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Good day to our valued subscriber Kathy Southwick of Elgin

Fate of Union pharmacy on hold

SC Health District Board wants to look at economic feasibility first

By Dick Mason The Observer

The future of Union's pharmacy, the Union Drug Company, remains cloudy after a meeting of the South County Health District Board Tuesday.

The board did not take action on a request by Walt Brookshire, the owner of the Union Drug Company, to have the South County Health District purchase his pharmacy.

Brookshire believes the purchase may be needed to ensure a pharmacy remains in Union after he retires. His hope is to have the pharmacy relocated and then run by the SCHD.

Karen Wing, chair of the SCHD board, said the SCHD does not have the resources to purchase the pharmacy at this time, but stressed the body wants to save the pharmacy.

"We all support the pharmacy and do not want

it to go away," the board chair said.

Wing noted a financial analysis of the Union Drug Company is now being conducted by the SCHD and the board will take a serious look at its options after the review is completed.

"We will see if (the purchase of the pharmacy) is feasible," she said.

Purchasing the pharmacy would cost the SCHD about \$240,000, but Brookshire said he would ask the money be paid over a 15-year period. This would cover the cost of the pharmacy's prescription and over the counter medications and its patient files, said Brookshire, a member of the Union City Council.

The immediate future of the pharmacy is in danger because its building at 105 N. Main St., may be sold this spring. Brookshire, who owns the building,



Dick Mason/The Observer

The Union Drug Co. has been operating since 1903 at 105 N. Main St.

said he has a purchase agreement with a prospective buyer, who might exercise it by May 1.

Should this happen, Brookshire said, his pharmacy would have 90 days to relocate.

"The clock is ticking quickly," said Brookshire, who has owned Union Drug Company since the mid-1990s.

Should the pharmacy

relocate, it would do so with the help of the Cove Union-Powder Medical Association. CUP's board has formally expressed support for efforts to keep Union's pharmacy operating. The board of CUP, a nonprofit that owns the assets of The Union Family Health Center, passed a resolution last week stating it will consider a number of options for helping

Brookshire, including constructing a new pharmacy building, renting one or purchasing one that would be renovated.

The resolution passed by the CUP board will take effect only if the South County Health District agrees to buy the Union Drug Company. Should CUP and the SCHD work together to give Union's See Pharmacy / Page 5A

LGCC discusses funding plans

By Cherise Kaechele The Observer

The La Grande City Council discussed what to do with money allocated to the TRT funds and what to do with the unanticipated surplus from the general funds budget at Monday night's work session meeting.

The TRT funds are used for tourism promotion and tourism-related facilities. The money comes from lodging taxes from area motels and hotels.

The City of La Grande has just over \$16,000 available to be used in the current fiscal year, according to City Manager Robert Strope.

The Union County Chamber of Commerce also receives funds from the TRT budget, which is See LGCC / Page 5A

Award-winning director to give EOU commencement speech

Eastern Oregon native Skye Fitzgerald was nominated for an Oscar in 2019 for his film, 'Lifeboat'

By Francisca Benitez The Observer

Skye Fitzgerald will be the commencement speaker at this year's Eastern Oregon University graduation ceremony on June 15. An Oregon native, Fitzgerald is an award-winning filmmaker and EOU alumnus.

Fitzgerald's current project is a trilogy of short films exploring the refugee

crisis in different countries around the world. The first film in the series, "50 feet from Syria," was released in 2015 and follows Syrian-American doctor Hisham Bismar as he treats victims of the Syrian civil war in a Turkish hospital on the Syrian border.

The second film was released in 2018 and is called "Lifeboat." The film follows German volunteers who were assisting Libyan migrants attempting to make the journey in boats to Europe to seek asylum. "Lifeboat" was nominated for an Academy Award this year.

Fitzgerald grew up in the tiny Eastern Oregon town

of Monument, which currently has a population of about 125. He said that with class sizes of around six students, he got plenty of one-on-one time with teachers.

His experience, he noted, was the opposite of "most people's perception of rural schools. I got a great education."

Fitzgerald said after high school he was drawn to EOU because he didn't want to live in too large of a town, and he was also excited by an offer to run on the EOU cross country team. Once he got to La Grande, Fitzgerald said he fell in love with the valley.

See Director / Page 2A

More than anything, I think what the Academy Award nomination offered is a wonderful platform to be able to talk about the issue and be able to raise awareness surrounding something that is really important." - Skye Fitzgerald



Courtesy photo

Skye Fitzgerald on the red carpet at the Academy Awards.

Elgin looks to fill ambulance, fire department needs

By Amanda Weisbrod The Observer

Elgin City Council members and volunteers for the Elgin Rural Fire Protection District are preparing to purchase a new ambulance and recruiting community members to join the team.

Kevin Silvernail, ERFPD fire chief, said Elgin's current ambulance was purchased brand-new in 2008, meaning its lifespan is almost at its end.

"We've done a good job of keeping the ambulance maintained, but we're looking for a new one for safety reasons," he said. "There's no specific, mandatory date out there, but 10 years is a guideline."

Elgin Mayor Allan Duffy said the city council is currently researching possible grant funding avenues with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other organizations in order to pay for a new ambulance, which he estimates would cost about \$250,000.

"We're looking at all sorts of grants. It's just a matter of searching for who has grants that fit our needs," he said. "Funding wise, there's not necessarily a timeline, but we're looking at purchasing (the ambulance) after the end of the budget year."

Duffy said the city's budget year ends in July, so he and the council are expecting to have the new ambulance in town by late summer or early fall. The mayor stressed the importance of the rural city having its own functioning emer-



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Elgin Fire Chief Kevin Silvernail, Mike Pearson and Nik Nilson, volunteers, build a training mechanism for strengthening their skills during structure fires.

gency equipment because the nearest ambulance other than Elgin's is in La Grande, which would add at least 20 minutes to every call response time.

"Having your own local ambulance is a part of public safety. We're providing a safety measure for our community," he said. "Folks out there, when they're in need, they're relying on us, so we have to have good equipment that's running. You don't want your ambulance breaking down. We're getting to a point where it needs to be replaced soon before we run into issues. We're trying to be proactive in realizing the life of our equipment."

Along with having a reliable ambulance, Duffy and Silvernail both spoke on how vital it is to have enough volunteers to run the emergency vehicle and respond to calls all over the area, but especially across Elgin's fire protection district, which Silvernail described as "the

top of Minam grade, then out north seven miles, then out to 204, then south to the top of Hamburger Hill."

The mayor said the fire district follows the same boundary lines as the Elgin School District.

Silvernail said Elgin's emergency services have 12 volunteers in total, 10 of whom are responders for both the fire department and the ambulance. Back in 1991 or '92 when Silvernail began volunteering for the fire department, however, the city had 18-20 emergency service volunteers. He said the current volunteer maximum is 23 people, and he'd like to get as close to that number as possible.

"It'd be wonderful if we had that many," Silvernail said. "We definitely need volunteers for both the fire department and the ambulance. A lot of volunteers have a role with both because they go hand-in-hand - the fire department uses See Elgin / Page 5A

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 36 LOW Mostly cloudy Thursday 51/31 Cloudy

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FRIDAY HIGH SCHOOLER BUILDS NEW MERA TRAIL

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