

EDUCATION

Merle Comfort honored by state association

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Merle Comfort generated a wave of excitement Saturday at the Oregon School Boards Association convention in Portland.

Comfort, a La Grande leader known for his ability to calm turbulent waters, brought people at the convention to their feet when he accepted a high association honor — State School Board Member of the Year. The award salutes Comfort for his 20-1/2 years of work as a member of the La Grande School Board and the eight years he has spent on the InterMountain Education Association Board.

Comfort learned earlier he would receive the award but was moved by the moment.

“It was more emotional for me than I thought it would be,” he said.

Larry Glaze, director of operations for the InterMountain Education Service District and former La Grande School District superintendent, said Comfort deserves of the honor.

“He has an extraordinary commitment to public service. I have never seen anyone more devoted to public service than he is,” Glaze said.

Comfort served on the La Grande School Board from 1991-99 and from 2007 to the present. He is the board chair. Comfort has helmed the board during tumultuous periods when the school district had to deal with issues such as serious financial problems.

“Merle was instrumental in keeping the situation under control,” Glaze said, describing Comfort as “cool as a cucumber in stressful situations.” He also said Comfort’s combination of common sense and critical thinking skills serve him well as a board member.



Comfort

Colleagues agree Comfort played an important role in the passage of the La Grande School District’s \$31.5 million bond in 2014. The bond funded the construction of a new Central Elementary School building and major renovations throughout the school district.

Mark Mulvihill, superintendent of the InterMountain ESD, said Comfort’s collaborative style was instrumental in getting the Umatilla-Morrow ESD and the Union-Baker ESD to merge into the InterMountain ESD in 2011. The change helped save the Union-Baker ESD, which was experiencing financial difficulties.

“He made a major contribution,” Mulvihill said. “It would have been much more difficult without his help.”

Joe Justice, a member of the La Grande School Board for nine years, said “it is amazing” how Comfort, despite his other responsibilities, is able to serve the school district with such a degree of consistency.

“Being a school board member is a very thankless job but also a very, very necessary one,” Justice said. “Having someone like Merle (on the board) is invaluable.”

Warming station receives state funding it can't use

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Union County Warming Station received more than \$55,000 in funding from the state but can't use any of it.

The organization behind the shelter has to hold on to the funds from the Oregon Housing and Community Services because an appeal has halted the process of it moving into a new facility that the shelter is renting near downtown La Grande. The appeal is currently under consideration by the La Grande City Council. If the council rejects the appeal, the warming station will be granted the necessary conditional use permit. Until then, the warming station is not able to provide a warm place to sleep to whoever needs it during colder months.

“The appeal of the permit

caused more than one problem,” said Debora Smith, the warming station’s board treasurer.

The Oregon Housing and Community Services provided more than \$1.7 million Nov. 14 to organizations across the state to help local organizations provide shelter to those without homes. Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, serving Baker, Grant, Union and Wallowa counties, received \$55,790. All of the funds are going to the Union County Warming Station.

Smith said that’s because the warming station is the only shelter in the immediate region. She said while she doesn’t believe there are services that would bring people to the Union County Warming Station from neighboring counties, the shelter will welcome anyone who comes. She explained the



Observer file photo

The current appeal on the Union County Warming Station has kept the organization behind the station from being able to access more than \$55,000 in funding.

majority of the money will go toward retrofitting the station’s new location at 2008 Third St., including for new sprinklers and an alarm system in addition to making the building ADA compliant. Any money left over will help cover rent, utilities, food and supplies for running the shelter.

Cody Vela, president of the Union County Warming Station’s board, said the organization wants to serve those going through the crisis of housing instability — but this mission has been

delayed by the appeal, filed by local businessman Al Adelsberger over concerns about the size and location of the winter shelter. Now the station’s board, and those who need its services as winter approaches, look forward to a public hearing on the appeal set for Dec. 4 at La Grande Middle School.

“Our hopes are (the city council) will reverse the appeal,” Vela said. “And our hopes are once it is reversed, we can immediately begin the work that needs to be done to open our doors.”

No plea yet on Imbler arson case

■ Kael Knight makes appearance in Union County Circuit Court on Tuesday

By Phil Wright
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A plea deal looks to be in the works for arson defendant Kael Knight of Imbler.

Knight, 19, appeared Tuesday afternoon in Union County Circuit Court via video from the nearby county jail. He sat silent while deputy district attorney Greg Baxter and defense attorney Rick Dall updated the court on the possibility of reaching a plea.

Dall told Circuit Judge Thomas

Powers any delay is not about whether Knight is mentally fit to proceed but about the district attorney’s office needing to check all the boxes, such as talking to victims.



Knight

Knight faces one count of evidence tampering and two each of first- and second-degree arson. Tampering is a misdemeanor, but the arson charges are felonies.

The state has accused Knight of setting four fires in the Imbler area, on Sept. 4, 21 and 24. The first three fires destroyed abandoned buildings

and the last was next to a business. Imbler Rural Fire Chief Mike Barry at Knight’s arraignment on Sept. 26 told the court the fires seemed to be escalating toward a more public threat.

Baxter told the court he is working to resolve the case soon, perhaps in a matter of a few weeks. He said the hang-up is finding an appropriate place for Knight after jail because he may have “potential mental health issues.”

Powers set Dec. 10 for Knight to submit his plea.



Eastern Oregon, you're our kind of communities.

Respect, responsiveness and commitment. That's been our approach for more than 125 years, and it's what you and your business deserve.

When you partner with us for your small business lending needs, you can count on us to listen, learn and get to know you and your business so we can provide solutions specifically tailored to your needs.

Others may say we are too big for you, but we aren't. We are here for you. Just as we always have been. We're proud to call this place home, and honored to partner with you as we all reach for the stars.

Let's create tomorrow, together.
bannerbank.com



Highest in Customer Satisfaction
with Retail Banking in the Northwest,
Three Years in a Row



For J.D. Power 2019 award information, visit jdpower.com/awards

Member FDIC