ODOT Public Information Officer for Region 5, said there’s not enough information to make drastic changes just yet.

“With the short time-frame for this study, it’s too early to tell if the increase in crashes is a trend that will continue,” Strandberg told The Observer. “Another study will be conducted at the three-year mark. For now we are reviewing the data and have shared it with the Oregon Transportation Commission and Oregon legislators.”

The chief sponsors of the 2015 bill proposed raising the speed limits, were Rep. Greg Barreto (R-Cove), the representative for the La Grande area, and Rep. Jim Weidner, who was a representative in Yamhill County but retired in 2017.

Neither Barreto and Weidner could be reached for comment before press time.

The 2015 bill received wide bipartisan support. It passed in the house 52-5 and in the senate 22-6. The governor signed the bill less than a month after the Legislature passed it.

Gov. Kate Brown’s office did not respond to a request for comment.

Not everyone thought the bill was a good idea, though. In the early stages of the bill, Troy Costales, administrator of the ODOT Transportation Safety Division, provided written testimony to the House Committee on Transportation and Economic Development in opposition to the bill.

In April 2015, Costales told the committee the transportation department believed raising speeds would lead to more fatalities.

“ODOT is concerned raising speeds will increase the number of serious and fatal injury crashes in the state, especially in rural parts of the state where emergency services are not readily available,” the testimony read.

Costales laid out the case against the bill. He noted excessive speed and alcohol

impairment were the two main causes of fatal car crashes in Oregon. He noted in 2013, Oregon had a fatality rate on rural interstates of .93 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, while Idaho, where the speed limit was 10 mph higher, had a fatality rate of 1.38.

He concluded his written testimony with a concise summary: “Statistics demonstrate increasing speeds will result in an increase in serious and fatal injury crashes.”

Almost four years later, the PSU study suggests Costales was correct.

Compared to the control group, highways where the speed limit was increased from 60 to 65 saw an “increase in total, fatal and injury A crashes, truck involved, and truck involved fatal and injury A crashes.”

Injury A crashes are crashes that cause severe injuries.

Highways where the speed limit was increased to 70 saw an “increase in truck involved crashes. No apparent change in fatal and injury A crashes. A possible decrease in truck involved fatal injury A crashes.”

Nonetheless, the study recognizes more data is needed.

“A longer time series with additional crash data will improve the analysis,” the study concludes in its findings.

Doug Bish, traffic services engineer for ODOT, said the PSU study backs up Costales.

“Yes, it would seem to support (Costales’ testimony),” Bish said.

Costales told The Observer there is a “safety valve” in the bill that allows ODOT to reduce speeds on roads if it deems it increases fatalities or injuries.

“It has been done a handful of times, where speed limits were dropped back down again,” Costales said. “There is prescribed in statute things we have to follow and prescribed discretion in statute gives the agency and commission a structure for evaluation. This is not something you can, on a whim, choose to change.”

Costales said his job is to make roads as safe as possible, even if he testified in opposition to the bill.

“This is what they chose,” Costales said. “Our job is to live by the law. Part of my job is to give people a heads-up and warning that there is risk involved.”

## COUNTY

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this. We can rely on each other.”

Scarfo said talking to the other commissioners and bouncing ideas off one another has been very positive.

Andres noted this series is a continuing process that lasts most of the year.

“The culmination or graduation is next fall at the Association of Oregon Counties general meeting,” he said.

Throughout the year, the two commissioners will also learn about community and economic development, risk management and health and human services.

Scarfo and Andres both said they’ve been busy as the new commissioners, but it’s well worth the effort.

“The one thing I knew, which has been confirmed every day, is the quality of people working at the county,” Andres said. “They’ve been helping out a lot.”

He added the liaison appointments — where each

commissioner is assigned a department or major focus — help keep them up to date about topics without having to learn everything all at once.

“I think that’s really beneficial,” he said. “I’m not trying to learn every single part (of the county). I’m relying on my fellow commissioners to know and report to me and vice versa.”

Among his appointments, Andres is responsible for public works. He said he’s learned there are 26,000 miles of county roads in Oregon. In Union County, public works and the commissioners are responsible for the upkeep of 650 miles of roads and 89 bridges.

