

BUDGET

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sensed top education leaders will push for full funding of public schools.

He said this could be achieved by drawing money from several state reserve funds and money generated by the new Corporate Activities Tax, which voters approved in 2019. The CAT tax is expected to raise between \$1 billion and \$2 billion a biennium, all of which is to be spent on boosting student success.

Mendoza said if the state provides full funding in 2020-21, it will put the La Grande School District in a much better position to deal with state funding shortfalls expected for 2021-22 and 2022-23 due to fallout from the pandemic.

The superintendent said his school district is building a strong reserve fund that could help it survive cuts in state funding without making program or staff reductions.

The school district got a good start at boosting its reserve fund this spring when the state closed

schools, requiring La Grande to go into a distance education-only mode. Money the district saved on expenses included funds for substitute teachers and supplies. Furlough days for classified staff and teachers are also boosting the bottom line. The furlough program will save the school district \$300,000 on employee pay for the remainder of 2019-20, which ends June 30.

Future steps to curtail spending may include cutting back on school field trips, reducing staff travel and cutting expenditures for

classroom supplies and new maintenance equipment, Mendoza said.

"We need to make adjustments to build up our reserves," he said.

The superintendent also said he expects the school district's reserve fund to get a boost in stimulus funding from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act. This could provide the school district with at least \$400,000.

"I am confident that we will receive stimulus funding," Mendoza said.

The superintendent also credited the work of business manager Chris Panike for helping the district's budget picture.

"He is a great steward of public funds. He creates efficiencies," Mendoza said.

Mendoza spoke to the budget committee at its first meeting of the year. The committee was presented with a proposed 2020-21 general fund budget of \$26.39 million, about \$1.18 million higher than the current budget. The spending plan calls for the school district to decrease its high cost capital projects fund

by \$75,000 and its five-year maintenance projects fund by \$150,000. The district then would reallocate this \$225,000 to reserve funds to better prepare the district for cuts. Mendoza asked the budget committee to advise him on whether to take these steps.

The budget committee will meet next June 10 to further discuss the financial situation. The committee is responsible for submitting a recommended budget to the La Grande School Board, which will vote June 24 on adoption of a 2020-21 budget.

SHERIFF

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beat Rasmussen, noted he didn't anticipate a drastic change from the unofficial total.

"Once the night was over, it was what I expected," he said.

Bowen won 13 of the county's 19 precincts and carried a large advantage in the three precincts in the La Grande city limits, one in Island City's city limits and two of the surrounding precincts. Those votes accounted for more than 89% of the deputy's overall margin of 1,624 votes.

Rasmussen carried three precincts, including Imbler's 10th. Miller won Elgin's 8th and a northern county precinct.

Rasmussen and Bowen tied in one precinct in the Summerville city limits.

Rasmussen, who has served as sheriff since winning in 2004, said his campaign moving forward will have the same approach of "staying focused on the positive changes we have made in the Sheriff's Office and what we are doing to better serve the citizens of Union County."

Neither candidate said they plan to make changes to their campaign in the lead-up to the general election. Bowen did say he will take a pause before resuming campaigning later in the summer.

"We pushed the 'vote for me' pretty hard," he said. "To be honest, I want to give people a break, hit it hard again in August, September, October."

Despite Bowen's large cushion in the primary election, there are now more than 3,000 ballots cast for neither of the top two candidates they both can vie for.

"I believe if voters look at the experience, the qualifications, the education, the quality service that has been provided for years to Union County, people will realize who is best prepared to serve as Sheriff and lead the agency," Rasmussen said.

Bowen said the votes show the county is looking for a change, and he doesn't see those who voted for Miller or Rollins now casting a ballot for Rasmussen.

FIRE

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she said.

Recommendations include clearing brush and raking pine needles — material that carries fire easily, putting homes and lives at risk. The Forest Service also recommends to have a "ready, set, go" evacuation plan and become "smoke ready" with simple, low cost "do-it-yourself" filters. The agency also asks the public to be extra vigilant with any ignition source, from debris burning to dragging chains and running power equipment like chain saws.

One effect of the state's stay-at-home order this spring has been an uptick in human-caused fires, Hessel said. One estimate is that there have been twice as many runaway brush fires on private land than is typical this time of year, so he warned landowners to be aware of the weather forecast. Often burning in the morning can alleviate the risk of fires spreading

by wind.

As for the upcoming wildfire season, both agencies reported that their seasonal fire staff are reporting to duty and preparing for training throughout the state. Hessel said training will not be the region-wide interagency fire school normally held at Eastern Oregon University, but held locally in smaller groups.

