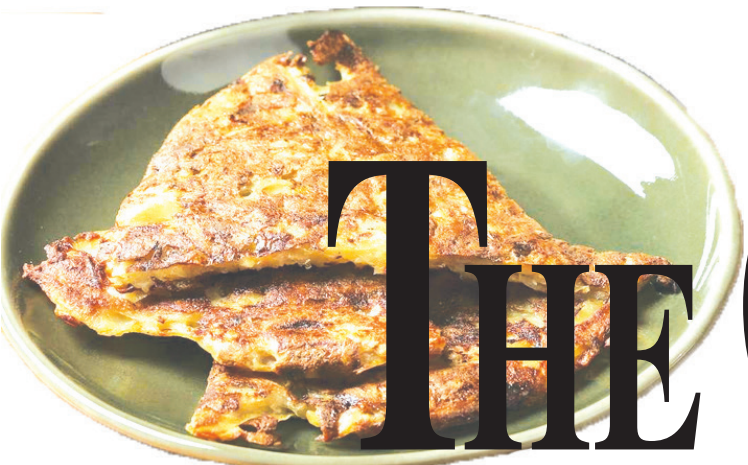




RE-ELECT

BOYD RASMUSSEN

for

SHERIFF

Paid for by committee to Re-elect Boyd Rasmussen.

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SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

THE OBSERVER



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EOU grads go virtual

Local businesses anticipate financial pinch from lack of visitors

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — There will be no stage to walk across this June for graduating Eastern Oregon University students. The La Grande-based college has nixed its in-person graduation because of restrictions due to the coronavirus and instead opted for a virtual graduation June 13.

The change not only will affect the students, families and the school itself, but it could make a difference to local businesses that were anticipating the mid-year influx of visitors.

“We started discussions in March when the university moved to remote delivery of its on-campus classes, but did not immediately move to a virtual event because we know the in-person commencement ceremony means a great deal to our students and their families,” Eastern’s vice president for university advancement, Tim Seydel, said.

Students who wish to walk will be able to during the spring commencement ceremony in 2021. However, for those who would like to hear their names in a commencement ceremony sooner, there may be a fall in-person ceremony they will be welcome to attend. That ceremony is not guaranteed, depending on how long coronavirus restrictions continue. Seydel said the decision came after surveying students about their feelings about commencement.

“EOU students are invested in this ceremony for a wide array of reasons,” Seydel said. “The commencement team is using that feedback to shape plans going forward.

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Staff photo by Dick Mason

Children Lincoln Seimears (from left), Dax Law and Macie Davis attend day care last week at Central Elementary School in La Grande. Certain day care providers can operate during the COVID-19 crisis to provide services for children of essential workers.

COVID-19 takes toll on day care

Child care providers allowed to open for children of parents in essential jobs

By Dick Mason
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Debra Hansen, the owner of a Cove day care center, has been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis.

The number of children Hansen cares for has fallen from 10 to four or five since Gov. Kate Brown’s executive order to stay home took effect in mid-March. Hansen is in no way bemoaning her circumstances, though.

“I feel lucky,” Hansen said, because she has been able to keep her child care center, Lil Fanny, open. She would be in a very difficult position financially if she had to close her business.

“I am the sole provider for my household,” she said.

Hansen is in select company. Her center is one of only about 30 in Union County that have been granted emergency

status, a standing that allows them to remain open during the pandemic.

The total represents less than half the number of centers Union County had before the stay-home directive took effect in March, according to Tobie Sass, the child care development director for Child Care Resource and Referral of Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start.

A big reason for the decline is that only day care centers granted emergency status can continue operating under the exec-

utive order. Those with emergency status can serve only children whose parents have jobs the state has deemed essential.

The state directive further restricts emergency day care providers by not allowing them to take in any children they were not serving before the order took effect, including children of parents with jobs deemed essential, Hansen said.

Even without these limits, Hansen said the number of children

See, Day Care/Page 5A

Expand Idaho movement gains traction

Wallowa County is eighth to grant petition approval

By Bill Bradshaw
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — Wallowa County — Idaho? Give the Gem State a sea-coast and a border with California?

