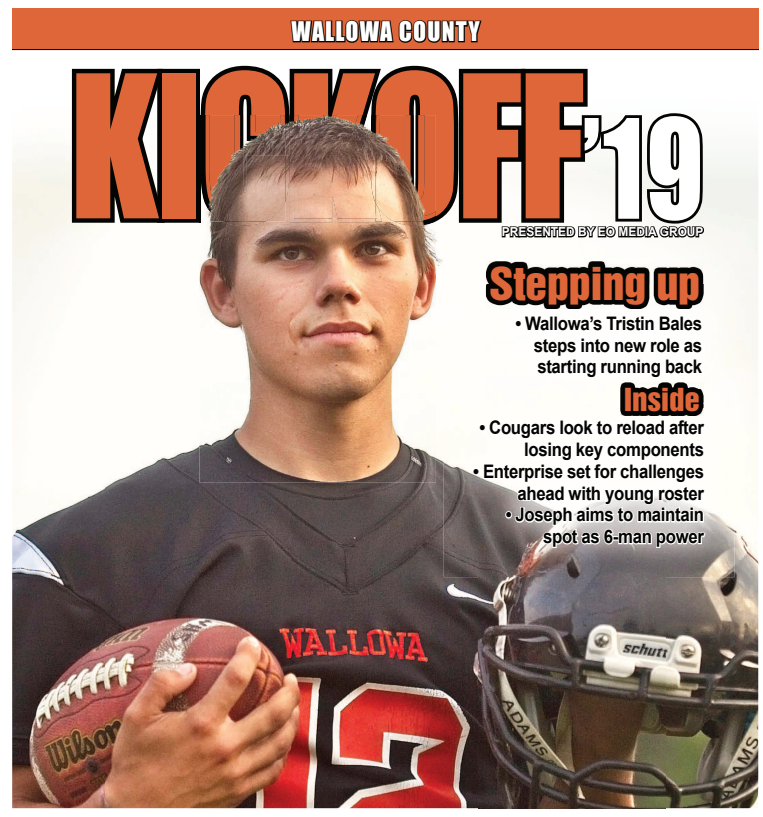
The year in design: The Observer's top front pages

UNION COUNTY

WALLOWA COUNTY



Brown sics OSP on GOP senators after walkout

By Claire Withycombe, Aubrey Wieber and Mark Miller
Oregon Capitol Bureau

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown Thursday called on the Oregon State Police to round up Republican senators absent from the Capitol to protest a major environmental policy.

The state Senate came to a standstill Thursday morning after the chamber's 11 Republicans didn't show.

It's the second time Senate Republicans have used their absence to convey their displeasure over a policy proposed by Democrats, who hold sway in the governor's mansion and majorities in each chamber of the Legislature.

The Senate has 18 Democrats, all of whom were present Thursday. But it needs 20 members to legally meet — at least two Republicans if all Democrats are present.

"It is absolutely unacceptable that the Senate Republicans would turn their back on their constituents who they are honor-bound to represent here in this building," the governor said in a statement. "They need to return and do the jobs they were elected to do."

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, gave a sorrowful speech during a Thursday floor session after the sergeant-at-arms was unable to locate two more senators in the Capitol.

See Walkout / Page 2A

Baker speaks out against B2H

By Samantha O'Conner
WallCom News Service

More than 80 people turned out Wednesday in Baker City for a public hearing on the proposed Boardman-to-Hemingway power line, and more than a dozen local residents told a state council that they oppose the line that would pass through Baker County.

Nobody spoke in favor of the line.

Those who testified before the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council listed multiple concerns about the proposed 500-kilovolt line, including its potential effects on views from the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, harm to agricultural land and wildlife such as sage grouse.

Idaho Power first proposed B2H, a 300-mile, 500-kilovolt line, in 2007.

The Oregon Department of Energy has recommended the Energy Facility Siting Council approve the project, and on May 29 the Department of Energy issued a draft proposed order for B2H. That order started a 60-day comment period, during which the Siting Council will have multiple public

See B2H / Page 5A

Editor's Note:
The Boardman-to-Hemingway meeting in La Grande took place Thursday evening. The story from that meeting will be available in Monday's edition of The Observer.

Dick Mason/The Observer
Vegetation removed from Greenwood Elementary School is deposited by an excavator operated by Adam Slippy of the La Grande School District Thursday morning.

Improvements underway

By Dick Mason
The Observer

The La Grande School District is losing vegetation but gaining three new roofs, a classroom and more.

The addition and substitution are due to summer upgrade work beginning in the La Grande School District, work that will leave the school district a safer place with additional and improved classroom space.

Much of the upgrade work will be funded by state seismic grants and money from the school district's capital projects and maintenance fund.

"We have been putting money into (the capital projects and maintenance) fund for several years," said Joe Justice, chair of the La Grande School Board.

