

‘Christmas Star’ to be visible during solstice

By Bill Bradshaw
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The “Christmas Star” will become apparent for the first time in nearly 800 years and — hopefully — will be visible over Northeastern Oregon on Monday, Dec. 21, to coincide with the winter solstice and brighten up the darkest night of the year.

About 45 minutes after sunset Monday, the two largest gas giants in the solar system are expected to appear to cross paths in the southwestern sky. Not since 1226 have they appeared so close, although they are in reality millions of miles apart.

In 1226, Genghis Khan was taking over parts of Russia and the 5th Crusade was trying to recapture land in Egypt.

According to kgw.com, the visible distance apart of the two planets can be measured by degrees. Jupiter and Saturn will be about 0.1 degree away from each other, making them appear basically as one bright light in the sky. For perspective, the width of the full moon is about 0.5 degrees. The distance between Jupiter and Saturn from our perspective will be about 1/5 the width of a full moon.

In the Northern Hemisphere, just after sunset,



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It won’t be quite this bright in Northeastern Oregon, but a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the southwest sky Monday, Dec. 21, 2020, will create a “Christmas Star” about 45 minutes after sunset. It’s the first time the two have come together in about 800 years.

look in the southwest sky and you’ll be able to see the two neighboring lights above the horizon. Jupiter will be on the left and Saturn will be on the right.

Of course, the Wallowa Mountains hide much of the sunsetting horizon in Wallowa and Union counties, so visibility may be limited.

“Let’s hope it is clear as the south camera will pick it up,” a spokesperson from weatherbee.com said in an email.

According to the Bible, it was a similar event that Magi followed to Bethlehem to the stable where Jesus

was born. Magi were a type of priest in ancient Persia. Although the Bible does not say how many magi attended Christ’s birth, it is assumed there were three because they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

According to nbcnews.com, it was a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter about 2,000 years ago, not Saturn and Jupiter.

NASA’s Night Sky Network said that from Tuesday, Dec. 15 to Friday, Dec. 18, Jupiter and Saturn also will be visible by looking toward the waxing

crescent moon to the west about 45 minutes after sunset.

“Keep in mind that while the two gas giants may appear close, in reality they are hundreds of millions of miles apart,” NASA writes. “This will still be quite a striking sight, but you will need to look fast as both planets will set shortly after sunset.”

On the solstice night, Dec. 21, the moon will be higher in the sky, but Jupiter and Saturn will remain closer to the horizon in the western sky and might look like one large star.

OUTDOORS

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Bobolink, a birding supply store, said the sale of binoculars has been particularly strong this Christmas season. He said this likely reflects an increased interest in bird-watching in people who desire to get outdoors more during the pandemic. Bray said binoculars are a product that gets increas-

ingly better due to technological advancements.

“They are getting smaller and more powerful,” Bray said.

He also noted it is easier to quickly focus new models of binoculars, something important when watching quick-moving avian creatures.

At Alpine Archery, John Appleton, who co-owns the store with his wife, Anieta, said gift cards are again a

top seller this Christmas season. He said many of the buyers are relatives or friends of avid bowhunters but are unfamiliar with archery. Appleton said the gift card idea is a good one for such individuals because the needs of archers are very specific.

He said it is tough for people unfamiliar with the nuances of bows to get the right equipment to complement them. Appleton cited

arrows as an example.

“If you get the wrong size arrows for someone’s bow they will be useless,” he said.

Anieta Appleton said this Christmas season is again a busy one at Alpine Archery.

“I love it. We get to see our regular customers and the people who come in once or twice a year,” she said. “It is like family coming in to see you.”

ALL AGES

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difficulties go through.

“I experienced what it is like to live on limited means when I was younger,” Steffey said. “I know how stressful it can be.”

A key element of this stress often involves car maintenance because someone without a vehicle has a hard time getting to their job. Having neighbors to help with matters as fundamental as installing new windshield wipers could make a big difference for someone struggling financially.

“They could help people thrive,” Steffey said.

He said when people apply for occupancy at Timber Ridge, they would be urged to reach out to their community.

“We would want them to give back in ways which would benefit the entire community,” Steffey said.

This could include actions as simple as picking up litter at the apartment complex.

Steffey said residents would be encouraged not only to help others but also to be willing to accept assistance when offered.

“By being willing to accept help you are giving other people a sense of purpose,” Steffey said.

Timber Ridge Apartments would have physical features that would foster the intergenerational connections, said Dale Inslee, executive director of the Northeast Oregon Housing Authority, which would own the complex. These would include flat walking paths with adjacent benches where people could rest. Exercise equipment for

younger people and seniors who want more strenuous exercise also would be along the paths.

And a large community center would be a big part of the intergenerational component of Timber Ridge. It would include space for a computer lab and classes that could be taught for people of all ages.

Should the Community for All Ages concept be successful and be adopted throughout the United States, it could have a positive influence on the economy because people living in those communities would be healthier.

“If this catches on, it could drive down health care costs,” Steffey said.

