

## GOALS

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Strope said that report is complete and the city now has specific recommendations to follow in 2020. Strope said the report shows La Grande has enough land to address its housing needs but the city may need to make changes to zoning.

La Grande last year also wanted to continue working on economic development through Urban Renewal Agency funding. Strope said some projects wrapped up in 2019, including updates to Countertop Solutions, Grande Ronde Animal Hospital and Steve's Outdoor Adventures. He also said progress continues with the URA's call for new projects, which he described as a "major tool for our economic development."

Perhaps the biggest goal the city met was establishing the train whistle quiet zone, Strope said. The trains that pass through La Grande are no longer required to blow their horns at each crossing, an accomplishment that has been in the works for more than 10 years. The zone went into effect just after midnight Dec. 27. Strope said the city staff anticipates hiccups in getting train engineers to remember not to blow the horns but they are happy to have accomplished this long-awaited goal.

### Union County

Union County welcomed two new commissioners in 2019, Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes. Both commissioners completed county college, a networking opportunity where new commissioners

learn the ins and outs of county government.

"The best thing that came out of county college was the folks I met and the relationships I formed," Anderes said.

Scarfo echoed Anderes' remarks about county college and said having other commissioners in Oregon he can turn to for advice and guidance will be invaluable. The new commissioners said the people they work with have been the biggest help in getting established in their new roles.

"We have some truly great people working in Union County," Anderes said.

The county's goals in 2019 including commissioners attending city council meetings throughout the county, increasing membership at the Buffalo Peak Golf Course and establishing new businesses in the Baum Industrial Park. The county did not increase membership at the golf course but checked off the boxes for the two other goals.

Commissioner Donna Beverage said two new businesses — Romans' Precision Irrigation and Ethiopian Hands — finished building at the industrial park and plan to open for business in the next few months.

All three commissioners said they found value in being liaisons to the different cities as it helps them better understand what is happening across Union County. Each commissioner works with at least two cities, and Scarfo said the effort has helped bridge the gap between county and city officials.

"A lot happens at the city level," Scarfo said. "It is im-

portant to keep these things in everyone's agenda."

Another highlight in 2019 for the county commissioners was a visit to the White House. Scarfo said it was an honor to represent Union County and rural Oregon.

### Eastern Oregon University

EOU's biggest goals for 2019 were to continue making education more affordable and accessible to students and to continue developing the university's identity as a rural university. Using its strategic plan, known as "The Ascent," the university worked on these goals with a variety of projects.

One project Eastern completed was the addition of a sustainable rural systems degree. Students enrolling in the fall of 2020 will have the opportunity to pursue an area of study that will develop skills geared toward local communities. EOU President Tom Insko said he is excited about the more experience-based, hands-on learning opportunities the school is developing for its students.

"It is about providing relevance and providing opportunities through the university for our students," Insko said.

Insko also said he is happy the university continues to provide affordable education to students. He said the university has kept its tuition increases lower than other universities, and the implementation of a free review process for transfer credits has helped provide access to education for students who want to continue their education at EOU.

Renovation of Loso Hall remains ongoing and progress continues on updating some of the performing arts facilities on campus.

Insko credited the success of the year's accomplishments to the university's strategic plan, which provides a clear vision.

### Wallowa County

Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash said the goals for the county in 2019 were to work on the Wallowa Lake Dam and the Blue Mountains Forest Plan.

The dam was not completed, though Nash said most of the work will be completed during the winter of 2020 and the project finished by the fall of 2021. He said doing the work during the winter will employ workers during the off-season.

The Blue Mountain Forests Plan revision did not come to fruition. The U.S. Forest Service tossed out the project in March 2019 and late in the year re-started the process — for the third time — to develop a plan that addresses social, economic and ecological goals of the national forests in the Blue Mountains in addition to providing framework for future management decisions.

"We are developing a new plan, and doing it in a new way," Nash said. "Hopefully in the next two and a half years we will have a new functioning plan."

Cove, Elgin, Island City, North Powder, Summerville and Union city officials did not respond to requests for comment on 2019 goals before publication. The Observer will provide information about the 2020 city and county goals at a later date.



Ryan Brennecke/EO Media Group

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley answers a question from the crowd Saturday during a town hall meeting at Ridgeview High School in Redmond.

# Merkley expects Iran to respond to killing of general

By Kyle Spurr  
EO Media Group

REDMOND — At a town hall meeting Saturday, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, addressed the potential for war following the assassination of Iranian military commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Merkley expects Iran to respond to the attack since it would be the equivalent of Iran assassinating the U.S. secretary of defense, he said.

But Merkley said he is working in Congress to avoid an escalation into war. He also reminded the crowd that President Donald Trump does not have the constitutional authority to take the country to war, unless he can prove a terrorist connection.

"We have to try to interrupt the escalation into another major war that will endanger our national security and result in thousands of Americans who will die on battlefields and cost another trillion dollars in funds," Merkley said. "We have to speak up. We have to do everything we can to stop that."