In response to the extended forecast, Weseman said several additional large air tankers and helicopters have been added to the Forest Service's exclusive use contracts to strengthen availability of firefighting aircraft this year.

"On the Umatilla National Forest, we'll be ready to respond with nine engines, five 10-person hand crews, the 20-person Umatilla Veteran Crew and two Type 2 helicopters located in La Grande," she said.

ODF has 20 initial attack crews staffing engines and hand crews hired for the Northeast District, Hessel said, with 60 sea-

sonal employees hired for the summer. Bulldozers are also on contract to be available to build firelines, when necessary, and has two single-engine air tankers and a detection plane staged at the La Grande airport and a Type 2 helicopter will be based in Pendleton, but will move around as needed.

To limit risk of COVID-19 exposure, Weseman said the agency is putting several provisions in place. She said firefighters will continue to respond to every wildfire, but how they are mobilized and supported will be different this year.

"On the Umatilla National Forest, we're inte-

grating Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols into our Wildland Fire Response Plans to help keep firefighters and the communities they'll work in healthy and safe," she said.

While the Forest Service's direction this coming season is to respond and extinguish fires as soon as possible, Weseman said there is a likelihood the forests of Northeast Oregon could have large remote fires that would endanger the lives of firefighters, should they fight the fire directly. In these cases, staff would either monitor them at a safe distance — either from the air or from another ridge top

or fighting a flank threatening private property or other critical resources like watersheds.

"We will also continue our focus on initial attack with the goal of fast containment to minimize the number of large fires during the year," Weseman said. Nationally, 98% of all fires fought by Forest Service firefighters are extinguished within 24 hours, Weseman said.

Technology advances help locate wildfires quickly and accurately. Weseman said firefighters use remote automated weather stations and satellites to rapidly assess conditions, such as

weather, fire behavior, and topography.

"This will help firefighters prioritize tactics that have a high likelihood of success, minimize prolonged exposure of resources, and put the life safety of responders and the public first," she said.

"In the fall and winter the school board can work with the community to nail down what they want to put in the bond," he said, "and take it to the ballot in May."

PHASE 2

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6 feet between parties. Venues are to use 35 square feet per person as the metric. In theory, then, a 3,500 square-foot venue would have a capacity of 100 people. A location would need to have a footprint of 8,750 square feet or more to hold the maximum 250 occupants.

The guidelines allow no more than 10 people per party at any location, but those in the party don't need to maintain social distance.

Among the churches that will reopen is the La Grande Church of the Nazarene, which will hold a

CORRECTION

The Page 1A story on June 4, "Union, Wallowa counties hope to enter Phase 2 this week" misstated two numbers. Oregon at the time of publication had 4,399 cases of COVID-19, and the reopening plan caps outdoor gatherings at 100 individuals.

service in its building at 10:30 a.m. Sunday.

"We'll be able to move forward and start meeting in person," pastor Kevin Goss said. "We'll be taking some extra precautions to help folks be socially distanced in terms of seating in the sanctuary. We're not going to be running any children's ministries or Sunday school programs, just our worship service."

One concern Anderes has with the gathering size guidelines is there is

enough ambiguity to cause confusion.

"My interpretation is that if you have the ability mathematically to work out that if you got 6 feet between people you are going to be OK within those limits," he said.

Goss offered a similar take in how it applies to his congregation.

"The way that I've read it is that in any space we need to be able to provide for the 6 feet of social distancing," he said. "In our sanctuary space, we can

