

Weather posed challenges for delivery

The snowiest February in at least a couple of decades.



JAYSON JACOBY,
BCH EDITOR

A printing press that suffered the mechanical version of a massive heart attack.

A section of freeway prone to prolonged closures (see: snowiest February).

It's a litany, but one of facts, not excuses.

And it's the confluence of these unfortunate circumstances that over the past month has made it difficult, and on some days impossible, for the Baker City Herald and The Observer to bring our publications to your home with the punctuality to which you, our subscribers, have been accustomed.

But we believe the worst, as the saying goes, is over.

This Monday, for instance, your papers were in the hands of our carriers about the same time as usual — around 12:45 p.m. for The Observer, and about 45 minutes later for the Herald, which has to travel an extra 42 miles of Interstate 84.

And although we'd never tempt Mother Nature by suggesting the Blue Mountains have seen their final blizzard of the season, barring future freeway closures, we're confident that Monday's schedule will once again be the standard.

The challenge that was February actually started a few days earlier, when the 53-year-old printing press at The Observer burned out its motor on Jan. 28.

Because repairing the press was not financially feasible — an offset printing press is considerably more complicated than, say, a copy machine — we had to contract with the East Oregonian in Pendleton to start printing The Observer and the Herald.

This adds about 50 miles to the journey your paper makes each day before you sit down to read it. (Possibly following the latest bout of shoveling snow.)

To compensate for the longer commute, both newspapers have moved up their deadlines by 30 to 45 minutes.

This is problematic.

Most notably, the earlier deadline gives our news staffs less time to gather information and interview sources and finish page layout each morning before we send them to the printer.

But we decided that relatively minor sacrifice was justified to make the transition to our new printing schedule as seamless as possible for you, our readers.

The weather, needless to say, cares not a whit for our deadlines.

And just as we were adjusting to our new regimen to ensure The Observer and the Herald returned from Pendleton in time for our regular afternoon delivery, the benign winter turned malignant.

Freeway closures were the biggest culprit in our struggles to deliver during February.

On several days the papers arrived so late that, rather than require our carriers to try to distribute papers after dark, and in nasty weather, we allowed them to deliver the next morning.

On one day a freeway closure made it impossible to drive copies of the Herald to Baker City until the day after publication.

The weather improved last week but both The Observer and the Herald arrived late on Friday due to a mechanical problem at the press in Pendleton.

Machines break, of course.

But press failures that significantly delay our papers are rare.

And, notwithstanding our recently ended (and much maligned) February, so are month-long bouts of severe weather.

Which is to say, Monday was a typical day.

And after a month of travails, we expect the return to normalcy was as welcome to you as it was to us.



GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

Sunny revenue forecast conceals rainy days ahead

Here's an item from Salem that you might have missed last week: The state's economists are predicting that legislators will have a record amount of revenue with which to work as they craft a spending plan for the 2019-21 two-year budget cycle.

The latest quarterly revenue estimate came last week from the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis (perhaps the only agency of state government that prepares PowerPoint slides featuring a tiny image of Bigfoot in the lower left corner, a touch that we find admirable). This is the revenue estimate that legislators on the powerful Ways and Means Committee will use as they work to produce their first draft of the 2019-21 budget.

There is good news for state taxpayers in the most recent revenue estimates: The numbers likely mean that taxpayers will receive somewhat larger rebates from the state's odd-ball "kicker" system when they file their taxes in 2020. You'll recall that the

kicker rebate is triggered when tax revenues for a two-year budget cycle come in at more than 2 percent above the economists' forecast made at the start of the cycle.

(The median kicker, the economists estimated, for a taxpayer earning about \$35,000 will be around \$180, but remember that the state pays that now in the form of tax credits instead of a check.)

For legislators, the increased revenue amounts are good news as well, to a point: The final result is that they should have about \$67.7 million more to work with than anticipated in previous estimates. The total amount in the general fund (think of this fund as the state's checking account) for 2019-21 should be around \$22.5 billion.

That's a lot of money. The problem, of course, is it's not enough to cover all the increased expenses anticipated in the state's budget, in particular a pair of familiar budget-busters: The increased premiums associated with the

state's underfunded public pension system and the growing costs of the state's expanded Oregon Health Plan, the state's version of Medicaid.

Part of that Oregon Health Plan gap was filled last week when the Senate approved House Bill 2010, a \$380 million package of taxes on hospitals and health insurers that will remain in place for six years. The measure already has passed the House of Representatives, and Gov. Kate Brown is expected to sign it.

The bill expands and extends the funding pieces approved by voters in January 2018's Measure 101, and it increases a 1.5 percent tax on health insurance providers to 2 percent.

The state still faces a gap of \$542 million or so to fund the Oregon Health Plan, and Brown's two proposals to plug that (a \$2-per-pack additional cigarette tax and a tax on employers whose workers are on the Oregon Health Plan) face, shall we say, a somewhat dubious

Legislature.

One other point from last week's forecast is worth keeping in mind.

The state's economists are joining a national chorus of economists who are increasingly certain that the national economy will be significantly slowing down by next year.

If that turns out to be the case, and considering Oregon's vulnerability to economic slowdowns, it would behoove legislators to do what they can to bolster the state's rainy day fund and its education stability fund, which have about \$1.9 billion combined.

That seems like a hefty amount, about 9 percent of the general fund. But, the economists warned, "such reserves would barely be sufficient to withstand a typical recession's impact on state revenues, let alone account for the increase in public services and programs during downturns."

Bottom line: It's not rainy quite yet. But it will be soon. Let's be sure we're ready for the rain.

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Phone: **541-963-3161**
Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-422-3110
Fax: 541-963-7804
Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com
Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com
Street address: 1406 Fifth St., La Grande

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