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Good day to our valued subscriber Cecila Lovely of North Powder

Elgin man faces murder charges

One man in custody in an apparent double homicide outside Elgin

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

ELGIN — The Union County Sheriff's Office is investigating a double homicide outside Elgin.

The sheriff's office in a press release Wednesday, Dec. 30, announced the arrest of Gary Otis Mason, 54, of Elgin, for the deaths of Candy K. Williams, 56, and a juvenile. Williams was Mason's significant other, according to the sheriff's office, which did not identify the juvenile.

The sheriff's office detained Mason on Tuesday, Dec. 29, at approximately 3 a.m. following an initial investigation at his residence, 68381 Chumos Road, outside Elgin, where Williams also resided. The sheriff's office booked Mason into the Union County Correction Facility, La Grande, at about 6 p.m. Tuesday.

He now faces two charges of first-degree murder.

According to the sheriff's office, Mason called the Union County Dispatch Center via 911 from his home on Chumos Road at approximately 12:06 a.m. Tuesday.

A deputy with the sheriff's office and an Oregon State Police trooper responded and found two bodies upon arrival. Mason was at the scene and received aid from the Elgin Ambulance and La Grande Fire Department.

The Union County Major Crime Team, which includes members of the Union County Sheriff's Office, La Grande Police Department, Oregon State Police and Union County Attorney's office, then investigated throughout the day.

The sheriff's office also it would not provide further comments on the case, which now is in the hands of the district attorney's office for prosecution.

Mason remains in the county jail on no bail.

Years of backyard sewage

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

ISLAND CITY — A years-long dispute between the landlord and a resident at Island City Mobile Manor has resulted in violations of Oregon's moratorium on evictions, threats and acts of violence and a pool of backed-up human waste.

The ordeal began shortly after Steve Butcher, a contractor and mobile home owner, moved into the park in January 2019. Just a month later, in February, he came home to the smell of sewage leaking from his plumbing and pooling under his home.

Butcher hired a plumber to make repairs, then his pipes burst again, and again, for a year. Each time he fixed his plumbing, pressure built in the pipes and broke the seals, leading to what he called a "sewer pond" underneath his home.

"It's been a continuous problem for quite some time," Butcher said.

After once again repairing his plumbing in February 2020, he and the plumber decided to wait into the evening to observe what happened during peak use hours. When a flood of human waste

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COVID-19 relief package offers hope in Union County

By Dick Mason
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The $900 billion COVID-19 relief package President Donald Trump signed Sunday, Dec. 27, will provide families in Union County with a vital boost.

Robert Kleng, director of Eastern Oregon University Head Start, a program that provides free preschool education to children from lower-income families, understands this firsthand.

"The needs of families (in Union County) is higher than I have ever seen it in the 10 years I have been with Eastern Oregon University Head Start," Kleng said on Tuesday, Dec. 29.

The $900 billion relief package extends unemployment benefits for millions of Americans, ones which had expired days earlier. These benefits are a lifeline for numerous people in Union

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Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain
Wallowa girls basketball assistant coach Carrie Hermens, left, addresses a crowd of more than 80 people at the Wallowa County Courthouse on Monday, Dec. 28, 2020, while organizer Dennis Sheehy listens.

'Please, let them play'

Rally supports Wallowa County prep athletes who are missing sports

By Ellen Morris Bishop
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Parents, players, coaches and fans of all ages rallied in support of a high school basketball and wrestling season this year at the Wallowa County Courthouse. The hastily scheduled event drew more than 80 people, and featured talks by coaches, Wallowa County commissioners and athletes.

Both sports are considered "contact sports" and are currently banned by the Oregon Health Authority due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Oregon School Activities Association, because of the ban, cannot OK those sports for the upcoming season.

The rally organizers and others hope a change can allow the sports to be played.

"Thirty-five other states have been playing high school sports," said David Howe, Wallowa High School principal and girls basketball coach. "They haven't experienced problems. If OSAA could give us a reason for not allowing us to play, I could go along. But they have just banned the basketball season without an explanation."

Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain
Football, basketball and track athlete Jericho Peters explains why athletics are important to him at the Wallowa County Courthouse on Monday, Dec. 28, 2020.

Rally organizers and Wallowa Superintendent of Schools Tammy Jones emphasized that schools wanted to adhere to rules for safety and health.

"We want to be sure that whatever seasons we open, we keep kids and families safe," Jones said.

"Applying a one-measure-fits-all rule to all schools across the state does not make sense to students or the community (here)," rally organizer Dennis Sheehy of Wallowa said. "In Wallowa County, the total number or COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic is 76. The number of deaths … is three. It is obvious that the situation in rural counties like Wallowa County is very different from counties like Multnomah or Marion that have very high-density populations."

In September, the athletic directors at all three Wallowa County high schools submitted a letter and proposal for a basketball season to the OSAA. They proposed a basketball season in November and December with restrictions that included a maximum of 45 spectators at each game, with masks required, or a total of 100 people in the gym, with no spectators allowed and only teams, coaches, officials and others essential to the game, including a person who would film the game. The proposal also included sanitizing the ball and many other measures.

The proposed "COVID-19 league" would be similar to the group of Eastern Oregon schools that played in the abbreviated "touch" football season, including Cove, Elgin, Imbler and North Powder as well as Wallowa, Enterprise and Joseph.

The OSAA never responded to the proposal, according to Howe. Wallowa A.D. Mitch Frye considered the proposal as being rejected.

Currently, OSAA has sanctioned a statewide "fall" sports season consisting of football and cross-country beginning in February.

"It's obvious that playing football in February is not a viable

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WEATHER

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Patchy clouds

Friday
38/30
Mostly cloudy

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