Wallowa School District wins \$2.3 million grant for gym retrofit

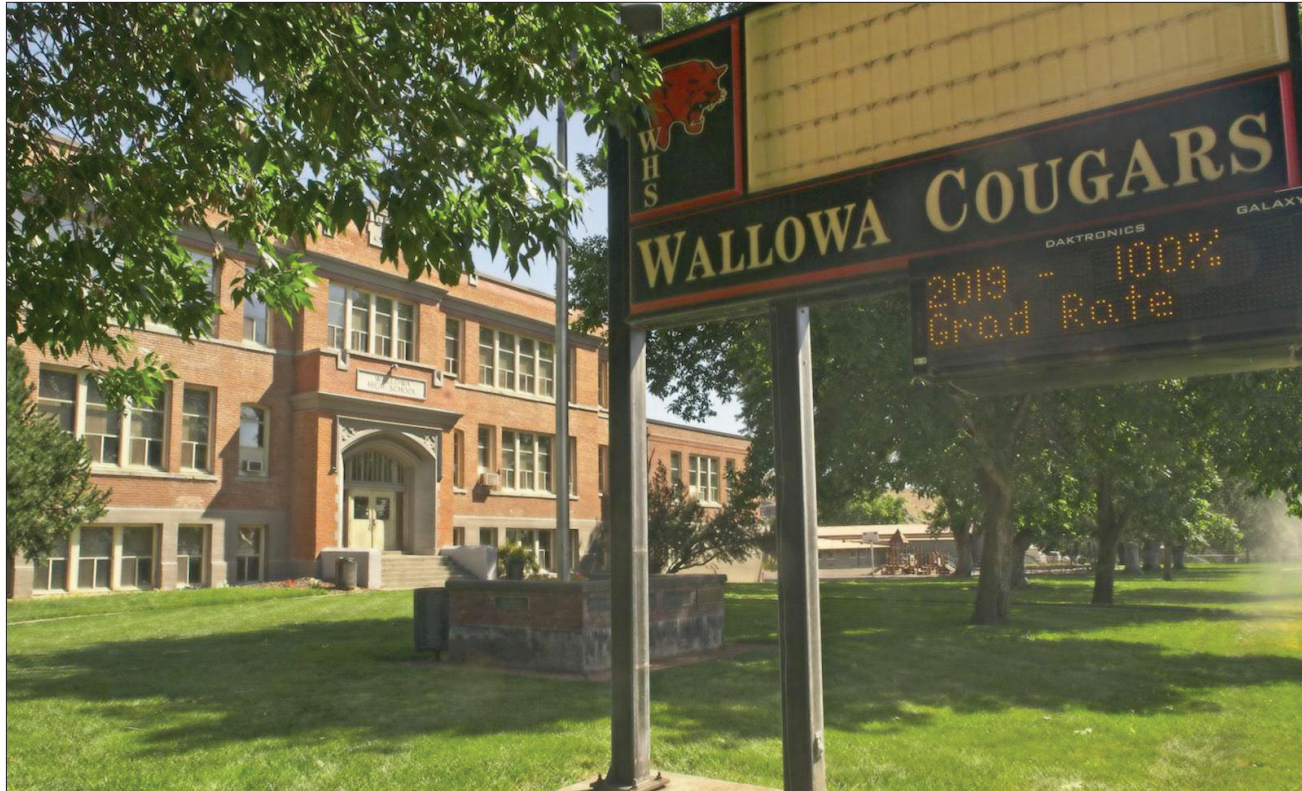
By Ellen Morris Bishop

EO Media Group

WALLOWA — It was a long time in coming, but the Wallowa School District recently received a \$2.3 million seismic retrofit grant from the Oregon Department of Education.

The district will use the funds to make the Cougar Dome stable and safe in the event of an earthquake. The grant also will fund primarily structural improvements so the large gym building can serve as public shelter during an earthquake or other disaster.

The school and the town of Wallowa are along the western end of the Wallowa fault. That structure has uplifted the Wallowa Mountains more than 7,000 feet. It provides low intensity quakes of magnitude 2-4 every few years, mostly centered in the Upper Wallowa Valley. Based upon the fault's nearly 40-mile length, geologists calculated it could unleash a magnitude 6 or 7 quake. Lidar mapping of the fault near Wallowa Lake, which shows detailed ground topography even under heavy forest cover, shows no evidence of major faulting or significant fault scarps in the last 17,000 years. But that is a short time in geologic cycles.



EO Media Group file photo

The Wallowa School District recently received a \$2.3 million seismic retrofit grant from the Oregon Department of Education.

The grant was obtained as a result of the Technical Assistance Program facilities assessment and long term planning. District staff, administrators and school board have been working on the facilities assessment with their consultants (Pivot of Eugene) since the fall.

The school district has two years to begin seismic retrofit construction using the \$2.3 million. The funds cover design as well as

construction.

Retiring Superintendent Jay Hummel noted the school board is considering combining the seismic work with other much needed renovations to the school.

"Fixing the heating-cooling system in each of the school buildings is unbelievably expensive. But it's got to be done," Hummel said. "The second thing is to fix the gym beyond the seismic

grant. Expand the front entrance area. Build a nice entry area. Provide a community accessible weight room and exercise area. Fix bathrooms and concession area."

Hummel said money for the improvements will come from a combination of a general obligation bond with matching funds of up to \$4 million from the state. If the work on the gym under the seismic grant is done in conjunc-

tion with the bond-funded improvements, there could be some cost savings in a major gym renovation.

Hummel said the next step will be to take a realistic list of school renovations and improvements to the community.

"In the fall and winter the school board can work with the community to nail down what they want to put in the bond," he said, "and take it to the ballot in May."

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