Greenwood Elementary is receiving some of the most extensive renovations. Work being done there includes seismic upgrades to make the school safer in the event of an earthquake.

Seismic upgrades include the replacement of the roof over Greenwood's classrooms. Crews have already made substantial progress in setting the stage for this.

"The metal roof over the classrooms has been removed completely" said Joseph Wolfe, the La Grande School District's bond and facilities manager.

The new roof will include seismic plywood sheathing which crews will soon start putting in.

The seismic work will also include the installation of seismic shear walls for some classrooms. These walls will include metal moment resisting frames, which have greater flexibility, allowing larger movements during an earthquake, according to the website www.seismicisolation.org.

Upgrades also set for Greenwood include the replacement of its aging gym floor. The floor has already been removed and the new one has been delivered to the school district. The floor is now being acclimated so it will fit perfectly when installed. Acclimation is necessary because when wood flooring is moved to a different area it can expand or contract depending upon the humidity level. Water said the new floor will be installed in about two weeks.

Greenwood's gym will also be receiving a new roof and windows this summer. Crews have already taken off the old roof and taken out its windows.

Other work at Greenwood set for this summer include the installation of acoustical ceiling tiles in the kindergarten hallway to soundproof it and a new wheelchair lift.

Seismic upgrades are the most significant projects scheduled at La Grande High School. The roof over the LHS gym will be replaced by one with plywood

See Improvements / Page 3A

Dick Mason/The Observer
Jeff Paulson of Griffin Construction works at Greenwood Elementary School Wednesday.

Dick Mason/The Observer
Work on the replacement of Greenwood Elementary's gym roof is done Wednesday.

Union County appeals DEQ penalty

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

Union County is appealing a 4-6 penalty of almost $60,000 from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality claiming it violated conditions of its general permit related to the U.S. Forest Service rapid have constructed at the La Grande/Union County Airport.

"The parties primarily differ on the magnitude of the penalty, how DEQ should calculate the penalty, and whether corrective actions were taken," Katherine Benner, public affairs specialist for Oregon DEQ, said in an email to The Observer Thursday. She added that "DEQ is meeting with Union County later this month to discuss the potential for a settlement.

See Appeal / Page 5A

Sculpture installed, celebrated in Joseph

Observer staff

JOSEPH — A new granite and bronze sculpture will soon grace the courtyard of the Joseph Center for Arts and Culture in Joseph. Aptly named "stewpiewiew," which in the Nez Perce language means, "I return from a hard journey," Doug Hyde's sculpture will be visible from Main Street, welcoming residents and visitors to town.

The installation will be completed over the course of this week, and at 2 p.m. June 22 the celebration of the new sculpture will begin. There will be drums, a talk and, at 4 p.m., a salmon feed for the public at the Joseph Center, 401 N. Main St.

Hyde, a Nez Perce artist, was born in Hermiston. Raised at Lapwai, Idaho, he was sent by a teacher to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

See Sculpture / Page 5A

LGCC explores vision revisions

Monday evening's work session focused on three goals

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

The La Grande City Council and members of the city planning, economic development and parks & recreation departments met for a work session Monday evening to learn about the city's comprehensive plan in regards to state expectations.

Phil Steinbeck, a representative from the Oregon Department of Land Conservation & Development, led the workshop with an hour-long presentation followed by a short discussion. Steinbeck mostly focused on what a comprehensive plan is, where

See LGCC / Page 5A

Elgin CC discusses flooding at meeting

By Amanda Weisbrod
The Observer

High waters were a hot topic of discussion at Tuesday night's Elgin City Council meeting, as the topic of flooding sealed into several items on the agenda.

Dan Lutman, Elgin's public works director, said while the volume of water making down the nearby Grande Ronde River was at 9,900 square feet per second on Friday, it rose to 27,000 square feet per second by Monday. Because of these rapid and high floodwaters, Lutman said the city has closed Cedar Street in Elgin until "the blacktop is showing."

The public works director reported he has not yet found

See Elgin / Page 5A

WATERS RISING

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Flooding caused by rain and snowmelt continues to wreak havoc on roads and threaten structures in Union and Wallowa counties.

Flooding in Union County has forced the closures of Pierce Road, Alkali Lane and Rhinehart Lane, a portion of Highway 237 and left much of Hilgard State Park under water over the past three days. Floodwaters in Wallowa County have forced the closure of all or portions of Jim Town and Whiskey Roads. The picture overall in Wallowa County is so bad that its board of commissioners declared a state of emergency Tuesday due to flooding throughout the county.

Motorists are being urged to be very cautious when driving on flooded roads.

"You don't know how deep the water is and what is under it," said Union County Public Works Director Doug Wright.

The flooding is caused by spring snowmelt and unusually heavy rainfall, according to Marilyn Lehmann, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service office in Pendleton.

"The rain has compounded the problem," Lehmann said.

