

## CHOIR

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Yours,” “Mato del Anima Soto” (a Spanish number) and “Christus Factus Est” (a Latin song). The songs were selected by Kevin Durfee after he evaluated the talents of his choir earlier in the school year.

“We wanted to exploit our strengths,” Durfee said.

This year’s repertoire was selected to help LHS take better advantage of the higher number of boys in the choir. Thirty-three percent of the choir members are boys, more than in many past years.

The competition was conducted at the LaSells Stewart Center at Oregon State University in Corvallis. This was a shift from the previous decade when the class 4A choir championships took place at Bauman Auditorium at George Fox University in Newberg. Durfee said the acoustics are better at Bauman Auditorium than at the LaSells Stewart Center. He explained that sound does not reverberate well at the LaSells Stewart Center.

Choir member David Durbin agrees.

“There was dead space at OSU,” the senior said.

The LHS students did not focus on the less than ideal acoustics but instead, at the urging of the Durfees, concentrated on enjoying themselves.

“We made a point of getting in there and having fun. The (first place) trophy was the cherry on top,” said sophomore Gage Brogoitti, whose mother Karrine Brogoitti is publisher of The Observer.

It was easy for the students to have a good time because they like one another’s company.

“It is a tight group,” said the director.

The group proved to be good traveling companions during the course of a one-week tour to Western Oregon, at the end of which they competed at state in Corvallis. Kascie Durfee noted that during such trips students can sometimes get on one another’s nerves, but that was far from the case this year.

“The trip actually brought



Courtesy photo

The La Grande High School A Cappella Choir recently won the 2019 Class 4A state title.

them closer together,” she said. Perry said the choir has esprit de corps, which she credits to efforts of the Durfees.

“(Choir) feels more like a family than a class,” she said.

LHS’s 2019 title adds to an already sterling legacy. Since Kevin Durfee became its choir director 12 years ago, LHS has won

six state titles and never finished lower than third place at state.

The LHS A Capella Choir members will perform again May 28 at an end of the school year concert at their school’s auditorium. The program will begin at 7 p.m. with a performance by the La Grande Middle School’s choir, and the LHS A Capella Choir will sing at 8 p.m. ■

## LHS quartet wins state OMEA title

The La Grande High School A Cappella Choir won the class 4A OSAA Choir Championship during a week-long trip to Western Oregon, but that wasn’t the only award the school’s music program brought home.

The four members of LHS’s State Chamber Ensemble in the tenor/bass vocal category for teams with two to four members also won a prestigious honor. The quartet, composed of twin brothers Daniel and David Jensen, Max Strand and Brixtin Walker, won state for the second year in a row in a Oregon Music Educators Association competition at Pacific University in Forest Grove.

The LHS quartet won their OMEA title against quartets from the entire state. The competition was open to students from all high schools, not just those from LHS’s 4A classification.

“They did an excellent job,” said LHS Choir Director Kevin Durfee of the quartet.

## TRAIN

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and Aug. 3 have been cancelled.

The Friends hope to add eight runs back to this list, but will first need to get approval from the WURA board at its next meeting on June 11.

“We’re trying to work out exactly who’s going to pay for what and how many trains can run,” Spaulding said.

While WURA covers costs associated with maintaining the track and right-of-way, the Friends are responsible for the operational and business sides of the Eagle Cap Excursion Train. Brock Eckstein, WURA manager and City of Elgin administrator, said it’s been some time since the two groups have solidified an agreement on exactly who is paying for what, so he’s working to create a budget

to define the details.

“I’m trying to set up a good operational agreement that both sides will be OK with that explains each others’ duties,” Eckstein said, adding the discussion between WURA and the Friends on financial responsibilities is ongoing. “There has been quite a bit of confusion, so I’m going to work to be the conduit of information between the two organizations.”

Eckstein said he’s crafting the budget with the frame of mind that the federal government will not retroactively distribute the 2019 tax credit, although Spaulding said he is hopeful it will.

The reality is it is unclear whether or not WURA will receive the 2019 tax credit retroactively, and this decision won’t be made by Congress until the fall at least, but federal legislation is

in the works to extend tax credits, according to the policy team of Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.).

Senators Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) have introduced a bill to extend tax credit items, including the 45G Tax Credit, for two years, and in January, Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) proposed a bill to extend the tax credit for railroad track maintenance permanently.

Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts said without the tax credit, the excursion train’s future is uncertain.

“We can either have limited runs and try to keep it out there in the focus, or we could shut it down, and shutting it down doesn’t seem like the right thing to do,” Roberts said. “The only way we could allow the excursion train to operate is because of the tax credits. Without the tax credits, we wouldn’t be run-

ning it at all because we wouldn’t have any money.”

Scarfo, however, said he is reluctant to continue to rely on federal funding for the excursion train and hopes to explore other financial avenues.

“After this season is over and we see what happens with the federal government’s decision, we’re going to try to break this all down and keep this train moving and hopefully self-sustain funding without having to rely on whether or not the federal government is going to pass the 45G Tax Credit every year,” Scarfo said. “That’s my goal, and for me, I don’t want to see this going anywhere.”

