

OWNERS

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be a part of it anymore," said McCool, who is also publisher of The Bulletin in Bend.

Western Communications has owned The Observer since the mid-1970s, but its actual connection extends back to 1959 when Robert Chandler and John McLelland purchased The Observer. Chandler, who died in 1996, was then the owner of the Bulletin, and McClelland's family ran the Longview (Washington) Daily News.

Chandler, reflecting 37 years later on his decision to buy the La Grande newspaper, wrote in a 1996 column that it was not only a good business decision, but also reflected a commitment to community journalism. He referred to a statement McClelland made to the La Grande Chamber of Commerce in the 1960s to make this point.

"We didn't buy the newspaper because it was cheap, because it wasn't by newspaper standards of the day. Nor did we buy it expecting things to always run along the same old way, we knew we were going to provide new quarters, new equipment and a larger staff," McClelland had told the

chamber.

Chandler purchased McClelland's share of The Observer in 1969. Less than a decade later, Chandler founded Western Communications, the majority of whose stockholders have been members of his immediate family throughout its history.

McCool said her father enjoyed visiting La Grande, just as she does.

"I would not mind living there someday. It is so beautiful and there is so much history," she said. "I love it out there."

She said The Observer is like many newspapers Western Communications has purchased and operated.

"It is a community newspaper in a beautiful area," McCool said, adding that Western Communications' papers have also been in relatively isolated areas where it is easier to capture the market.

The Observer's longest serving publisher during its stint with Western Communications was Bob Moody. Chandler named Moody The Observer's publisher in 1973, and he served through 1997. So successful was Moody that he was inducted into the Oregon Newspaper Hall of Fame in 2005.

McCool said Moody was a

favorite of her father's.

"He stood up to him as an equal and told him what he thought. My dad really respected that. They had a great relationship," she said.

Chandler, who was inducted posthumously into the Oregon Newspaper Hall of Fame in 2006, made frequent trips to Western Communications' newspapers, including those in La Grande, Baker City, Burns, Redmond and Crescent City, California. McCool said he enjoyed getting out of the office and talking about the newspaper industry.

"He was a very social person," McCool said. "He loved the newspaper business and really liked the business end of it."

Chandler also embraced the opportunity to speak with members of the communities Western Communications' newspapers served.

He liked to see that people working at Western Communications' newspapers had a big presence in their communities. This was apparent in a story about Moody that appeared in the May 16, 1996, edition of The Observer. Chandler recalled in the story that he used to fly a plane to La Grande. One time when he came to visit he had sent word of his arrival by radio and asked

the airport officials to call The Observer for someone to come and pick him up.

When Chandler arrived at the airport, no one from the paper was there, so he started walking into town. A motorist stopped and offered him a ride into town. He asked Chandler where he was going and Chandler told him, "The Observer."

Chandler said he asked the driver who owns The Observer.

"Oh, Mr. Moody," the man replied. Chandler then recalled, "I didn't bother to correct him because I'm delighted for people to think he's the owner."

The Observer, prior to being taken under the wings of Chandler in 1959, was owned by Fred Waybret, a California state senator. Waybret purchased The Observer in 1942, according to an Oct. 21, 1996, story in The Observer on local newspaper history by the late La Grande historian Jack Evans.

This means that since 1942, The Observer has essentially had just two owners, Waybret and, later, Chandler and his family. The first 48 years of The Observer's history, though, were far less stable in terms of ownership continuity.

The newspaper's publisher

when its first edition came off the press on Oct. 20, 1896, was George Hoskins Currey, a graduate of La Grande's old Blue Mountain University. Currey put out the paper with a press acquired from a defunct Baker City paper named The Blade. Currey's brother Fred B. joined him at The Observer in the summer of 1897, after which the newspaper began listing its publisher as the Currey Brothers.

The Observer was purchased by Bruce Dennis in 1910. Dennis had been editor of the Baker City Herald. In 1914, he sold The Observer to newspaperman Clarke Leiter, who according to Evans, improved The Observer's look.

"He had worked at The Oregonian and contributed to its metropolitan appearance," Evans wrote.

