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Good day to our valued subscriber Mary Brown of La Grande

Liberty receives major grant

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Walt Disney classic “Sleeping Beauty” was released in 1959, the year La Grande’s Liberty Theatre closed.

Today, the Liberty Theatre is closer to reawakening after a long slumber, just as Princess Aurora does in “Sleeping Beauty.”

Liberty Theatre has a chance to reopen in about a year thanks to a \$225,000 grant its foundation received from the Ford Family Foundation.

The grant allows the foundation to forge ahead with its renovation project, said Michael Jaeger, president of the Liberty Theatre Foundation board.

“This significant contribution to the overall plan for theater restoration puts the project on track to open sometime in late 2020,” Jaeger said in a news release.

“The Ford Family grant will fund the electrical system, HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning), plumbing and some reconstruction costs associated with the auditorium.”

Jaeger said the Ford Family Foundation grant is the largest the Liberty Theatre Foundation has received for the renovation project.

Once the electrical system, HVAC, plumbing and auditorium reconstruction work is complete, ceiling restoration and fire suppression system work will be done. After that, the balance of the work shifts to restoring the theater.

News of the Ford Family Foundation grant came Friday, two months after the installation of a steel frame for the theater’s canopy. Union-based Quiet Life Construction, the prime contractor for the Liberty Theatre project, used a forklift to hoist the 2,000-pound frame in place for welding it to the building. La Grande metal

See Liberty / Page 5A



Staff photo by Phil Wright

Cook Mona Esquiro checks on the yams Thursday morning at the Presbyterian Friendship Center, La Grande, in preparation for the community Thanksgiving Day meal from the nonprofit Neighbors Together.

Turkey, potatoes, stuffing and gravy

More than enough of each to go around at annual community Thanksgiving meal

By Phil Wright, The Observer

LA GRANDE —

Mona Esquiro had plenty on her mind Thursday morning in La Grande, but her focus was on one thing: “Gravy, gravy, gravy,” she sang.

Lots of gravy. Turkey gravy. Somewhere around 10 gallons of the stuff.

Esquiro headed up cooking the annual community Thanksgiving dinner at the Presbyterian Friendship Center, just as she has the three years prior for the charitable nonprofit Neighbors Together, which organizes the event.

“It’s fun,” she said. “I have so many volunteers. I just have to tell them what to do. It’s really good.”

She had the hard part out of the way. Esquiro said she spent Wednesday in the center’s industrial kitchen cooking 10 turkeys, each about 15 pounds.

“I had all the ovens going. It was so hot in here,” she exclaimed.

And there were the 100 pounds of russets for the mashed potatoes, and 50 pounds of yams, and the rolls and cranberry sauce and more. And the pies for dessert. Esquiro said volunteers would provide anywhere from 50 to 75 pies.

All together, she said, the goods make about 200 meals. So there has to be plenty of gravy.

“They love my gravy,” she said. “And of course they put it on the potatoes, the stuffing and everything.”



Staff photo by Phil Wright

Volunteers serve up the goods Thursday during the annual community Thanksgiving Day meal at the Presbyterian Friendship Center, La Grande. The nonprofit Neighbors Together took over the event four years ago and prepares around 200 meals for the day, including plenty of pie.

Hanna Voetberg said she is all about the gravy. The president of Neighbors Together, she told Esquiro she wants her mashed potatoes “swimming in it.”

Esquiro replied she’s a stuffing person.

“I can always have mashed potatoes and gravy,” she said. “But stuffing?”

The event opened to the public at about noon and started serving around a half hour later. Voetberg said the meal is for anyone who wants it. Neighbors Together took over the event four years ago, and that Thanksgiving members of the EOU football team came.

“Those guys could really pack it away,” Voetberg recalled.

And this year, the university’s women soccer team attended. The team is getting ready for a return to the NAIA national tournament’s final location in Orange Beach, Alabama.

Kathleen Hollingshead said she has

been coming to the community meal year after year for two decades. While the food always is tasty, she said it’s the community that keeps her coming back. She may not be able to donate, she said, but participation matters. If no one shows up for these gatherings, the events tend to die out, she said.

Couple Destiny Fouts and Chester Wilson said they were first timers. Wilson said he was happy he didn’t have to clean and do the dishes this Thanksgiving, and they both said the dinner had everything you could ask for.

“Kind of like Grandma used to make it, really,” Fouts said.

Fouts and Wilson ended up with a fair bit of dessert. During the event’s raffle, she won an apple pie.

Going home with extras is just fine with Esquiro. She said the aim is to provide for those who need it.

“Nobody goes hungry here,” she said.

Oregon’s economy remains strong

By Jake Thomas, Saphara Harrell and Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — It’s a good time to be a holiday shopper in Oregon.

Despite fears of a recession earlier this year, Oregon’s economy remains stronger than much of the country. Unlike a decade ago, when the economy was reeling from a recession, Oregonians have jobs and money. That puts them in a better position to be generous this holiday season.

Hovering at 4%, the state’s unemployment rate is at historic lows. Oregon had the second-fastest growing median income in 2018. At 13%, Oregon’s poverty rate is below the national rate and the lowest since 2000.

“We’re in unprecedented times right now,” said John Topagna, president and economist at Portland-based consulting firm ECONorthwest. “We’re in the eleventh year of an economic expansion, and no other Americans have ever lived through that.”

While Oregon’s economic indicators are strong going into the busiest shopping season of the year, there are signs that trouble some economists. There have also been some blips in the otherwise strong economy that resulted in job losses.

Still, local shoppers, retailers and bankers remain optimistic going into the holidays.

Umpqua Bank, a regional bank with branches across Oregon, reports strong consumer confidence. Annette Campista, a senior vice president at the bank and regional director of business banking, said she’s seen an increase in business loan applications, an indicator of economic health.

Campista said the bank has seen an uptick in consumers saving. She said many customers have leveraged low interest rates to refinance their homes and consolidate debt.

Jeff Bailey, the president and CEO of the Heppner-based Bank of Eastern Oregon, similarly reported increases in deposits, “steady to better” activity on loans and overall faith in the economy despite the threat trade wars pose to the region’s agriculture.

“From a national perspective, consumer spending is still very strong,” said Bailey. “In small towns in rural

See Economy / Page 5A

INDEX

Classified.....3B Horoscope.....5B Opinion.....4A
Comics.....7B Lottery.....2A Outdoors.....1B
Crossword.....5B Record.....3A Spiritual Life.....6A
Dear Abby.....8B Obituaries.....3A Sports.....7A

WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
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