

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

5 — La Grande quiets train horns

Train whistles at all hours off the day and night in La Grande are all but gone. The city after years of work received the federal approval for a Quiet Zone along a stretch of tracks close to downtown.

The La Grande City Council in February 2017 adopted City Manager Robert Strope’s priority to developing a zone free of train horns most of the time, and in October the council gave Strope the approval to notify Union Pacific Railroad, the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration of the city’s intent to establish a Quiet Zone.

The city had to pay about \$200,000 in safety improvements near railroad crossings and undergo crossing inspections. On Dec. 4, Mayor Steve Clements announced the city received approval of the zone, which officially went into effect at 12:01 a.m. Dec. 27.

4 — Springs floods affect Union County

Heavy rains and fast-melting snow in April combined to flood roads throughout Union County and turned thousands of acres of agricultural land into virtual lakes. The rising waters ended up causing little structural damage, but farmers in the Grande Ronde Valley saw the water cover acres and acres of their production land.

Blue Mountain Seeds of Imbler may have taken the hardest hit. The flood covered 1,000 acres of seed production land, ruining the harvest of the crop there until 2021.

The floodwaters drenched neighboring counties as well. The Wallowa County Board of Commissioners declared a state of emergency due to floods. And emergency management efforts were in full swing in Pendleton as McKay Creek crested its banks and covered residential streets and a city park.

3 — EO Media Group buys The Observer

The 123-year-old Observer was on rocky ground when its parent company Western Communications Inc. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January. Western Communications came out of bankruptcy seven years earlier but owed more than \$7 million. The company’s plan was to dump The Observer, The Bend Bulletin, The Baker City Herald and other newspapers it owned to pay off the debt.

The EO Media Group, owner of the East Oregonian, The Daily Astorian and Hermiston Herald, among others, saw the opportunity to save fellow local papers. The Oregon company was the winning bidder at the bankruptcy auction of the sale of the businesses and became one of the largest media companies in the state.

Throughout the bankruptcy ordeal, The Observer never stopped publishing, even when employees could not depend on a paycheck from

2 — La Grande High School wins state football title

The La Grande High School Tigers tore through opponents all season and did not slow down in the playoffs.

The Tigers received a police escort out of town the afternoon of Nov. 30 on the way to Hermiston to take on the Banks Braves, the defending Class 4A champion.

La Grande relied on a historic defense to stifle Banks and keep the out of the end zone. The Braves also put up a tough defense, but the Tigers stayed with their plan and capitalized on scoring opportunities, including a pick six. The last seconds ticked off the game clock, and La Grande won 21-0.

The win came almost 45 years to the day since the last time La Grande in 1974 took home the state championship.

1 — Union County Warming Station becomes central issue in La Grande

The Union County Warming Station planned to open in October at 2008 Third St., its third home in as many years. But developer Al Adelsberger filed an appeal against the conditional use permit for the shelter. The move blocked the opening and set up the La Grande City Council for a heavy public hearing the evening of Dec. 4 to consider the appeal.

Roughly 200 locals filled the commons area at the La Grande Middle School for the hearing and dozens spoke, many with concerns, some with ire, some with angst and tears.

People supporting the appeal argued the Third Street site was not a good fit because of its location near downtown. Some said warming station organizers needed better safety policies and should provide thorough services for the homeless. Those against the appeal and for a swift opening of the station argued the Third Street facility was the best available for what



The La Grande High SchoolTigers celebrate their win in the Nov. 30 title game in Hermiston. TheTigers defeated Banks, 21-0, for their first football title since 1974.

the nonprofit could afford and the shelter was the only service offering meals and a warm place to stay the night in the winter.

The council listened during the course of almost four hours that evening. Councilors said they heard little in the way of facts about adverse effects the shelter would create. The council voted 7-0 to deny the appeal. And Mayor Steve Clements made a promise to involve the city council in working with both sides toward a more comprehensive solution to local homelessness.

Adelsberger has held off on appealing the council’s decision to the state Land Use Board of Appeals. And he has been moving forward on bringing together members of the faith community, business owners, nonprofits and local government officials to open the doors of a transitional housing facility. Some 20 acres near Walmart in Island City is available for the plan, and while the full realization might be 10 years out, Adelsberger said the focus is on what the community can do in the next 12 months.



Developer Al Adelsberger urges the La Grande City Council during its public hearing in December to uphold the appeal he filed to prevent the Union County Warming Station from opening at 2008Third St. The council denied the appeal with a unanimous vote, and Adelsberger is working toward a transitional housing facility.



Flooding in April submerged thousands of acres in Union and Wallowa counties, including this portion of the agricultural land between Imbler and Cove in the Grande Ronde Valley.



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