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COVID-19

Union County hits pause

Local schools work to remain open as some activities take a break

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The La Grande School District could return all grades to distance learning as the number of cases of COVID-19 continues to mount. Other local school districts also are working to remain open to in-person instruction.

Other activities, however, are going to have to take a break.

Gov. Kate Brown on Monday, Nov. 9, announced Union County joined the group of counties taking a two-week pause on social activities to help stop the rapid spread of COVID-19 where community transmission is on the rise. Baker County also made the pause list Monday, along with Clackamas and Washington counties. The four join Jackson, Malheur, Marion, Multnomah and Umatilla counties on the pause, which goes into effect Wednesday, Nov. 11, and lasts until Nov. 25.

The pause measures include urging all businesses to mandate work from home, ceasing long-term care facility visits that take place indoors and reducing the maximum capacity of other indoor activities to 50 people.

The governor is instituting the two-week pause in counties with a case rate above 200 per 100,000 people over a two-week period or more than 60 cases over a two-week period for counties with less than 30,000 people.

Union County on Friday was close to reaching the pause threshold. Over the weekend, Union County had 19 new cases of COVID-19. Monday morning, the Center for Human Development, La Grande, reported 13 new cases in the county. Brown's announcement about the pause came hours later.

Since the pandemic began, Union County has reported 553 total cases and two resulting deaths.

The Oregon Health Authority on Monday reported the state had 723 new COVID-19 cases, bringing the state total to 51,155. Four more people in Oregon died from the virus, pushing the state's death toll to 734.

The pause comes as the La Grande School District considers shifting all students to virtual learning.

The district in an announce-

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A veteran remembers

Former prisoner of war recounts Vietnam experiences

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Mike Bengé did not know his life was in immediate danger, but his friends did.

Bengé, then a civilian in the South Vietnam city of Ban Me Thuot, was doing what he did best in early February 1968 — reaching out to those in need of assistance. The North Vietnamese's historic and devastating Tet Offensive was underway. Bengé was trying to help everyone he could to evacuate before the next attack occurred.

Bengé, from Morrow County in Eastern Oregon, was preparing to go up a hill to lend a hand to friends when he noticed they were waving. He first thought the waves were a greeting, then he detected desperation.

"They were telling me that the North Vietnamese were after me," Bengé said.

By the time he realized this, it was too late. Out of a ditch emerged North Vietnamese soldiers.

"There were 13 of them, armed with AK-47s and SKS assault rifles and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher — the muzzle of which at that moment was pointed at me, looked as big as a bushel basket," he said.

Bengé did not know it, but years of imprisonment awaited him.

Higher-ups disregard crucial intelligence

The course of Bengé's life had changed dramatically from a short time earlier when he was watching the start of the Vietnamese Lunar Year, also known as Tet, a major holiday.

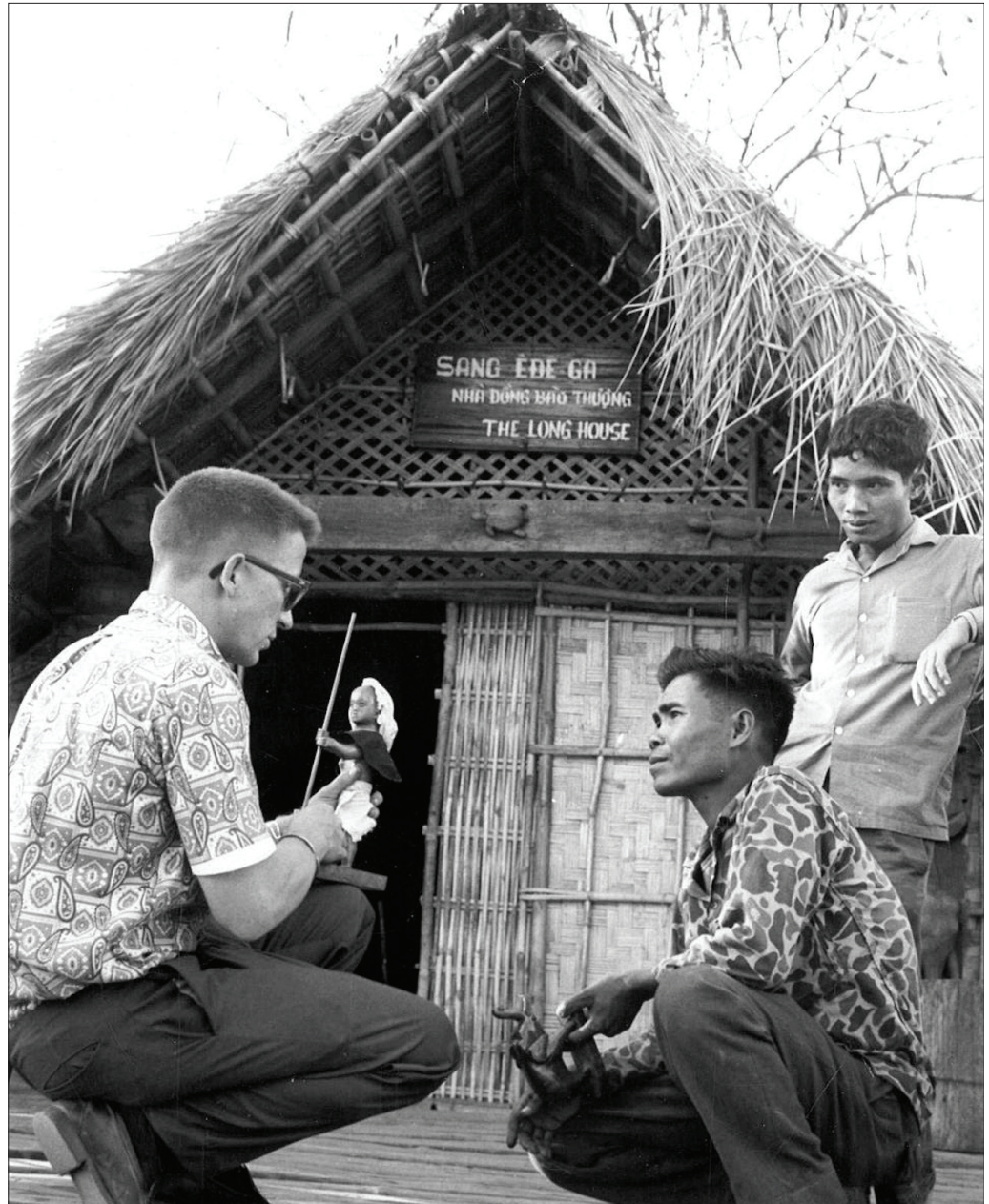
South Vietnam and North Vietnam were at war, but many in South Vietnam felt safe because the two sides agreed to a cease fire for the Tet holiday. Bengé knew better, though, because the anti-communist Montagnards of Vietnam's highlands reported to him they had seen a large North Vietnamese force on the Cambodian border poised to make an attack on Ban Me Thuot.