That could be the outcome if efforts succeed by a group called Move Oregon’s Border in some of the 20 counties where the group has filed requests

to collect signatures on petitions.

The deadline to gather signatures in Oregon counties is early August for them to go before voters in November. Wallowa County Clerk Sandy Lathrop received the petition in April and, after conferring with the county’s legal counsel, District Attorney Rebecca Frolander, Lathrop notified Move Oregon’s Border President Mike McCarter on May 5 that the group may begin collecting signatures in the county.

Only 242 signatures are needed to get it on the November ballot.

“We’ve done it county by county because we’re asking for advisory votes from each county’s commissioners,” said McCarter, who lives in La Pine.

He said the real reason behind the movement is because many people in Oregon’s rural counties feel overlooked by the urban-dominated state government.

“If you love your county but you are sick of your state government,

then help us move the state border. Idaho’s governance fits our needs and our values better,” he said.

McCarter said county clerks in eight of the 20 counties have approved requests to circulate petitions, including Baker, Curry, Douglas, Grant, Harney, Josephine and Umatilla counties, along with Wallowa County.

Union County has denied the group’s petition, as have 10 other counties, and the status

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Unemployment numbers begin to diminish

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Moves government officials made to flatten the curve of coronavirus infections resulted in a spike in unemployment the past seven weeks.

That curve is starting to flatten, too.

Union County reported its two lowest weeks of first-time unemployment

claims since the coronavirus outbreak in March, with 130 individuals filing for the week ending April 25 and 142 added to the roll in the most recent week, which ended May 2, according to the Oregon Employment Department website.

Those numbers are well below the peak weeks that respectively saw 311 and 307 people file. Still,

they are higher than any total from 2020 prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The 272 new claims, an increase of 20% over the past two weeks, brings the county total since March 15 to 1,619, which is roughly 2.5 times higher than the number of people unemployed in the county in February, according to Oregon Department of Employment numbers.

Countywide, the numbers have followed a similar trend during the time stay-at-home orders have been in place in terms of the most impacted industries. Manufacturing continues to be by far the hardest-hit group of workers in Union County, with 74 of the claims filed coming from that sector,

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COVID-19 by the numbers*

Worldwide cases: 4,013,728
Worldwide deaths: 278,993
U.S. cases: 1,324,488
U.S. deaths: 79,756
Oregon cases: 3,286
Oregon deaths: 130
Union County cases: 4
Union County active cases: 1
Union County deaths: 0
Wallowa County cases: 1
Wallowa County active cases: 0
Wallowa County deaths: 0

*As of 3 p.m. Monday, May 11. Sources: World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Military Department

Farmers Market opens Saturday

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A new page will be added to the noteworthy story of the La Grande Farmers Market this weekend.

The La Grande Farmers Market, which has traditionally opened the third weekend of May, will make its 2020 debut on schedule Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon at Max Square in downtown La Grande despite the COVID-19 crisis. The city of La Grande last week granted the market permission to operate after its leaders worked to set up a series of stringent safety guidelines.

“We just want everyone to be safe,” said Liberty Avila, president of the La Grande Farmers Market Board of Directors.

Jessica Bogard, manager of the market, said it is critical not to delay the opening.

“Farmers have crops ready for market now. We had to open so they could make a living,” said Bogard, noting at least 23 vendors list the La Grande Farmers Market as a primary or significant source of annual income.

Avila agreed and said it is critical during the COVID-19 crisis to help maintain the region’s food supply chain. The board president also said the market will celebrate its 40th anniversary later this year.

“It is one of the longest running (farmers markets) in the state,” Avila said.

In keeping with tradition, the market will be open each Tuesday starting May 19. This year the Tuesday market will be open from 3-6 p.m.

The La Grande Farmers Market schedule and location has not not changed, but its rules have due to COVID-19 safety concerns. The market will use two

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight

41 LOW

A shower

Wednesday

60/40

Showers