Ownership of The Observer changed hands again in 1918 when Dennis purchased it back from Leiter. Seven years later, Dennis sold the newspaper again, this time to Frank B. Appleby and Harvey Matthews. The Observer was then located at 1710 Sixth St., in a building they would replace in dramatic fashion in 1928 with a two-story structure that would house the newspaper the next 56

years.

Evans described the new building as "a handsome brick structure," which was designed by Charles B. Miller, a local architect. The Observer was temporarily located on Adams Avenue just east of the old Sacajawea Hotel when The Observer's new home was being constructed. The new building at 1710 Sixth St. served as The Observer's home until 1985, when The Observer moved into its present location at 1406 Fifth St. The current building was constructed in 1984, and the building at 1710 Sixth St. was later torn down.

Appleby and Matthews, after constructing the building on Sixth Street, sold the newspaper to P.R. Finlay in 1930. The next ownership change was in 1942 when Waybret purchased The Observer.

Coincidentally, that was the same year Chandler visited La Grande for the first time, while working for United Press, the telegraph news service then used by small town afternoon newspapers.

What Chandler saw in La Grande in 1942 piqued his interest, sowing the seeds for what would be a memorable and overall successful 60-year relationship.

PROJECTS

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ings in the Central Business Zone. Portland-area developers Tony Ngo and Mark Chen, who purchased the property in 2018, said in their application the building, which has been vacant for about a decade, "needs a major rehab to bring it back to life." In addressing the URA, Jarski pointed out all of the building's major systems need to be replaced, including wiring, HVAC and plumbing. There are also structural issues in the basement that must be addressed.

The renovation, which is estimated at \$289,300, will yield space for up to six retail businesses or restaurants. The project meets two of the four goals of the La Grande Urban Renewal Plan — revitalizing downtown and retail development.

GRANDE RONDE ANIMAL HOSPITAL (194 POINTS)

The site of the old Quail Run

Motor Inn, which was destroyed by a fire in 2017, at 2400 Adams Ave., will become the location of GRAH, which the staff report said was "one of the strongest projects in the field of applications this year." The project will require the construction of a new 3,000-square-foot building for the treatment of small animals and pets. "The facility will have modern medical, surgical, dental and diagnostic equipment," according to the staff report and will have the capacity to see and treat between 45 and 120 patients daily.

Applicant Lee Darch, who has more than 40 years of veterinary experience, believes his business will employ 12-15 people when it's fully operational, and that they would be "competitive" waged jobs, which meets goal 2 of the Urban Renewal Plan. The full budget for the project is estimated at \$708,000.

COUNTERTOP SOLUTIONS (185 POINTS)

Countertop Solutions, a custom

manufacturing and retail business that builds and installs stone, acrylic and laminate countertops, is expanding its own business while at the same time filling a building that has been vacant for about nine years at 1417 Jefferson Ave., which is adjacent to the Central Business Zone. Business owners Chris Loman and Sam Jacobson, who have between them close to 30 years of experience, said the move will add three additional jobs and addresses the concern of blight in the city.

The project, which will include electrical upgrades, structural reinforcement and the installation of new doors and a concrete floor and drainage system, will cost \$250,365. Most of that cost, though — \$176,787 — will go toward equipment. The project will meet three of the URA's four goals — revitalizing downtown, creating high-wage jobs and retail development.

BR OFFICE CONDOMINIUMS (165 POINTS)

An interior remodel will help

an existing business to expand and open the possibility for future renters at 1902 Fourth St., a building owned by David and Anna Baum. The project will include remodeling one of the suites to expand Dr. James Kopp's orthopedic practice and add a weight loss center. Another of the building's suites will receive several upgrades, including electrical and lighting, and a new front door, to make it ready for use for commercial operations. The building's exterior will also be upgraded.

The project's URA grant of \$63,211 covered most of the \$75,000 for which it was eligible. The overall cost will be \$272,373. It meets the goals of revitalizing downtown and creation of high wage jobs.

STEVE'S OUTDOOR ADVENTURES (148 POINTS)

Steve West's business at 316 Antelope Drive will add a second building next to its current loca-

tion in the Business and Technology Park. The new building, which carries a cost of \$185,000, will be the home of Pendleton Ammunition, a business that West projects will sell \$2 million in product in the next year, according to the staff report on the project.

