



Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

Phil Wright takes over The Observer newsroom starting on Nov. 18. He joins the La Grande newspaper after nearly 15 years in Pendleton at the East Oregonian.

WRIGHT

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experienced journalist like Phil Wright,” Rush said. “Observer readers will soon learn what East Oregonian readers already know: Phil is dogged in seeking out important local news and reporting those stories faithfully and accurately. He’s a true community journalist with a passion for rural Oregon.”

Wright is a 1986 graduate of Pendleton High School and a 1993 graduate of then-Western Oregon State College. He later earned a master’s degree in English from Portland State University.

“Obviously, we are losing a very talented reporter here at the EO,” said Cutler, a former editor/publisher of The Observer. “And while we are sad to see someone with Phil’s talent leave, we are happy that he’s getting a chance to lead the newsroom in La Grande. I think the staff in La Grande and the readers of The Observer are going to see a number of positive changes as Phil gets acclimated to Union County.”

Brogoitti said at the end of the day, Wright’s commitment to quality journalism, along with his work in Pendleton, were among the reasons he was the right fit.

“As a veteran reporter for the East Oregonian, Phil understands what it means to be from Northeast Oregon and the values and cultural differences in rural communities,” she said. “It’s important that The Observer’s news coverage resonates with our readers and that we are bringing them the best that journalism has to offer. Phil brings that element in spades.”

The Observer was purchased by EO Media Group in July, along with the Baker City Herald, from Western Communications of Bend.

Western Communications 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.



Courtesy Photo / Ashley O'Toole

This is how a portion of the lower Morgan Lake Road area appears via a drone photo.

FIRE

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have fire protection for their houses for the first time ever, said Mike McAllister, who has lived on lower Morgan Lake Road for decades. McAllister has been a leader in the effort to get fire protection for this area.

The fire protection option became available after the residents banded together to successfully request that their properties be annexed individually into the fire district. This means that residents who agree to pay additional money in property taxes, submit the proper paperwork to the coun-

ty and the state, pay required fees and get proper board approval will receive emergency service from La Grande Rural Fire if department officials determine that their fire trucks can reach the home.

Jim Kreider, who with his wife, Fuji, owns a home in the lower Morgan Lake Road area, is delighted that it appears they will soon have fire protection for their home.

“It sets my mind at ease,” he said.

He noted that a Union County report in the 1980s indicated homes in the Morgan Lake area faced the highest wildfire risk of any in the county.

Meet the man changing the way Oregon responds to mental health, addiction

By Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Finding a director to run a key new division of the Oregon Health Authority vexed Pat Allen for months.

The agency director worked with hundreds of internal and external stakeholders to search for someone who would bring experience and familiarity with Oregon’s forlorn behavioral health system. Allen needed someone to overhaul critical state services provided to the one in six Oregonians dealing with mental illness or substance abuse.

“Over those months, I became convinced that every state’s behavioral health system is screwed up, but they’re each screwed up in their own way,” Allen said. “I really thought that local expertise was critical. We took several runs at trying to find the right candidate and never really got there.”

He found that those recruited to lead the behavioral health subdivision were well aware of the challenges facing Oregon’s emergency in mental health.

Mass homelessness, higher than average rates of addiction and suicide, a state psychiatric hospital nearly full and a system of community mental health programs that severely lack resources all needed attention.

Taking on the task of renovating the unit of state government responsible for looking after Oregon’s most troubled citizens was not attractive.

But where others saw a chaotic mess, Steve Allen saw opportunity.

At the time of the Oregon Health Authority’s search, Steve Allen, 63, was working with lawmakers, advocacy groups and behavioral health specialists to craft policy that would become Senate Bill 937. He was a consultant from the Washington D.C.-based Council of State Governments Justice Center tasked to help Oregon. He helped design the plan to infuse \$10.6 million in grants to Oregon’s counties, tribes and regional consortia to strengthen services for people who frequently cycle through jails, courts, and hospitals.

“I wanted to look at what the state could do differently to slow or stop that trajectory, and what additional services could be provided,” Allen said.

During his work on the 2019 legislation, Allen had the opportunity to see lot of the state and meet many passionate people in communities dealing with these problems. Oregon was the 10th state he’d worked in as a consultant and the only one that prompted him to share observations with his wife back home in Wisconsin.

“I told her this was a place we could live for two reasons. One, Oregon is just gorgeous, but as importantly, I was really taken by the people here trying to work differently and improve systems,” he said.

Pat Allen co-chaired the SB 937 work group, and the pair — who are not related — became familiar with

one another’s history, strengths and leadership styles.

“I was just so impressed with the quality of (Pat’s) leadership — clear, thoughtful, decisive self-reflective. He’s the kind of leader that I knew I could work for,” Allen said. “Having just worked in 10 states, the atmosphere here in Oregon was that so many people were coming together and saying, we need to create an environment in which we can do better for the people of Oregon.”

One day after a work group meeting, Allen casually asked Health Authority director how someone might apply for the job of behavioral health director.

Pat Allen pointed him in the right direction and went about his business, but hours later, he picked up the phone and rang the consultant.