She said late Tuesday morning Union and Wallowa counties had received two to three inches of rain over the past 48 hours. The amount of precipitation is very high for this time of year.

"It is a once-in-a-50-year event," Lehmann said.

She said many parts of the region over that 48-hour period received two to three times as much rain than they normally do in all of April. Lehmann explained that the excessive rain was caused by a pool of moisture that came in from the Pacific Ocean.

Union is among the local cities hardest hit by flooding. On Tuesday, portions of Little Creek overflowed. Among the areas impacted by the high water was the Forest Service ranger station building, which is owned by the city and includes structures renters live in.

Water seeped into one of the homes and was pumped out between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. Tuesday, said Union's city administrator, Doug Wiggins. The ranger station structures have not had to be evacuated.

Also in Union, floodwaters have surrounded two homes near the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show Grounds.

"The houses appear to be on islands," Wiggins said Tuesday morning.

Fortunately, as of Tuesday evening, water has not seeped into either of the homes.

In La Grande, flooding in the south

See Flood / Page 5A

Ronald Rice/The Observer
The Grande Ronde River flooded much of Hilgard State Park, which is shown Monday afternoon in the top three photos. BOTTOM: The Grande Ronde River, which has been rising due to a deluge of rain and snowpack melt-off in recent days, is shown at Perry. The National Weather Service has a flood warning in place for streams and creeks in Union County and western Wallowa County through 4:45 p.m. today.

You have now entered the Quiet Zone...

LG receives green light for Quiet Zone

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Ear-piercing noises may soon disappear from the soundtrack of downtown La Grande.

The Federal Railroad Administration has notified the City of La Grande that its application to establish a Quiet Zone has been approved. This means La Grande may now put a plan in place prohibiting train operators from blasting their horns while rolling through downtown La Grande.

Mayor Steve Clements was delighted to hear the news.

"This is fantastic," he said. "It has been a long process which has come to pass."

Clements credits Father Hank Albrecht, the former

See Trains / Page 2A

A veteran's legacy

Byron Whipple is retiring from his position as veteran service officer this month

By Francisco Benitez
The Observer

Byron Whipple has been the Union County veteran service officer for 10 years.

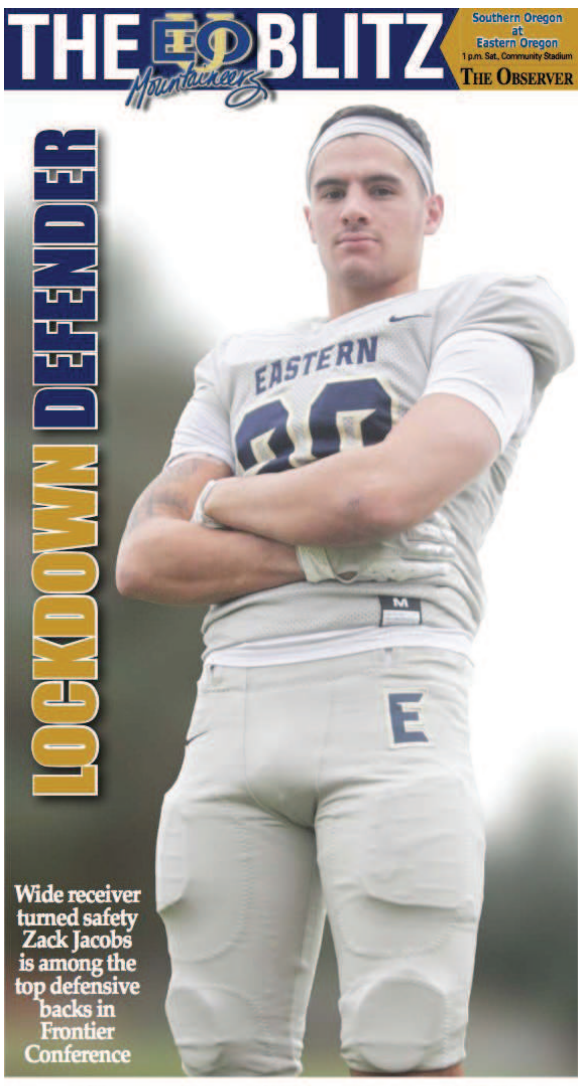
Whipple

After a full decade at the La Grande Center for Human Development, he is retiring this month.

As a veteran service officer, Whipple helps make sure veterans are getting the benefits they qualify for and that they are connected to all the services they can utilize.

"Our job here is to assist veterans in anything they need," Whipple said.

He often helps veterans submit applications to the veterans affairs department that result in them getting a larger monthly check in benefits each month, or even a large sum of back pay. The process can be long and difficult, as there is a lot of paperwork, and evidence from doctors must be collected for injuries. It can be tricky and hard to navigate, and Whipple helps make it easier.

Whipple served in the Navy for 22 years beginning just after he graduated high

See Whipple / Page 5A