While their new positions are taking them to other parts of the state, Scarfo said he’s happy to focus his efforts on issues closer to home.

“I want to take care of Union County first,” he said.

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## VAPES

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health effects of smoking a vape, it really isn’t accurate to say it is a safe alternative to using traditional tobacco products.

“Safer doesn’t mean safe. With a lot of the vape products, the research isn’t conclusive yet because there hasn’t been enough time for the studies to determine the health consequences,” she said. “The adolescent brain is still developing, so when addictive substances are introduced during that time it can frame the brain for lifelong addiction. The research has indicated that early teen use of vape products is leading them to traditional tobacco products.”

Brett Smith, assistant principal of La Grande High School, said while he agrees vaping could usher teens toward using tobacco, there are a few distinctions between the two products that may cause teens to choose vaping over cigarettes: its discreet nature and the perception that it is a safe alternative to traditional tobacco.

“I think the big difference between vape and smoking is no one here on campus is

lighting up a cigarette in a classroom. We’re not naive enough to think kids don’t smoke cigarettes and other things outside of school, but here on campus, it’s a no tolerance zone,” Smith said. “The vape provides a way to infiltrate that.”

With the expectation that the trend of vaping will stick around and likely increase in Union County, Baxter and other faculty members at La Grande High School are taking steps to educate teachers and staff about what vapes look like, how students are concealing them and their health effects in order to strengthen prevention efforts.

“It’s not about what’s popular and what’s not, it’s about the health and safety of the kids,” the LHS principal said. “I don’t want any of them to be locked into an addiction of any kind.”

## CHIEF

Continued from Page 1A both positions because he was moving to La Grande.

The Union Fire Department chief position was filled about a year ago by the City of Union, but the Union Rural Chief position remained vacant. The Union Rural Fire Department then entered into a contractual agreement with the La Grande Rural Fire Department for clerical and fire chief services.

Kretschmer said his role of serving as chief of the Union Rural Department will be made easier by the good working relationship the two fire departments have.

“I do not think there will be many issues,” Kretschmer said.

Kretschmer and his wife, Shauna, a teacher at Imbler Elementary School, are the parents of three girls, six-year-old twins and a nine-year-old. He tries to spend as much time as possible with his family despite

the demands of his work.

“It is definitely a balancing act,” he said.

The La Grande Rural Fire Department responds to about 450 calls a year, the majority of which are for medical emergencies.

Kretschmer, a certified emergency medical technician, said it is always important to have a composed and reassuring manner when providing medical assistance.

“If you are not calm, cool and collected, the patient will pick up on that,” he said.

Kretschmer noted firefighters often encounter people experiencing some of the worst moments of their lives, and this can take a toll on the first responders. He said it is important after particularly challenging calls to make sure that emotional backing is provided.

“We check in to see if they need someone to talk to,” Kretschmer said. “We are a community of support for each other.”



### ATTENTION DEER HUNTERS

Wallowa County Chapter of Ducks Unlimited has a W. Blue Mountain (#649B) LOP tag on Hancock lands. It will be auctioned off Saturday 9 February at the annual banquet and auction in Enterprise. For complete bidding information, contact Gene at 541-828-7795 prior to the event OR plan to attend.

Register on-line at Ducks Unlimited Wallowa County for a three meat buffet including Stangel buffalo, plus raffles, games, auctions, decoy painting for the kids and more.



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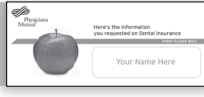
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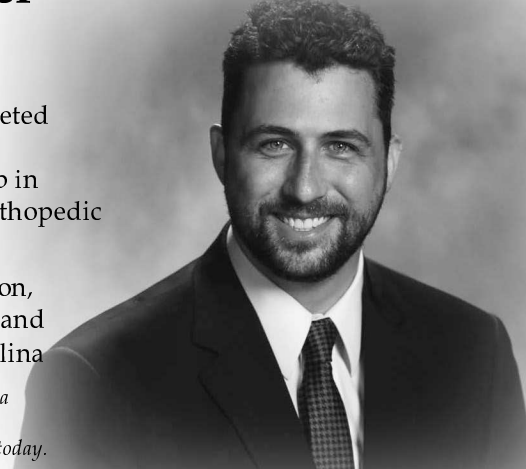


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