Bengé and his friend Gerry Hickey were disappointed with the response they received after telling military officials of the report.

"They brushed aside the intelligence, questioning whether the Montagnards could be believed," Bengé said.

The response of the two men was one of incredulity.

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Mike Bengé/Contributed Photo

Mike Bengé, left, talks with Montagnards in South Vietnam in the 1960s while with the U.S. Agency for International Development. Bengé, who has family in Union County, would spend six years as a prisoner of war following the Tet Offensive in January 1968 in Vietnam.

"I can't explain what it felt like to finally be free."

— Mike Bengé, who spent six years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam

COVID-19 aid available for businesses

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As coronavirus cases surged last week in Union County and winter continued its steady approach, the struggles of the past year were fresh in the minds of many La Grande business owners.

While most La Grande businesses have thus far survived the pandemic relatively unscathed, many have done so thanks to local, state and federal aid programs.

"Most of our businesses are holding on, with some actually having benefited from the pandemic, including businesses that offer items that are necessary right now like face masks," said Christine Jarski, economic development director for the city of La Grande.

Jarski said the city still has funding available for businesses that have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, including a low-interest loan program reserved for businesses within city limits. The city issues one such loan to The Cell Fix, a local electronics repair company.

"There's been a lot of assistance utilized," said Harold Wolf-



Kaleb Lay/The Observer

The Cell Fix electronics repair shop, La Grande, is one of 24 businesses that received low-interest loans from the city of La Grande due to impacts from COVID-19.

ford, who works at The Cell Fix. "I think there have been local and state level assistance that's been utilized that's definitely been appreciated. ... We're adjusting, we're keeping up with everything, but there were definitely times that that assistance was essential and appreciated."

The program offers loans of up to \$10,000 to affected businesses at 1% interest.

The loans are issued on 48-month terms, and payments are deferred for the first six months. The second six months require interest-payments only.

Jarski said the city has awarded 24 of the loans to local businesses, and the program has about \$80,000 in remaining funds. She also stressed additional resources are available, including grants through the city and various federal programs.

To qualify for the city's emergency loans, businesses must be physically located within La Grande city limits and cannot have employed more than 50 people when operating at full strength. Businesses also must have been relatively stable before the nega-

tive effect of the pandemic hit.

Wolford said business has been steady through the pandemic so far. He also noted if The Cell Fix hadn't received assistance, he was unsure if "we'd still be here."

With winter weather nearing and the travel season at an end, some experts expect the coronavirus will exacerbate seasonal slowdowns for some business.

"Our hotels and motels, now that the travel season is over, they're going to see negative impacts," said Greg Smith, director of the Eastern Oregon University Small Business Development Center, La Grande. "People who don't have to travel are not."

Not all businesses have experienced contractions due to the pandemic, according to Smith, who noted, "If you're running a liquor store, you're doing extraordinarily well."

Businesses interested in assistance programs should visit the Union County Chamber of Commerce website. Any business considering closing can contact Jarski, the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District or the Small Business Development Center.

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Issue 134
2 sections, 12 pages
La Grande, Oregon
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