LAURENCE'S AUTO BODY & PAINT (156 POINTS)

The lone project not to receive URA funding is looking to expand its business at 1208 N. Willow St. Laurence's Auto Body's application encompassed adding a shop and installing a paint booth, which would create two new jobs as well as an internship. The total project cost is \$154,977, and it was eligible for \$50,000 from the URA. It would have met the goal of adding high-paying jobs, according to the staff report.

The Observer will follow up with more on the businesses that received URA funding for 2019 at a later date.

SALE

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Western Communications, which also owns the Bend Bulletin, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January. The company first sought to restructure, then decided to liquidate its assets. This was the second bankruptcy for Western Communications in the past 10 years. It emerged from another bankruptcy in 2012.

The Observer and Baker City Herald Publisher Karline Brogoitti said to finally reach this milestone was something she couldn't fathom a year ago.

"When things were their toughest or looked incredibly bleak, the thing that kept me, and everyone else, going was that commitment to what we do," she said. "The pride and passion that these staffs have for their papers, their communities, their readers and their advertisers is something that I continue to be amazed at. It's that unyielding passion that got us through some incredibly stressful days."

Brogoitti said she believes there are brighter days ahead with new ownership in place and a renewed sense of optimism in both locations.

"Now, we get to reap the benefits of that hard work," she said. "The EO Media

Group saw a smart and profitable investment and a dedicated, loyal staff."

According to court documents, the EO Media Group bought the two community newspapers from Western Communications for \$775,000.

Rush said EO Media Group is only buying the newspapers and business equipment, not the real estate in La Grande. The Herald is in a leased space in downtown Baker City. The Observer will likely be relocating from its current home on Fifth Street to new office space in La Grande sometime this summer.

Rush, who will add La Grande and Baker City to his role as regional publisher of the Eastern Oregon group, said for the near term there are no significant operational changes planned.

"The EO Media Group is hiring all current employees in both La Grande and Baker City operations," he said. "Readers and advertisers will have the same printing, publishing and delivery schedule for both newspapers."

Brogoitti will remain in charge of day-to-day operations in both locations as the publisher.

The papers officially become part of the EO Media Group July 1.

ATVS

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remain off limits to ATV use under the proposed ordinance would be Hunter Road, McAlister Road, Ellis Road from the intersection of North Powder River Lane to the Anthony Lakes Highway, Gekeler Lane from the intersection of Pierce Road to McAlister Road, Buchanan Lane, portions of Palmer Junction Road, Bowman Road and Moses Creek Road.

Most of these roads would remain off limits to ATVs because of the existing speed and volume of car and truck traffic.

Union County would join a growing number of areas

where restrictions on ATV use are being lifted, including Baker, Umatilla and Grant counties. Presently in Union County, Union and Elgin are the only cities that have ordinances allowing ATV use on most of their roads.

The ordinance would not have any impact on how ATVs are used now for agricultural work, Anderes said.

A second hearing on the ordinance will be conducted July 17. Should the second reading be approved, the new ordinance would take effect immediately. The public will again be able to comment on the ordinance at the hearing, which will begin at 10 a.m.

at the Joseph Building Annex.

In other action items at Wednesday's meeting, the Union County Board of Commissioners ratified a three-year contract for employees who are part of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union. About 20 employees are members of the federation, including those who were working in the accounting, planning, assessor and county clerk offices.

Terms of the contract call for the employees to receive a 2.5% wage increase in 2019-20 and pay boosts the next two years based upon increases in the Consumer Price Index.

The agreement also calls for a new sixth step to be added to the AFSCME employees' salary schedule. The sixth step, to be added during the second year of the contract, would make it possible for employees at the top of the salary schedule to receive a step increase. All employees receive annual step increases until they reach the top of their salary schedule. The step increases are 5%.

Anderes said adding the sixth step is a good way of rewarding employees for loyalty and longevity.

The new contract also boosts the number of days the employees will receive for bereavement leave from two to three.

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