

Effort made to restore funding

■ Dispute resolution funding was cut 14% by Legislature

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Nancy Gromen of La Grande, executive director of the Eastern Oregon Mediation Center, felt optimistic about her agency's budget for the 2019-21 biennium as the Legislature's session neared its conclusion in mid-July.

Then the unexpected happened: The budget for the Oregon Office for Community Dispute Resolution, which funds the Eastern Oregon Mediation Center, was cut by about 14% by the Legislature.

This means that total funding for the Eastern Oregon Mediation Center in the 2019-21 biennium will drop \$5,200 to \$46,800.

Gromen said that prior to the cut, the Oregon Office for Community Dispute Resolution had been told by the Legislature it would receive a 5.5% increase.

She said the cut occurred when a Ways and Means subcommittee reallocated \$349,000 that was to have gone to OOCDR to a higher education program. The funding OOCDR receives is from the state's higher education budget because the program is administered by an office at the University of Oregon, Gromen said.

The Eastern Oregon Mediation Center and other mediation centers supported by OOCDR are now trying to get the Legislature to restore the \$349,000. Gromen asked the Union County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday to send letters to Rep. Greg Barreto (R-Cove), Sen. Mike Hansell (R-Athena) and members of the Ways and Means committee requesting the funding be restored during the one-month 2020 session of the Legislature in February.

The Union County Board of Commissioners voted to
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UNION COUNTY

A LONG BUT REWARDING JOURNEY

■ 'Showcase' \$5 million Grande Ronde Rappel Base opens at regional airport



Dick Mason/The Observer

Features of the new Grande Ronde Rappel Base include an operations room where helicopter take offs and landings are monitored and directed. Kyle Johnson, an assistant foreman at the base, checks the operation room's equipment on Wednesday.

By Dick Mason, The Observer

A race against winter and the fear of ominous fog in Pendleton. Both are parts of a lively story behind the creation of the new \$5 million Grande Ronde Rappel Base next to the La Grande / Union County Airport.

The story was celebrated Wednesday during an open house for the Grande Ronde Rappel Base, which was officially completed Sept. 1 but which has been operating since April. The base features a 10,000-square-foot building and four helicopter landing pads.

"It is a showcase," said Noel Livingston, Wallowa Whitman National Forest forest fire staff officer.

The base is for helicopter rappelling flights to wildfires. For a rappel, a helicopter hovers over the intended spot and the rappellers slide down ropes up to 250 feet with the help of a descent device.

The base's building features include a ready room filled with gear firefighters don before flying to a blaze, an equipment room, office space, a training room and an operations room filled with high-tech radio equipment. The operations room has striking angled windows that provide operators a degree of peripheral vision, allowing them to look south and north for additional helicopters coming in or taking off.

Construction of the rappel base was funded with a \$4 million loan Union County received from the state and a \$1 million Connect Oregon grant. The U.S. Forest Service is leasing the building from Union County.

The building of the new rappel base started in the late summer of 2018. Wellens Farewell Construction of Enterprise, the contractor for the project, was able to get the shell for the base's new building finished before winter hit. This made it possible



Dick Mason/The Observer

Miles Hancock, a member of Grande Ronde Rappel Base's staff, examines one of the new base's four helipads.

for interior work to be conducted in the winter when the weather was inclement, said Union County Public Works Director Doug Wright.

Wright was impressed with the perseverance Wellens Farwell staff showed in getting the shell of the building up before winter.

"At one point they had 35 people working at the site. They really did an outstanding job," Wright said.

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Supervisor Tom Montoya said that completion of the rappel base is a credit to unwavering cooperation between the county and the Forest Service.

"We have had a really strong and vital relationship," Montoya said.

Steve McClure, who retired in January after a three-decade career as a Union County Commissioner,

began working to get the rappel base built about seven years ago. He was inspired to do so because he said that La Grande is centrally located within the area of the Wallowa Whitman and Umatilla national forests and because its operation would bring additional money into Union County. He said that La Grande was in competition with Baker City and Pendleton for the rappel base.

McClure said that he accompanied many Union County officials on trips to Portland and Salem to talk with legislators and government representatives about getting state funding for the project and designing it.

"We often left at 4:30 in the morning (on trips to Western Oregon)," McClure said.

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Film festival set for 10th year

■ Eastern Oregon Film Festival opens Oct. 24 in La Grande

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

In 2009 Ian Clark and Mike Surber founded the Eastern Oregon Film Festival as a way to provide an outlet for local film productions and viewings. What was once a two-day event of movie screenings has turned into a weekend long festival including conversations with the artists, after-parties and live local music. EOFF 2019 will be hosted at three locations on Depot Street in La Grande Oct. 24-26, plus a screening at Eastern Oregon University on Friday night. This year's festival includes 10 feature-length films and 24 short films by local, national and international artists.

The festival has grown in many ways, according to Festival Director Christopher Jennings. From the size of the audience to the number of movies being shown and submitted, Jennings said the festival continues to evolve with each year.

"Our region is packed full of creative individuals. We've been building and cultivating an audience over the 10 years," Jennings said. "We've really worked on building a quality and intimate connection with the audience, the filmmakers and films."

The films shown come from a mixture of curated content and submitted works. The movies submitted range in content and quality, according to Jennings, and those selected are chosen by a committee made up of EOFF members and the board of directors. This year's committee was made of approximately 30 members who spent several days viewing more than 100 of the submissions.

"We think it's important to have that mixed blend so people who come to the festival know they are going to see good films," Jennings said.

According to Jennings, topical documentaries are what were the biggest in terms of submission and selections this year. Some of the documentaries chosen include "Pigeon Kings," about a group from South Los Angeles who train pigeons for the sport of Aviation Acrobatics, and "I Am Human," a female-produced and directed sci-fi documentary about the co-evolution of humans and technology. This film will be shown at EOU in the hopes of bringing the community and the college students together.

Festival-goers this year
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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Friday 39 LOW A little rain
Saturday 48/36 Showers
Sunday 49/41 Brief showers

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Issue 124
3 sections, 20 pages
La Grande, Oregon

