

From the editor’s desk

Put the blame where it belongs

La Grande police on Sunday, July 26, responded to Bi-Mart to trespass a customer who refused to wear a mask. According to the local law enforcement daily bulletin, the customer decided to wear a mask and shop once the officer showed up.

FROM THE EDITOR



PHIL WRIGHT
OBSERVER EDITOR

Over in Enterprise, a Wallowa County sheriff’s deputy on Friday, July 24, cited a woman for trespassing at the Ace Hardware after she refused to wear a mask and refused to leave because she would not wear a mask.

Gov. Kate Brown handed down the requirement for anyone 5 and older to wear masks in public spaces. The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration has the job of enforcing Brown’s orders to combat the spread of the virus. OSHA’s lever is fines and penalties against businesses that don’t comply. Thus business owners, managers and employees have the onus of having to enforce a mandate that came down from on high.

That makes Brown an easy target to blame for putting businesses in a tough spot. But that would be misplacing the blame.

Businesses of all kinds have to obey rules and laws to help ensure public safety. Ask bartenders and bar owners the consequences they can face if their establishment serves too much booze to customers. Restaurants don’t have to provide you healthy food or even tasty food, but they have legal requirements to make sure their food is safe for consumption. Certain employers hire safety managers to implement state and federal safety rules and regulations.

Still, it’s fair to acknowledge a manager or owner of a hardware or general store is not likely to have confrontations with customers that a bar-keep may have and probably does not have to give customers the boot as often.

Most Eastern Oregonians respect the notion of personal responsibility. As such, the real culprit in a confrontation over wearing a mask in a public space is the person refusing to wear the mask.

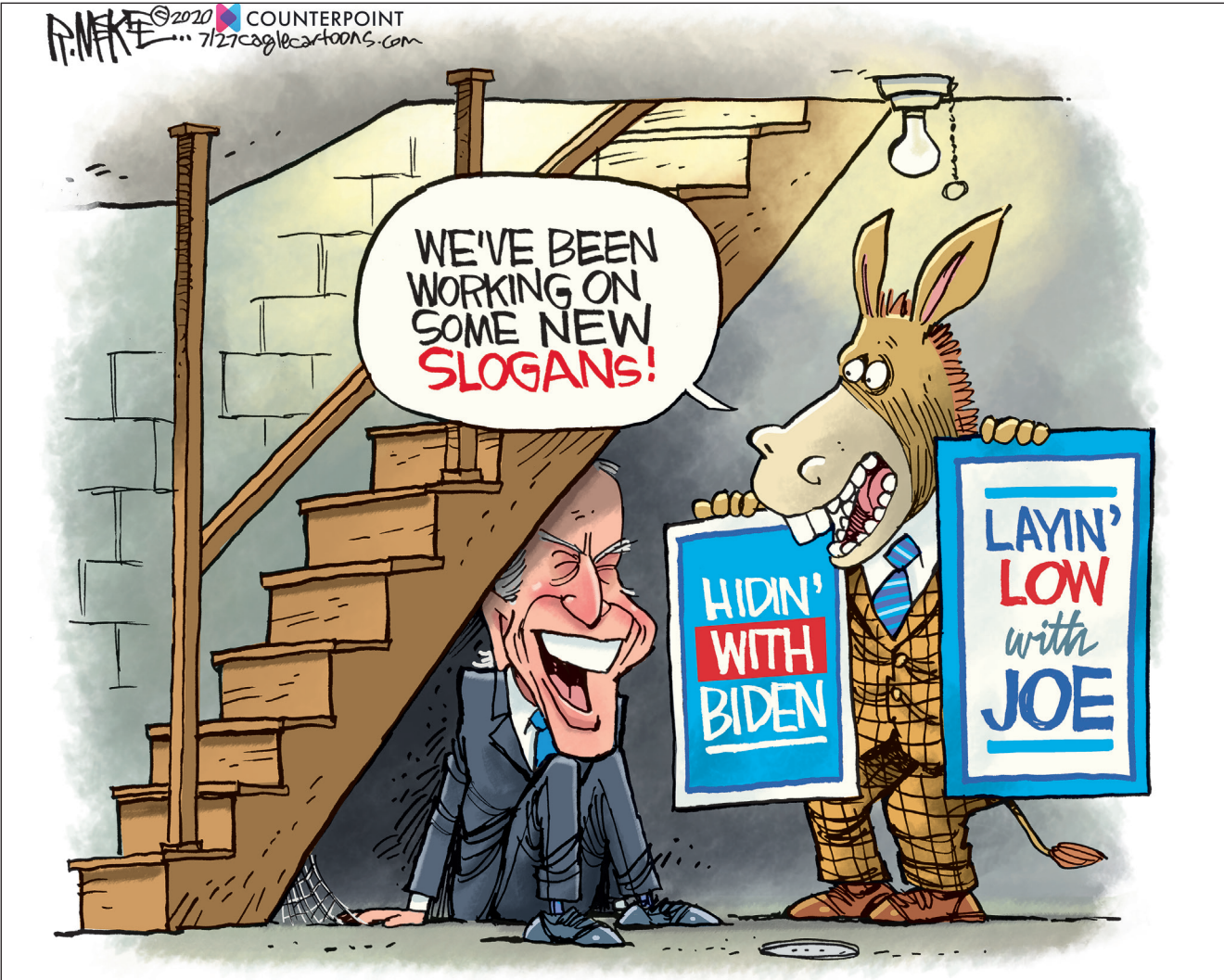
Really, how different is this from someone who insists on driving drunk? Or refuses to keep their ill-behaved dog on a leash? If someone with an aggressive dog tried to enter a grocery store, a manager would have every right to refuse to let that person shop with that dog because it’s a danger to everyone there.

