

OFFICE

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Move aims for fresh start

However, the location also carries with it, to a degree, the lasting vestiges of a trying time for The Observer staff in the lead up to and fallout from Western Communications’ second bankruptcy. WesCom, the company that previously owned The Observer, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy Jan. 22, 2019.

“It also harbored a lot of emotional feelings in the past of the difficult changes that went down in that office and the bad news that had to be delivered, especially in the last couple of years,” Brogoitti said, calling the move the last puzzle piece to fall in order to “wipe the slate clean and start fresh.”

The family-owned EO Media Group purchased The Observer on July 1, 2019, in the bankruptcy sale, along with the Baker City Herald, The Redmond Spokesman and Bend Bulletin. The four papers joined the East Oregonian, Hermiston Herald, Wal-lowa County Chieftain and others under the umbrella of the media group.

EO Media, however, did not purchase the former building from WesCom, instead electing to lease it for The Observer until finding a permanent home. The 911 Jefferson Ave. location, the previous home of Commercial Tire, was among several the company considered before reaching a decision.

“Location was a huge consideration because it’s so close to downtown,” Brogoitti said. “You have downtown right here, you have the library (next door). It just felt like a good location based on our proximity to the core business area.”

She also pointed to ample parking the location provides for its staff and



Staff photo by Ronald Bond

The Observer’s new office at 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, is shown Wednesday. Staff is in its third week at the location after the newspaper spent 35 years at 1406 Fifth St.

“It’s a nice residential area. I think it’s the perfect space for apartments, and there’s a real housing crunch in town.”

Observer Publisher Karrine Brogoitti, on conversion of the old Observer office to an apartment complex

to it being a free-standing building as additional perks.

“The office is really never closed,” she said, noting there are employees in the office most hours of the day and late into the night, “so being able to find a location that would accommodate our wonky employee hours without disrupting businesses or people around us and being able to accommodate parking (were important).”

Fabrication shop was a no-go

Mark Wittwer, who co-owns the building with his wife, Brenda Wittwer, said the couple bought the building about 2-1/2 years ago with the original intent of having it house a fabrication shop for Brenda Wittwer’s nephew, who does artistic work with high quality stainless steel.

When that plan fell through, the other options were considered, including a brew pub or other large

projects.

Then the possibility of The Observer came up, and Mark Wittwer said they had the right fit.

“Long story short, the more I thought about it, I thought this was the way to go,” he said.

The building required an ample remodel to convert from a tire store to a newspaper office, and EO Media Group Vice President Kathryn Brown said she was happy with the staff’s patience during the process.

“All of us at EO Media Group are grateful to the staff of The Observer for their perseverance and patience as their new building was being remodeled,” she said. “The openness of this bright new space is symbolic of the light that newspapers everywhere shine on our government and our communities.”

Wittwer said the biggest challenge during the remodel was deciding what to do with the concrete in

the area used by Commercial Tire for vehicle work.

“It was just a mess, we looked at less expensive options (but) we opted to tear it out,” he said.

When they did, they happened upon an interesting find.

“We found some old pottery that had some Chinese writing on it,” he said.

While he’s uncertain of what exactly was at that location, Wittwer said he believes he happened upon part of La Grande’s Chinese underground and thinks a laundromat from that time — potentially the 1870s or 1880s — was there.

“It’s definitely a story that should be told,” he said.

Fifth Street building getting new life

While The Observer office has moved, life is far from over for the block building at 1406 Fifth St., though it will take on a much different look and a different tenant.

Contractor Derek Howard, owner of CB Development Group, purchased The Observer’s old office Jan. 8 and is planning to turn the building to an apartment complex.

“I jumped on it right

away once I saw it (was for sale),” Howard said.

Howard pointed to several benefits of the building, not the least of which was its location, given the proximity to Eastern Oregon University, La Grande middle and high schools and Grande Ronde Hospital.

He also mentioned “the need for apartments in this side of town, and not just a need for apartments, it’s probably going to be the only market rate apartments that has a full parking lot.”

Howard said he initially had a thought of placing a boutique hotel at the location before settling on the apartments.

The block building itself is structurally sound, but crews are gutting the inside of the building, a project, Howard said, could take around three or four more weeks.

Howard purchased the building for \$450,000, and said the project in its entirety — purchase price, demolition and construction — is budgeted at about \$2.2 million.

Once completed, it will house 20 apartments of various size — 10 upstairs and 10 downstairs, with the two levels being identical. Each floor will have five studios, one 1-bedroom, three 2-bedroom and one 3-bedroom. Howard said the studios will range in size from about 575-700 square feet. The 1-bedroom will be about 900 square feet, the 2-bedroom 930 and the 3-bedroom 1,300.

“I’m hoping to have everything completed by probably November,” he said.

Brogoitti called the idea for apartments at the location a “fantastic idea.”

“You’re close to the hospital and the schools, you’re close to downtown,” she said. “It’s a nice residential area. I think it’s the perfect space for apartments, and there’s a real housing crunch in town.”

UPDATES

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remote-access platforms.”

Students and faculty will meet in digital classrooms starting March 30. Digital classes will continue through the end of term in June. Employees also will begin the transition to work from home wherever possible.

Many EOU professors already lead remote instruction, according to the news release, and 67% of EOU students already take at least one class online. Nearly half of the university’s student body is already enrolled in distance learning.

•Island City is offering to help its elderly residents with errands, grocery shopping, picking up to-go food and similar tasks.

“We have people ready, willing and able to help in any way we can during this time,” the city announced Wednesday afternoon.

Please contact Island City Hall at 541-963-5017 for information and/or to set up help.

•The Union County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday declared a state of emergency as a local response to the outbreak of COVID-19. For more about that, see Page 2A.

•La Grande closed all city offices until further notice. The city asked residents to conduct business remotely. For more information, visit www.cityofla-grande.org.

•La Grande and Island City each reported they will not send late notices or disconnection notices for water/sewer bills this month due to the economic hardships the virus may cause.

•Grande Ronde Hospital has limited visitations to only one support person in the laboring mothers and newborns in the Family Birthing Center. No visitors are allowed hospital wide.

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YOURS.

BG 50
HANDHELD BLOWER
\$139⁹⁵
★★★★★
"Powerful and lightweight."
- Kevin2376

FS 38
TRIMMER
\$139⁹⁵
★★★★★
"Great product, very reliable."
- tolbert

MS 170
CHAIN SAW
\$179⁹⁵
★★★★★
"It starts easily and runs great."
- Dick44

MS 250
CHAIN SAW
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★★★★★
"Great Value and Dependable."
- Holly501

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