

VISION

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Hundreds of thousands of cars pass the Woodburn truck scales on Interstate 5. It's here that inspectors, called compliance specialists, complete random checks on a variety of criteria from the physical equipment to a driver's documentation.

The process starts with the 75 weighmasters across the state at roadside scales like Woodburn.

Weighmasters use an automated system that electronically collects data from each truck that passes under a detector located about a mile up the freeway.

Tom Avila is one of the weighmasters at the Woodburn scales. After 14 years, he's adept at reading dozens of data points on several trucks at once as they file past his little hut at the weigh station. He sits in front two computer monitors displaying details he needs to know about each truck.

In a matter of seconds, Avila reads who is driving, where they're licensed, how long they've been driving, whether their registration is valid, how much weight each truck axle is carrying and if the weight matches their permit. The Woodburn scales are also piloting a new technology that can tell Avila whether a tire is flat or if there's a problem with an axle so he can alert the driver to pull over.

The Woodburn scales see approximately 6,000 to 7,000 trucks a day. Between pre-clearance and simply not having enough time to weigh every truck, that number is a small portion of the total trucks rolling by.

Avila works with inspectors like Don McCloskey, who pull trucks out of line either by certain type — such as focusing on those carrying hazardous materials — or using a formula.

According to Jess Brown, ODOT Motor Carrier's central safety unit manager, the algorithm is crucial to inspectors' ability to keep Oregon's roads safe.

Instead of randomly checking trucks and stopping drivers who have no violations, inspectors can target trucks most likely to have an issue.

"We want to take those trucks and drivers who are in bad shape off the road," Brown said.

McCloskey will ask Avila to flip a switch that notifies the driver they're going to be inspected and to pull around to a large truck barn located a hundred feet west of the weigh station.

According to Brown, compliance specialists like McCloskey are expected to complete between eight and 10 rigorous inspections a day. That means they give each truck a 360-degree sweep, crawling down into a pit to get underneath, shining flashlights up into critical systems like brakes and load securement, checking the driver's service and medical records and ensuring registration is in order.

An inspection can take from 30 minutes to an hour depending on what they find and how long it takes to discuss with the driver what needs to be fixed.

According to ODOT data, the most common issues inspectors catch are improper lights and brake problems. Those account for nearly half the violations cited by inspectors.



Staff photo by Phil Wright

The New Year's Eve block party in downtown La Grande bustles as locals welcome in 2020.

MADSEN

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trooper. Hove, who also works in the La Grande office, noted Madsen is a leader, an excellent teacher and willing to put in extra hours when the need arises.

JoLyn Scott, an administration specialist for the La Grande OSP office, describes Madsen as upbeat and positive.

"He is always kind and fun," Scott said.

Madsen became a drug recognition expert with state police. In this role he has been responsible for determining if people are under the influence of drugs when driving. He has found many people do not realize they can remain impaired by drugs even after the hallucinogenic effects wear off.

"People are impaired much longer than they feel the effects," he said.

He noted people who use marijuana can be impaired at least a day after taking it. One reason is marijuana now is much more potent than it was when he joined the state police. He explained the levels of THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana that makes people high, averaged about 4% when he was a new trooper. That level has soared, he said, noting that he recently has seen some forms of marijuana with THC levels as high as 93.7 percent. He said contrasting marijuana of yesteryear to that of today is like comparing beer with 5% alcohol content to 150 proof whiskey.

Madsen has seen firsthand how drug addiction destroys lives, but he does not hold many caught in its throes completely responsible.

"Some didn't know any better. Their parents did this (took drugs)," he said.

By the same token, Madsen has seen young people with tremendous potential and family support who fell into the trap of drug addiction.

"They made bad choices," said Madsen, who made a number of



Staff photo by Dick Mason

Eric Madsen is looking forward to spending Sundays with his wife, Jeannie. The senior trooper with the Oregon State Police office in La Grande retired Tuesday after a 23-year career.

presentations in schools during his career urging young people to stay clear of drugs.