If the store let the dog in and it bit someone in the store, the victim likely could sue the dog’s owner, sure, but the business also would be liable.

A business does not want that kind of liability. And does a business want a reputation of being lax on requirements dealing with the coronavirus? Does not seem like many would.

And we each have rights of personal expression — thanks to the state and federal constitutions — but the adage that your liberties end where another person’s nose begins holds true when it comes to wearing face coverings in public.

You can forgo a mask and act out in all kinds of ways, but you can’t endanger others while you do so. Nothing gives you that right.



My Voice

We’re committed to the community

In my 27 years of service to our community, I have never seen greater challenges than our officers are facing today.

This being said, our officers are not deterred and remain honored to serve in their chosen profession. The men and women who serve as your La Grande police officers are not only officers — they are friends, parents, neighbors, coaches and members of our community.

In June, The Observer requested “all documentation regarding formal and informal complaints against members of the La Grande Police Department over the past three years.” To maintain the trust and legitimacy that we enjoy within our community, it is very important that we are as transparent and open as possible within the laws governing these records, so I was pleased to provide the requested information.

As noted in The Observer article, “Addressing discontent” on July 14, 2020, over the course of the last three years, the La Grande Police Department received 11 citizen complaints. In that same period of time, our officers responded to calls for service or had contacts with community members a total of 39,729 times. Some may conclude that any complaint against a police officer is for excessive force.

To help understand the nature of the complaints we’ve received in the last three years, I will share a brief synopsis of each.

- A situation where an officer saw a person, waved and smiled. The person was unhappy, because they had previously asked the officer not to do that.
- A person was upset with the process an officer used during the course

MY VOICE



GARY BELL
LA GRANDE POLICE CHIEF

- of an investigation.
- An officer did not communicate effectively during the course of an investigation.
 - An officer showed a lack of empathy when issuing a citation.
 - A person was unhappy that an allegation couldn’t be proven.
 - One of our staff members was discourteous while off-duty in a public location.
 - An officer did not provide all options that law allowed.
 - A complaint from a community member that was unsubstantiated by others in the neighborhood, and the person was dissatisfied with the outcome.
 - A complaint about communications an officer participated in while off-duty.
 - A person asked an officer to do something they did not have the legal authority to do, and the person did not like the tone of the dialogue with the officer.
 - The one complaint for use of force was when three officers responded to a call where someone armed with a weapon was threatening their own life, and officers tackled the person.
- The truth is, our police officers are human beings with increasingly difficult jobs often performed in very stressful circumstances for all involved.
- Even with our rigorous on-going training, up-to-date policies that

reflect best practices, and the very best of intentions, there are instances where someone isn’t happy and they let us know. When they do, what happens next is representative of our commitment to professionalism and the pursuit of excellence. Our community absolutely deserves nothing less. We address every complaint, informal or formal, and take the appropriate action based on the circumstances. When mistakes are made, we learn from them, address the issue through training, policy change, or if necessary, take disciplinary action as appropriate.

I believe it is critically important that as a community we recognize there are unfortunately times when someone may not like the outcome of a contact with a police officer. However, that doesn’t mean the officer engaged in or is guilty of misconduct. Sometimes the police can (and should) do better, and sometimes the person in contact with the police can (and should) do better.

I will end by sharing one of the written expectations I have for my staff regarding customer service: “Our community has entrusted us and we owe it to them to keep that trust. I expect you to treat others the way you would want yourself or a member of your family to be treated.”

The people serving you at the La Grande Police Department care about our community, and we will continue to achieve our mission by adhering to our core values.

If anyone feels our officers aren’t meeting these expectations, I encourage them to let me know.

About the Author
Gary Bell is the chief of the La Grande Police Department.

Letters

Preparing for digital future is great news

It was very gratifying to see the June issue of “The Ruralite” with an article on the changes coming to transportation: “How Electric Vehicles Will Shape the Future of Driving.”

Our local co-op has been working to get vehicle chargers installed in the towns it serves. That’s a good place to start. It’s possible that customers could eventually partner with the

Write to us

The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. Letters are limited to 400 words and must be signed and carry the author’s address and phone number (for verification purposes only). Email your letters to news@lagrandeobserver.com or mail them to the address below.

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative. The co-op could leverage intelligent vehicle chargers and batteries to make different portions of its grid more robust, and to provide valuable services that save the utility and its cus-

tomers money.

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative is preparing for a digital future. That’s great news for all of us.

*Norm Cimon
La Grande*

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE

NEWSSTAND PRICE: \$1.50

You can save up to 34% off the single-copy price with home delivery.

Call 541-963-3161 to subscribe.

Subscription rates per month:

Union & Wallowa Co.\$11.80

By mail, all other U.S.\$15

A division of

THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801. Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

COPYRIGHT © 2020 THE OBSERVER
The Observer retains ownership and copyright protection of all staff-prepared news copy, advertising copy, photos and news or ad illustrations. They may not be reproduced without explicit prior approval.

Phone: 541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214

Fax: 541-963-7804

Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com

Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com

Street address: 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande

POSTMASTER
Send address changes to:
The Observer,
911 Jefferson Ave.,
La Grande, OR 97850

Periodicals postage paid at:
Pendleton, Oregon 97801

STAFF			
Regional Publisher	Karrine Brogotti	Classifieds	Devi Mathson
Regional circulation director	Kelli Craft	Home delivery advisor	Amanda Fredrick
Editor	Phil Wright	Advertising representative	Juli Bloodgood
News clerk	Lisa Lester Kelly	Advertising representative	Amy Horn
Sports editor	Ronald Bond	Graphic design supervisor	Dorothy Kautz
Reporter	Dick Mason		
Reporter	Sabrina Thompson		