Plans for Timber Ridge Apartments will soon be submitted to the city of La Grande Planning Department for approval. If the

planning department grants approval and issues building permits, construction could start as early as April 2021 and be completed about a year later.

A portion of funding for the construction of Timber Ridge Apartments would come from the state’s Local Innovation Fast Track program, also known as LIFT. The Oregon Legislature approved this program about two years ago and it is providing funding for affordable housing projects throughout Oregon. The Timber Ridge project’s general contractor would be CB Construction of La Grande.

LIST

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were being made available to senators.

The Stable Homes for Oregon Families coalition has pressed for a special session to extend the moratorium, which would be part of a broader proposal to couple it with a new state fund to compensate landlords for part of their lost income. Tenants would still have to pay rent owed by the new date of July 1 and certify that they are unable to pay as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic downturn.

House and Senate Democrats disagree about the proposal put forth by the House Committee on Housing, which heard the proposal from a work group on Nov. 30. The proposed fund would require lawmakers to draw \$100 million, probably from the projected ending balance in the 2019-21 budget.

“It is a well-vetted solution that has come forward as a result of the work group that would ensure \$100 million is ready to go out into Oregon communities and help landlords and tenants within a short turnaround,” Sybil Hebb, director of advocacy for the Oregon Law Center, said at a virtual news conference Dec. 4. “This proposal will provide stability for tenants to get past this cliff that will happen in January if we do not act.”

Advocates for some landlord groups want lawmakers to approve tax credits, which are subtracted directly from taxes owed, to offset losses in rental income. Hebb said such proposals can be discussed in the 2021 session.

A separate proposal would extend the moratorium on property foreclosures from Dec. 31 to July 1.

Brown issued executive orders on both matters in March after the start of the pandemic, and lawmakers passed bills in subsequent special sessions.

But they are among several draft bills and concepts being circulated among lawmakers. The others, in no particular order:

- Disconnect Oregon’s tax code from some federal tax breaks for businesses included in the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act,

which Congress passed in March. The state legislation would limit the amounts businesses could deduct for excess losses and net operating losses, among others, to save money for state coffers. Business groups have opposed the bill, which was readied for but not advanced to an Aug. 10 special session.

- Authorize the state to form an emergency stockpile, such as personal protection equipment and testing kits for communicable diseases.
- Allow bars to sell cocktails to-go in sealed containers, akin to beer and wine that are permitted.
- Allow frontline health care providers to share public health data.
- Provide a limited liability shield for schools and related programs against lawsuits stemming from COVID-19 infections if the district follows rules in effect during the public health emergency going back to March 8 of this year. The shield does not affect other types of lawsuits, such as those alleging discrimination, and would expire when the governor declares an end to the emergency.

A couple of agencies also have requested legislation for consideration during the special session, although no drafts were made available yet.

- Driver and Motor Vehicle Services Division: A moratorium on enforcement of expired DMV documents — licenses, permits and vehicle registration — is scheduled to end on Dec. 31. The Department of Transportation, DMV’s parent agency, seeks to extend the moratorium and make two other changes affecting in-person service at DMV offices.
- Employment Department: The agency seeks a technical change to allow it to tap its fraud control fund, instead of other funds that go for operations, to repay the Federal Emergency Management Agency for any benefit overpayments made under the Lost Wages Assistance program. That program drew \$44 billion from FEMA’s disaster assistance money to extend extra unemployment benefits of \$300 per week in 49 states, including Oregon, for five weeks ending Sept. 5. Oregon paid out a total of \$363 million under this program.

GRIM

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agency use and the first U.S. health care workers vaccinated early Monday morning in Long Island, New York, the long-awaited arrival of a way to fight the pandemic has finally arrived. Doses of the Pfizer vaccine are expected to arrive in Oregon this week and hospitals across the state have relief in sight.

However, Oregon Health Authority officials have said rural counties with few health care workers should not expect to receive any of the first doses of the Pfizer vaccine, as the doses must be kept at extremely cold

temperatures that can be achieved only with special equipment.

Rural counties will have to wait for other vaccines to receive FDA approval. The Moderna vaccine, similar to Pfizer’s, is expected to be the next to arrive in Oregon and does not require ultracold storage. Little has been confirmed about the Moderna vaccine.

“This is truly an historic moment that we should celebrate,” said Patrick Allen, OHA director, in a press release. “But we’re far from being out of the woods in this pandemic. For most of us, getting vaccinated against COVID-19 is several months away, and in that time we will see more

cases and, tragically, more deaths. Everyone should have the opportunity to get the vaccine when it becomes available, so we need to keep doing our part to protect our families, our neighbors and ourselves by doubling down on the basic actions that keep the virus from spreading.”

OHA has asked the public to remain vigilant as the country works to beat back the spread of COVID-19 and vaccinate hundreds of millions of people. State health experts continue to urge people to wear a mask, practice social distancing, avoid gatherings and get-togethers, avoid travel and wash their hands.

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