“I called him up and said, ‘Steve, I’m kind of dense, but are you the person that’s interested in the job?’” Pat Allen said.

The nationwide search came down to a conversation between the two, and it couldn’t have come at a better time. The previous interim behavioral health director had just retired.

“I came to realize a couple things. First, (Steve) is an honest-to-God national expert with experience in the trenches delivering care and running and operating statewide systems,” Pat Allen said. “Also, he just has an incredible way with stakeholders and clients, and he brings no ego.”

BEVERAGE

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The commissioner also said that as a member of the Natural Resource Committee for the Oregon Association of Counties and the National Association of Counties, she will continue to work on natural resource issues that are important to Union County.

She said she wants to continue strengthening connections between Union County and its cities.

“Building a relationship between the county and all of the cities (in it) has been a priority during my time as commissioner. Working together, we can get things done.”

— Donna Beverage, Union County commissioner

“Building a relationship between the county and all of the cities (in it) has been a priority during my time as commissioner. Working together, we can get things done,” Beverage said.

Beverage noted that she attends a regular meeting of Union County mayors. By

doing this, she and the mayors get to know one another, making it easier to ask for help when a need arises for something such as advice or equipment.

Beverage’s position is the only one of the three on the Union County Board of Commissioners that will be

up for election in 2020.

Beverage and anyone who files to challenge her will be on the ballot for the May 19 primary election. If one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, that individual will be elected. However, if no candidates top the 50% mark, the top two finishers will run against one another in a November 2020 runoff election.

The deadline for filing for the Union County Commissioner election is March 10.

TEXTS

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that old texts sent in the spring suddenly went through. Two people said they figured out the original messages were never received. It’s not clear why this months-long delay happened. Phone companies blamed others and offered no further explanations.

Stephanie Bovee, a 28-year-old from Portland, woke up at 5 a.m. to a text from her sister that said just “omg.” She immediately thought something had happened to her newborn nephew at the hospital.

She started calling everyone. Her sister and her sister’s husband didn’t answer. She woke up her mom, freaking her out. It was three hours before she learned that everything was fine and the text was an odd anomaly.

“Now it’s funny,” she said. “But out of context, it was not cool.”

Bovee figured out that people were getting some of her old texts that failed to go through when her sister and a co-worker both got texts that she had sent in February. The text her sister received wished her a happy Valentine’s Day.

Mobile carriers offered unhelpful explanations for the weird-text phenomenon, which appeared to be widespread, at least according to social media.

A Sprint spokeswoman said it resulted from a “maintenance update” for messaging platforms at multiple U.S. carriers and would not explain further. T-Mobile called it a “third party vendor issue.” Verizon and AT&T did not answer questions.

Marissa Figueroa, a 25-year-old from California, got an unwanted message

from an ex she had stopped talking to — and then he got one from her as well. Neither actually sent them last night, both said. Figueroa couldn’t figure it out, even worrying that her ex was messing with her, until she saw reports of this happening to others.

“It didn’t feel great,” she said. “It just was not good for me and my mental health to be in contact with him.”

A friend who’d just re-entered his life got a mystifying message from Joseph Gomez at 5:32 a.m. Thursday. In that text, Gomez seemed to assume she was on her way over to his house so they could order a Lyft.

It took a half hour of back-and-forth texting and help from a screenshot to clear up the situation. Can their relationship recover? Gomez, 22, said it was “confusion, then awkward, and then funny.” No mixed messages there.

EOU

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exceptional job of running it. She noted that his understanding of it is enhanced by the fact that he was in a TRIO program while attending college.

“He is perfect for the job,” she said.

Lund is impressed with the growth of Eastern’s online program because so many universities now have online programs, creating a very competitive environment across the nation.

Lund, who served as dean of Eastern’s distance education program in the 1990s, added that she hopes Eastern’s on-campus enrollment

can grow in the future. She said this is critical because on-campus programs add to the vitality of the entire campus and community.

David Nelson, chair of Eastern’s board of trustees, said there are a number of reasons to believe that EOU’s enrollment will continue its promising growth trend. One is the addition of baseball and women’s lacrosse, which was announced on Oct. 12. Eastern will field teams in both sports beginning in the spring of 2021.

It is anticipated that the addition of both sports will boost Eastern’s 2020-21 enrollment by 45 students, Seydel said.

Nelson said the work of EOU President Tom Insko is another reason the school’s enrollment may continue to improve. He said that Insko has an excellent reputation in the region and across the state and provides Eastern with stability. Insko, who grew up in Elgin and is an EOU graduate, is in his fifth year as Eastern’s president.

Nelson also feels good about the vast market of potential online students Eastern has the ability to serve. He explained there

are about 40 million people in the United States who have attended college but do not have a degree. Many are looking for a school where they can complete their degree requirements, he said.

Nelson, a former state legislator who lives in Pendleton, said he believes Eastern may be on its way to reaching a goal Insko set about three years ago — to have 5,000 full-time equivalent students online and 2,500 FTE students on campus by 2029.

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