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LG city councilors fend off accusations
GOP website criticizes three council members

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande city councilors Nicole Howard and Corrine Dutto and Mayor Steve Clements are defending themselves against criticism from what they believe are baseless accusations from a member of the Union County Republicans.

Lanny Hildebrandt posted a rant on the Union County Republicans’ website Sept. 8 accusing the councilors and mayor of supporting Black Lives Matter, Antifa, violent riots and looting, and defunding the La Grande Police Department. The post was gone Wednesday morning, Sept. 30, but was republished to the website within a few hours.

Hildebrandt is an accountant in La Grande and the treasurer for the local political action committee Americans for Liberty. He did not return messages for comment before deadline Wednesday, Sept. 30.

Union County Republicans Chair Laura Eckstein said the post is an opinion piece because Hildebrandt published his name and contact information.

“The post in question was made by a private citizen, and was clearly marked as his opinion, not that of the (Union County Republican Central Committee). The UCRCC strongly supports free speech, questioning candidates for public office on their views on important issues, and voting for/recommending votes for candidates that reflect or align with our values, as reflected in our county party platform.”

She compared the post to a letter to the editor, and said Hildebrandt posted it because he has access to the website as the former party chair.

Hildebrandt in the post claimed the mayor and councilors would be in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Antifa occupation and defunding the police.

Dutto said the accusations made against her and the other councilors are unfounded.

“(Hildebrandt) is jumping to conclusions based on my registration (as a Democrat),” Dutto said. “The decisions we do get to

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Back to school

K-3 LG School District students to be back in their schools Oct. 5

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The atmosphere at Island City Elementary School, La Grande, is ticking up a beat — and for good reason.

Monday, Oct. 5, will be a red-letter date for all elementary schools in the La Grande School District, marking the first time since mid-March, when all of the district’s schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that some students will be attending classes at their schools.

The school district has met state safety standards allowing for students in kindergarten through third grade to return to classes in person. This means K-3 students no longer have to take classes via distance learning, which they and the rest of the students in the district have been doing.

First-year Island City Elementary principal Brett Smith said there is a heightened sense of anticipation in his school.

“There is a buzz in the building, a very positive one,” Smith said. “There is a feeling of hope and optimism.”

The principal said teachers are excited, and he feels good about the students returning.

“Kids are not meant to be in front of a computer for hours and hours,” Smith said.

Central Elementary School principal Suzy Mayes said in an email that her staff also is delighted students will be returning soon.

“All of us are excited to welcome our students back to school. Our staff have been preparing their classrooms all week for the day we all have been waiting for,” Mayes said.

Many precautions will be in effect to protect children from COVID-19. For example, all students will stay in their classrooms throughout the day except when they go outside for recess.

“It will be a family unit,” Smith said.

Rather than students going to a cafeteria for breakfast and lunch, meals will come to their classrooms. And restrictions will keep students from certain portions of

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Dick Mason/The Observer

Dale Read, a member of Island City Elementary’s custodial staff, sanitizes a surface at the school Thursday, Sept. 30, 2020. The La Grande School District is preparing for its all its K-3 students to return to classrooms Monday.

“Kids are not meant to be in front of a computer for hours and hours.”

— **Brett Smith**, Island City Elementary School principal

Fresh faces seek to lead Island City

Island City has two candidates running for mayor

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

ISLAND CITY — Island City residents will vote in a new mayor in November, and two candidates are vying for the seat.

Dale Hanson stepped in as Island City’s interim mayor when Robb Rea resigned to move to Parma, Idaho, in August.

Hanson, who previously held the position until 2019, is not running for reelection. Margaret Spence and David Comfort are looking to fill the role instead.

Margaret Spence

Spence lived in Portland prior to her move to Island City in 2014. She said her family came to the area as a way to give their children a better life. Since coming into town, Spence has been involved in the Union County Fair Board as the fair’s



Spence



Comfort

manager and worked in the La Grande School District as the Union County Safe Communities Coalition coordinator.

“It is now time for me to focus on my city and my neighborhood,” Spence said. “My experience has given me the opportunity to get to know Union County and now I’d like to concentrate on making my community a better place.”

Spence has leadership experience through her positions on numerous nonprofit boards and has helped write grants and plan major events. Her role as the Safe Communities Coalition coordinator gives her the opportunity to work with community partners on several projects that assist residents across Union County with their needs.

ELECTION INFORMATION

- Voters soon will decide several local races, including those for mayors of La Grande and Island City. Ballots for the 2020 election will be mailed Oct. 14 and must be returned by 8 p.m. Nov. 3. The voter registration deadline is Oct. 13.

Spence said she aims to bring the residents together, foster government transparency and help clean up the community.

“The advantage of being a small town is that we have the opportunity to get to know our neighbors as a tight-knit community,” she said. “Unfortunately, we don’t always take advantage of that. I believe we can bring people together to accomplish great things. With goals come the need for resources, and a small town struggles with revenue and budget. It will be necessary to conservatively prioritize and carefully plan our revenues and expenditures.”

Spence said she hopes as mayor her role would provide new energy and growth in the community.

David Comfort

Comfort, a longtime resident of Union County, came to La Grande in 1979 with his family. In 2011, he and his wife built a home in Island City. Now, Comfort said, he wants to help his neighbors through COVID-19 and beyond the pandemic.

“Being the mayor during these upside-down times is of paramount importance,” Comfort said. “Coronavirus has touched all aspects of Island City, and I believe I can assist the staff and the community to stay safe and also productive.”

Comfort joined the Island City Budget Committee in 2018. He also is the assistant coach for La Grande’s American Legion Baseball program, which he said

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
43 LOW
Mainly clear



Friday
83/44
Partly sunny

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La Grande, Oregon

Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page 4A.