The Redmond town hall inside the Ridgeview High School auditorium drew a couple hundred people who were eager to hear from Merkley on national topics, such as the impeachment of Trump, health care and climate change. Most people in the audience supported Merkley and gave him a standing ovation at the end of the town hall meeting. About 30 Trump supporters protested outside the high school before the town hall.

The gathering was the first of three scheduled meetings in Central Oregon on Saturday. Merkley also held town hall meetings at the Madras Performing Arts Center and at Barnes Butte Elementary School in Prineville.

Merkley, a Democrat from Portland, offered his thoughts at the Redmond town hall meeting about the Trump impeachment, which he said aligns with the protections the Founding Fathers established in the Constitution.

"The issues that have been raised are very consistent with the founders' concerns," Merkley said. "Is there an abuse of power, and is there a solicitation of foreign interference?"

Merkley said he shares concerns with House Democrats who believe Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is unwilling to hold a fair Senate trial regarding impeachment.

"To me, that is a violation of our constitutional responsibility," Merkley said. "And I feel if you can't take the oath in an honest and clear way to do it impartial justice, then you need to recuse yourself from participation in the trial."

Merkley also discussed climate change in dire terms.

"The issue of carbon pollution and how it's affecting our planet is the biggest challenge human civilization has faced," he said.

Merkley said climate change can be felt in the forests, farmland and ocean. In the summer it produces intense wildfires, and in the winter, low snowpack.

## SMITH

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spotted owl habitat. Smith said as the 2nd District representative he would work to end the federal Endangered Species Act. He wrote on his website, www.sendjefftocongress.com, the ESA is no longer needed because many states have their own version of it.

Smith also said he would work to boost academic achievement in Oregon schools, noting Oregon has poor graduation rates and lower student scores on achievement tests compared to other states. He said he wants the state to place more of a focus on vocational education.

Many schools focus on getting students to college, he said, but that's a bad idea for 50-60% of students unless they have significant scholarships, because most students emerge from college with large student loan debts. He said a college graduate earning \$25,000 a year with a \$35,000 loan debt often is not in a good financial situation.

"For many it just does not pencil out," he said.

Rather than focusing on higher education at more expensive traditional colleges, Smith said Oregon schools should develop more vocation education programs to help students develop the skills they need to land jobs as machinists,

electricians, linemen and in construction. He said jobs in these fields offer living-wage jobs and the training will not leave students over their heads in debt.

Smith also is concerned about the future of Medicare, which he said will become insolvent in seven years without action. He said soaring health care costs are endangering the program.

"They are rising at twice the rate of inflation and three times the rate of wage growth," Smith said.

He blamed a shortage of health care providers as a big reason for soaring health care costs. He said a dearth of medical schools is one reason for the shortage and cited Oregon as an example. He said Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, graduates 150 doctors a year, not enough to allow the state to maintain a sufficient level of physicians for its population of almost 4.2 million. He said he would like to see changes at the federal level in policies and funding that would allow more universities to offer medical degrees and more health care provider training overall. He said medical organizations and their lobbyists are preventing the expansion of medical education programs.

"This is the root cause of rising health care costs," Smith said. "The system is rigged."

Smith is among eight candidates

running to succeed incumbent Greg Walden, R-Hood River, who announced in October he will not seek reelection. Walden has served in Congress since 1999. Smith spoke highly of Walden's work in Congress.

"Greg Walden has done a good job of looking out for the people of Eastern Oregon," the Elgin candidate said.

This is Smith's second run for public office. He ran in the Republican primary for Oregon governor in 2018, placing fifth in a 10-candidate field. Knute Buehler, a physician from Bend, won the nomination but lost to incumbent Kate Brown in the general election. Buehler also is running in the Republican primary to succeed Walden.

Joining Buehler and Smith in this year's GOP primary field are state Sen. Cliff Bentz of Ontario; Mark Roberts of Medford, a former Independent Party member who ran for a congressional seat in 2018; and Kenneth Medenach of Klamath County, who was part of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation in 2016.

Three Democratic candidates are running for their party's nomination: Jack Howard, a La Grande attorney and former Union County commissioner; Medford resident John Holm; and community organizer Isabella Tibbetts of Jackson County.

## BABY

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decided baby Wyatt was too big for a natural delivery and took Jaime in for C-section. He came out at 8 pounds, 5 ounces, and measured 20-1/2 inches long. Jaime said it looks like little Wyatt has her nose so far.

Jaime and Cody's 10-year-old daughter, Rikilynn, also was excited to meet her brother.

"She cried happy tears at the gender reveal party," Jaime said about her daughter.

Once they knew the gender of the baby, Jaime and Cody set about finding him a name. A friend gave Jaime a book from which she learned

Wyatt means "little warrior." "When I first felt him kick, I knew that's what he was — a little warrior," she said.

It took seeing the infant in person though to solidify the name. The couple still is considering their son's middle name.

As the New Year's baby, the Grande Ronde Hospital Auxiliary, the Auxiliary Sewing Committee and Quilt Questers sent Wyatt home with an array of gifts, including a handmade quilt and stocking and plenty of newborn supplies.

Jaime and Cody said they were looking forward to going home and getting to know the newest member of their family.

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