

Counting down: The Observer’s top 10 stories of 2019

10 — The purchase of the Flying J

The restaurant at the Flying J truck stop on the outskirts of La Grande was a popular eatery and meeting spot. But on Nov. 3, owner Brian Waldrop shut it down with little notice to the community.

Public records, however, revealed Pilot Travel Centers — which does business as Pilot Flying J — bought the place for a mere \$10, although there could have been other parts of the transaction that were just between the parties. Records with the La Grande Building Department showed Pilot Flying J plans an \$800,000 remodel of the restaurant interior, including putting in a Subway restaurant and a Mama Deluca’s pizza place, effectively nixing the establishment for meetups.

After The Observer published the story, Pilot Flying J sent a news release about the acquisition and coming renovations.



Staff photo by Phil Wright

PilotTravel Centers — which does business as Pilot Flying J — became the new corporate owner of the Flying J truck stop on the outskirts of La Grande. The restaurant was a popular eatery and meeting spot. But on Nov. 3, local owners shut it down with little notice to the community.

9 — Union passes school bond

Voters in the Union School District in November overwhelmingly approved a \$4 million bond to help pay for major upgrades to its buildings. The passage — 65.7% to 34.3% — in the small district qualified for a matching grant from the Oregon School Capital Improvement Program, thus giving the district \$8 million.

The Union School Board developed a list of 18 projects for the funds, from security improvements to repairing roofs and crumbling concrete stairs. The board in December selected the Wenaha Group as the construction management provider for the three-year renovation plan.



Staff photo by Ronald Bond

Chop Shop knife artist Derrick Erickson cuts a yellow watermelon soon after the 2019 opening of Market Place Fresh Foods in downtown La Grande.



Staff photo by Dick Mason

Students exit from the north entrance of Union High School Nov. 18. Union voters passed a \$4 million bond Nov. 5 to help pay for major upgrades to the school.

8 — Market Place Fresh Foods opens in downtown La Grande

The grocery store at the corner of Fourth Street and Adams Avenue in La Grande re-opened its doors to customers in May, giving downtown a place to shop and dine in.

New co-owners Marco Rennie and David Yount bought the business in May 2018 and rebranded it with a focus on community while keeping it part of the larger Market Place complex, along with Le BeBe Cakes and the Market Place Underground.

7 — Boardman to Hemingway transmission line moves forward in state approval process

The massive project to build a 293-mile, 500-kilovolt transmission line across much of Eastern Oregon continued to trudge through the Oregon Department of Energy’s multi-year review. Even so, the La Grande City Council in April declared its opposition to the project, which would pass through Union County and the La Grande area.

Two groups based in La Grande — Stop B2H Coalition and Greater Hells Canyon Council — filed a lawsuit in federal court in November to block the project, contending the Bureau of Land

Management and U.S. Forest Service, which authorized the transmission line, failed to adequately review the potential environmental and other effects of the power line that Idaho Power Company wants to build.

The state energy department’s Energy Facility Siting Council met in Pendleton in December to review the project’s draft review order and take comments from the public and Idaho Power.

6 — Union County Sheriff’s Office makes arrest in 2018 Cove homicide

Loretta Williams was at her home in Cove on the phone with 911 early Nov. 18, 2018, when dispatchers heard her confront a man and then the sound of a loud noise. Law enforcement arrived moments later. Williams was dead, the victim of at least one gunshot.

The Union County Sheriff’s Office on Feb. 21

arrested Ronald Dwight Lee, 72, of La Grande, for her murder. Lee and Williams were getting a divorce, according to Union County Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen.

The following month, the sheriff’s office arrested Steve Edward Hamilton, 66, of La Grande, also for the murder and for conspiracy to commit murder. Rasmussen said the two men knew each other, but he has not divulged details of that relationship.

The district attorney’s office at that time amended its charges against Lee to include conspiracy to commit murder.

State court records show Hamilton’s defense attorney, Kara Davis of Pendleton, asked for a conference to settle the case. Umatilla County Circuit Judge Dan Hill is presiding over that meeting on Jan. 7, 2020, in La Grande.

Lee and his defense attorney, Dean Gushwa of Pendleton, meanwhile, are heading to trial beginning April 1, 2020.



Staff photo by Sabrina Thompson

A train in early December passes behind Calvary Chapel in downtown La Grande. The blare of train horns were an all-day occurrence that interrupted sermons at the church. That changed Dec. 27 when La Grande’s quiet zone, banning most train horns, went into effect.

Happy New Year

The old is gone

And the new is here.

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