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Mounties win on PKs

Inside Wrong way driver on I-84, 2A
Public impeachment hearings begin, 10A

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Good day to our valued subscriber Kent Hug of La Grande

Traffic may slow in Union

■ Council votes to purchase radar speed sign

By Dick Mason
The Observer

More motor vehicle drivers in Union may soon find themselves easing off their accelerators.

The Union City Council voted Tuesday night to have the city purchase a radar speed sign for \$3,265. The portable sign will display the speeds vehicles are traveling and will serve two purposes — slow drivers down by alerting them of their speed and collect traffic data.

The data will indicate how frequently drivers exceed the speed limit, the average speed traveled, traffic volume and more, said City of Union Administrator Doug Wiggins. The sign, which will be powered by rechargeable batteries, will be attached to posts and easy to move.

Union Mayor Leonard Flint supported the purchase of the sign, noting that it would help the city crack down on speeders. He explained that the city, using data from the radar sign, would be able to recommend that the Union County Sheriff's Office patrol certain areas.

It was suggested at the meeting that the council might be wise to purchase two radar signs instead of one. Flint though said this would not be necessary considering how portable the sign will be. He also said he believes the city should see how successful one sign is before it purchases a second.

In other matters at Tuesday's meeting, the council discussed the status of the home buildings at the old Union ranger station. The ranger station, near the northwest edge of town, was built in 1937 and deeded to the City of Union in 1993. The ranger station has a four-bedroom house, a three-bedroom house, a two-bedroom house, an old oil storage building, a barn, a utility building, a utility garage and

See Union / Page 5A

GRANDE RONDE HOSPITAL

UNDER SCRUTINY:

Former La Grande cardiologist accused of implanting unnecessary pacemakers



Andrew Cutler/EO Media Group

A recently unsealed federal whistleblower lawsuit claimed that a longtime Portland-area cardiologist, Emilia Arden, implanted more than 100 patients with unnecessary pacemakers at La Grande's Grande Ronde Hospital.

By Nick Budnick, Portland Tribune

PORTLAND — A recently unsealed federal whistleblower lawsuit claimed that a longtime Portland-area cardiologist, Emilia Arden, implanted more than 100 patients with unnecessary pacemakers at Grande Ronde Hospital in Eastern Oregon.

The whistleblower dropped the case late last month, however, leaving unanswered questions in its wake about whether the allegations were true. The lawyer who filed the case says those questions should be answered.

"These are some of the most egregious allegations in a (whistleblower suit) that I've seen," said Jason T. Brown, a former FBI agent whose New Jersey law practice specializes in whistleblower cases in which the plaintiff can collect a percentage of money recouped by the federal government.

Brown filed the case on behalf of Kathy Onwezen, a cardiology nurse practitioner who worked at Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande. She dropped the case after federal officials determined the hospital already had refunded Medicare for any inappropriate surgery reimbursements, limiting the suit's ability to recoup funds, according to Brown.

"I think anybody who was seen by this doctor should be notified" and consult with an independent cardiologist, Brown said. "If someone got an unnecessary heart operation, then from my perspective they deserve compensation."

Arden, 60, the cardiologist named in the suit, did not respond to requests for comments. Nor did Onwezen.

In an email, Mardi Ford, the hospital's communications director, substantiated significant elements of the lawsuit as well as Brown's account

that Medicare was reimbursed for potentially inappropriate surgeries. Ford said the hospital investigated but the findings are confidential.

"After concerns were raised regarding pacemaker implants, the hospital voluntarily performed an internal investigation," she wrote. "That investigation is covered by Oregon's peer review privilege. Dr. Arden is no longer employed by the hospital. The hospital issued certain Medicare reimbursement refunds."

The suit alleged that Arden was "induced" by gifts such as free travel from device maker sales representatives.

Worked in Portland area

Before working at Grande Ronde Hospital, Arden worked in Portland, Hillsboro and Beaverton for a decade. She had staff privileges to perform surgeries at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in southwest Portland from 2007 to 2015 and implanted "lots" of pacemakers there, according to a Grande Ronde Hospital newsletter.

In Portland, she appears to have worked with the same device maker sales representatives she later did at Grande Ronde. The sales reps often attend surgeries to provide technical support.

"Both reps had worked with her (at St. Vincent) before, so that was very helpful," a nurse said in an article in the Grande Ronde Hospital newsletter

See Scrutiny / Page 5A



Arden

Other cases

Allegations of bribes and kickbacks to promote sales have plagued device manufacturers over the last decade.

In 2014, for instance, Biotronik, a German firm whose U.S. headquarters are in Lake Oswego, paid a \$4.9 million settlement to the federal government over alleged kickbacks. Biotronik was named in the Arden lawsuit. In 2011, St. Jude — a subsidiary of Abbott also named in the suit — paid \$16 million to settle a federal probe of alleged kickbacks to doctors.

And the Oregon Department of Justice sued two Salem doctors for failing to notify patients they had received special payments for using Biotronik products. The device manufacturers have consistently denied wrongdoing.

— Nick Budnick, Portland Tribune

"After concerns were raised regarding pacemaker implants, the hospital voluntarily performed an internal investigation. That investigation is covered by Oregon's peer review privilege. Dr. Arden is no longer employed by the hospital. The hospital issued certain Medicare reimbursement refunds."

— Mardi Ford, Grande Ronde Hospital communications director

INDEX

Business..... 1B Dear Abby..... 8B Opinion..... 4A
Classified..... 3B Horoscope..... 5B Sports..... 6A
Comics..... 7B Lottery..... 2A Sudoku..... 7B
Crossword... 5B Obituaries..... 3A Weather..... 8B

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