Madsen has dealt with many impaired drivers and plenty of others who were simply driving too fast. When pulling over these drivers, Madsen has made a point of asking their reason for speeding.

"If there is a medical emergency I want to know right away so I can help them get to the hospital as soon as possible," Madsen said.

When counseling drivers about infractions, he said he aimed to get them to understand they are putting others at risk along with themselves. He pointed out, for example, that many of those injured in construction zone crashes are the workers who have no protection along with the drivers of speeding

vehicles.

Madsen said as a law enforcement officer he has long strived to treat everyone with respect. He follows a mantra from an OSP officer he worked under in John Day early in his career.

"Treat everyone like you would like to see your mother treated," Madsen recalled.

Madsen said he has enjoyed a rewarding career with the OSP because of the tremendous people he has worked with and the support of his wife of 28 years, Jeannie. The couple, the parents of five children, are looking forward to spending more time together, especially on Sundays, when Madsen often had to work.

"Being able to spend Sunday with my wife and family is very important to me," he said.

Madsen also is retiring because he has worked long enough to qualify for full-time retirement benefits. He said if he worked as an OSP trooper past this point and he should die, the retirement benefits his wife would receive from the state police benefit fund for spouses would be cut significantly.

Despite his retirement, Madsen said his days in law enforcement are not over, not by a long shot.

Madsen, who lives in Elgin, soon will serve as a parole and probation officer for Wallowa County. It is a new challenge he is embracing. He will no longer be on patrol but will be continuing to do what he has done throughout his career.

"I'm looking forward to helping steer people in the right direction," he said.

FIGHT

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a longtime Union resident, told the commission.

The commission decided in a 3-1 vote to deny the permit.

According to the letter the city sent the Wentzels, the denial was because allowing the land to be used for a residence would contradict the master plan for the city.

"We felt like it was a gut punch after the planning commission meeting," Jane Wentzel said.

Wiggins supported the decision.

"We don't have a lot of commercial ground in town," he said.

As a compromise, the couple decided to split the land into three lots, and the planning commission unanimously approved. With two new lots for potential businesses and buyers, the Wentzels looked to change

the zoning on the third lot to residential.

They filed for a zone change in April in addition to suggesting a zone swap for a residential property on Medical Springs Highway owned by Coy Wilde. Under that scheme, the Wentzels figured the city would not lose any residential or commercial property.

However, the city denied the Wentzels proposal. The city in a letter cited the rejection was due to Wilde's noncompliance with zoning conditions and out of concerns Wilde would not follow through on using his property for a business.

The Wentzels presented their proposal during a June 19 public hearing before the planning commission. The final decision regarding the matter went to the city council Aug. 12. During both public hearings, the Wentzels attempted to address

concerns that opponents raised to the zone change.

Some, such as Dennis Clark, who owns a workshop near the Wentzels' property, said having people living in the commercial zone could lead to the city getting noise complaints. And Union resident David Orcutt said, "I can see problems in the future with mixing and matching commercial and residential properties."

Not everyone disapproved. Gary Koegler of Union said he was in favor of the zone change because it would encourage more people to move to town.

The council again voted 3-1 against the zone change. The planning commission and city council both cited the 2015 study in their decisions.

That was enough for the Wentzels.

"We made the decision to stop digging in a hole that has no bottom," Jane

Wentzel said.

She said they anticipate closing soon on a deal to sell two lots for \$34,000 total, which will go toward paying off their debt incurred from purchasing the property.

"The thing that kills me is they are just going to park equipment on the land," she said. "I hope the city is happy with their decision. They could have had three new families."

But that was not the city's intention for the land.

"The city is not holding out for anything other

than recognizing that it was zoned commercially and wishes to maintain that zone for commercial use," Wiggins said. "The property was originally a flour mill until it was torn down in the mid-1990s. It has always been commercial property, and the city continues to maintain it in that fashion."

Jane Wentzel said she and her husband plan to keep the remaining lot at 103 N. Bellwood St. as an area to spend time with family and will keep horses there.

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