

TROUBLING LEGACY

Committee report supports removing Pierce from EOU library name

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University’s library could be getting a new name.

The Eastern Oregon University Board of Trustees will take the final report from the Pierce Library Naming Committee under consideration during its Nov. 12 meeting.

The library’s name has been controversial for years. Its namesakes, former Oregon Gov. Walter Pierce and his wife, Cornelia Pierce, held a number of public leadership roles in Oregon during the first half of the 20th century. But Walter Pierce also received political support from the Ku Klux Klan, and the couple advocated for eugenics and racist policies. As governor, Walter Pierce upheld and created discriminatory and anti-immigration policies.

The 14-page report, which the committee submitted Aug. 27 to EOU President Tom Insko, contains research and testimony in support of changing the name of the library.

“We must never be complacent in prioritizing the values of justice and equity in the work we do every day at EOU, and we must intentionally carry these values into every conversation we have in this community and every decision we make as leaders of the university,” Insko said in a press release about the report and upcoming meeting. “The name of the library is one of those conversations that continues within, and outside of, the EOU community.”

The committee consists of EOU Vice President for University Advancement Tim Seydel, students Andrea Camacho and Joel Chin, associate history professor Rebecca Hartman and library faculty Katie Townsend. The committee set up criteria for determining the naming of the library and answered several questions in an analysis in the report, including whether the values of actions of the Pierces conflict with EOU’s mission statement, values and principles, and whether they demonstrate discriminatory views that actively promoted systemic oppression.

According to the report, the committee found the Pierces’ legacy does conflict with Eastern Oregon University’s values.

“In applying this set of criteria we were most troubled by the enduring nature of the Pierces’ commitment to exclusionary and nativist values and we identified a clear conflict between this commitment and EOU’s values of inclusiveness, embracing diversity and valuing multiple perspectives,” according to the report.

The committee detailed the former governor’s discriminatory history, including involvement with the KKK, limiting immigrants’ ability to own property, and particularly his discrimination against immigrants from Asian countries.

“In the context of our criteria, we conclude that regardless of the question of his Klan membership, (Walter) Pierce’s support of the Compulsory School bill, his and Cornelia’s successful campaign for forced sterilization, his vote against a federal anti-



Sabrina Thompson/The Observer

The Eastern Oregon University Board of Trustees consider changing the name of the Pierce Library at its Nov. 12 meeting. The library is named after former Oregon Gov. Walter Pierce and his wife, Cornelia Pierce. Walter Pierce received support from the Ku Klux Klan, and the couple supported eugenics and advocated for racists policies.

lynching law and his sustained assault upon the civil liberties of Japanese-Americans are clear evidences of the Pierces’ discriminatory actions and values,” the report said.

The committee found the Pierces never attempted redemption or reflected on their ideologies, but there is no evidence either promoted physical violence against people.

What is their public legacy?

According to the committee, Walter and Cornelia Pierce’s legacy is ambiguous. The couple helped the state and rural communities through their work, including Cornelia Pierce’s role as state librarian and Walter Pierce’s work in the development of Columbia River hydroelectricity, enacting the first graduated income tax and his advancement of popular government. However, the committee said in its report, when viewed through the lens of a racially

exclusionary progressivism, their achievements become problematic.

“For at the core of (Walter) Pierce’s populist and progressive politics was an enduring commitment to racial inequality and the values of white supremacy,” the report said. “While there is no argument that Walter Pierce made contributions to Oregon in his years as a public servant, the committee concludes his principle legacy is at best tarnished by, and at worst, singularly defined by a consistent and enduring commitment to racist ideologies and values.”

The committee’s report concluded with a recommendation to change the library’s name. The board will take this report and additional testimony under advisement before voting to keep or change the name of the library.

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Position 2 LG City Council candidates discuss issues

Both agree that the city needs to help businesses

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Nicole Howard wants to help La Grande businesses continue expanding their presence downtown.

This is one reason Howard is running for reelection to a second term on the La Grande City Council. But challenger Denise Wheeler contends the city has not done enough to help businesses, and she is running to defeat Howard and change that.

Howard is a strong supporter of the city’s Urban Renewal Agency and said she believes its funds are a substantial benefit for helping downtown businesses expand their operations. Howard noted several businesses, including Raul’s Taqueria and Direct Music Source, are using URA funds to help them expand.

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Early voting turnout filling ballot boxes

Union County elections has received more than 2,000 ballots

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Voters are turning out early in Union County. According to the Union County Clerk’s office 2,021 people have cast their ballot as of Monday, Oct. 19, 15 days before election night.

“I think people are voting early this year because of all of the hype regarding ‘early voting’ that is on the news, social media, etc.,” Union County Clerk Robin Church said.

During the 2016 general election, 10 days before election night Nov. 8, Union County voters had submitted 921 ballots, a 5.5%

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Boise Cascade could close Elgin plant

Company files lawsuit against DEQ

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

ELGIN — The Boise Cascade Company announced it might shut down its plywood plant in Elgin in early 2021.

The wood products giant notified the 230 employees at the Elgin facility it may reduce their hours or close the plant temporarily beginning Jan. 1. Boise Cascade spokeswoman Lisa Chapman said the

ONLINE

- To read a copy of the lawsuit, see this story at lagrandeobserver.com

potential reduction in hours and closure is due to a lack of logs because of wildfires as well as an order from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality regarding the use of wastewater at the Elgin facility.

“We were notified by the DEQ in April and after lengthy discussions we filed a lawsuit at the end of August,” Chapman said. “The DEQ

said to limit our water use due to the presence of dioxins.”

Dioxins are a group of toxic chemical compounds that are harmful to health.

The DEQ granted a permit in 2018 for use of water at the Elgin plant. Chapman said there is no evidence that use of the water, as the permit allows, has caused or contributed to an environmental or human health hazard. She said samples from the water contain low levels of dioxins.

Boise Cascade filed a petition for reconsideration with DEQ on

May 4, arguing the environmental regulation agency was “attempting to modify the permit without following its required procedural process.” DEQ denied the request on multiple grounds, including the company’s amendments to the water use plan were inconsistent with either the permit or Environmental Quality Commission rules.

The company, filing as Boise Cascade Wood Products LLC, responded on Aug. 31 in Union County with the lawsuit seeking a

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