The impact of the Eagle Cap Excursion Train ceasing to run would spread throughout Northeast Oregon, according to Spaulding, because of the amount of people who travel to

ride the train and subsequently spend money in Union and Wallowa counties, as well as the local businesses who cater the rides, like Ten Depot in La Grande.

“This money gets circulated at various businesses around the area and the more things you have here the better because we don’t have the big industries that used to be here, especially in Wallowa County,” he said. “Tourism is kind of their thing these days.”

Despite their situation, WURA and the Friends of the Joseph Branch are determined to come out of this struggle stronger than ever.

“My feelings on this situation are it’s moving in a very positive direction,” Eckstein said. “Things are moving forward, and even though we’re missing grant money this year, I think both organizations have a great chance to succeed.” ■

## DIXON

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“Lance is the only person I know who could pull this off (get a large bond passed) because of the trust he has built in the community,” said IMESD Superintendent Mark Mulvihill.

The new high school will replace the present classroom building, which was constructed more than 100 years ago. It has not been determined what will be done with the old school building once the new one opens in August.

The construction of the high school and gym are among many capital projects Dixon has helped lead and oversee in the North Powder School District. They include the construction of a cafeteria at North Powder Elementary School, which is used by the entire district, the addition of several classrooms in the elementary school and a new high school career technical education lab now being completed.

In addition, Powder Valley High School has annual graduation rates of at least 90 percent and the school district’s students are turning in solid performances on state assessment tests.

Dixon emphasized that what has been accomplished in the North Powder School District is an indication of what many people beyond himself have done.

“While I will always treasure this award, I know that only with the effort of many staff, board members and community support have I been able to accomplish most of the things for which I have received recognition. This award is a reflection of the work and hours put in by many others, and I am grateful for all they do,” Dixon said.

He said the award is also credit to his wife, Suzi, and their family.

“Being an administrator’s spouse is not easy, but Suzi has stuck by me through thick and thin since 1986. My kids have been understanding when Dad had to miss a game, concert or could not go camping for the weekend. I would not be where I am today without my wife and children being rocks to lean on.”

The superintendent said that in addition to his family and staff, those who have helped him in a big way include administrators like Mulvihill and Gerald Hopkins, whom Dixon worked under at the start of his career in Huntington.

“Dr. Hopkins taught me one principle that still drives me today — you have to have children and teachers to have a school, (so) take care of them first,” Dixon said.

Hopkins, who later worked under Dixon at North Powder as principal, was delighted when he heard someone he had mentored was receiving the Doug Flatt Memorial Award.

“I darn near cried when I heard he had won it. He truly deserved it,” said Hopkins, who is now retired and lives in Summerville.

Mulvihill said it is unusual for a superintendent to serve as long in a school

district as Dixon has. He explained that in many cases superintendents may find themselves at odds with some people in a community after several years because of controversial decisions they have had to make.

Mulvihill said Dixon has maintained excellent community ties because of how effectively he has built relationships and trust. He explained that, as a result, if Dixon makes a decision with, they are less likely to take it personally.

The IMESD superintendent credits Dixon with being someone who directs by making personal connections and being passionate.

“He is a relationship-based leader who leads from the heart,” Mulvihill said, adding that Dixon is an effective leader because he “is very humble and open to other ways of doing things.”

The Doug Flatt award is sponsored by Mid-Columbia Bus Company and the IMESD. The purpose of the award is to recognize a school administrator who exemplifies the same qualities for which Doug Flatt was known, according to the IMESD. Flatt, who died in 2003, was the chief executive officer of Mid-Columbia Bus Company. ■

## BIRDS

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about 18 miles north of La Grande. He said the Rhinehart Canyon outcrops fill up quickly because of the number of bird species that can be found there.

“Our (field trips) typically see the most species,” Bray said, adding this will be his 13th year volunteering at the festival. “The location at Rhinehart has documented over 140 species of birds and we could easily see 60 on Sunday, maybe more with both trips.”

Bray said his love of bird watching began with visits to his grandparents’ house when he was a boy. His grandfather, a hobbyist woodworker, was always building feeders and houses for the birds. Bin-

oculars and bird books sat at every window, where Bray would spend his time looking out, waiting for something to flash by.

“I just remember that being kind of like a fish tank but open in the back and anything could arrive,” he said. “It was always exciting.”

Nowak said one of the festival’s goals is to get the next generation of birders interested in the environment, so that’s why there are so many great kids’ activities. From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, volunteers will be available to help children build a birdhouse, color a canvas tote bag and earn a Junior Birder Patch, all of which they are welcome to take home.

“This is how we create conservationists,” she said. “We get children excited about the natural

world and they’ll grow up to protect it.”

The wildlife biologist said bird watching is a growing trend, and she’s excited to hopefully welcome more people to it with the Ladd Marsh Bird Festival.

“It’s kind of unique as far as outdoor hobbies go because it can be whatever you want it to be. You can do it for free, you can look out the window without any optics and enjoy them, or you can go up to having several thousand dollars’ worth of optical equipment,” Nowak said. “It can be whatever makes you happy in terms of enjoying birds.”

See the full schedule at [www.friendsofladdmarsh.org](http://www.friendsofladdmarsh.org) under the Bird Festival tab. Registration for the festival is free, but pricing for individual field trips and workshops varies. ■



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