The classic brunch

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Good day to our valued subscriber Wendy Clerget of La Grande

Oregon's workplace watchdog sticks to its playbook

Oregon OSHA trudges on despite pandemic, record workload and armed protesters

By JAKE THOMAS
Salem Reporter via AP StoryShare

SALEM — On a Sunday in December, a crowd of people carrying American flags descended on a house in a sleepy neighborhood in west Salem to declare they'd had enough.

After a prayer and recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, people from the maskless crowd of about 100 stopped at the house, taking turns speaking into a microphone about the ways state pandemic restrictions upended their lives, according to a video of the event.

A woman turned toward the house and screamed about a lost business. Others cited conspiracy theories that the coronavirus was planned or said state pandemic orders were illegal. Someone cried "tar and feather."

Inside, Michael Wood, administrator of the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration, monitored the unprecedented event. He runs the state agency charged with making sure Oregon's roughly 2 million workers go home healthy and uninjured.

Before the pandemic, employees likely knew the agency for its safety posters in break rooms or occasional worksite inspections. Now OSHA is the state's COVID cop, enforcing new rules for masking, sanitation and social distancing aimed at slowing the virus' spread in Oregon workplaces. The agency's inspectors and staff have been saddled with an unprecedented workload. They've conducted their work in a polarized political environment that's led to unusually confrontational pushback.

Even with a protest on his doorstep, Wood says he and his team will keep doing their job.

Wood, who has served as head of Oregon OSHA for 15 years and worked more than 20 years for a similar department in Washington, said his work and the work of his staff has proceeded normally despite the public turmoil.

"In a sense, it's simply another hazard that we need to address in the workplace to keep workers safe," said Wood, 59. "We think our job is addressing hazards

See, **OSHA**/*Page 5A*

Dick Mason/The Observer, File

Dave Mellinger loads food into the warehouse of the Community Connection of Northeast Oregon regional food bank with a forklift Oct. 29, 2019. The Oregon Food Bank and partners on Monday, Jan. 25, 2021, plan to launch a program to help take on food insecurity in Union County.

Taking aim at hunger

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The fight against an increasing food insecurity problem in Union County is set to gain some momentum thanks to a FEAST grant from the Oregon Food Bank.

FEAST — Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together — is a program the Oregon Food Bank describes as a community organizing process aimed at identifying and making improvements that can be made to a community's food system.

That program is set to kick off in earnest in Union County on Monday, Jan. 25, thanks to a partnership between the OFB and Oregon Rural Action, a grassroots organization with the goal of bringing social justice and economic and agricultural sustainability to rural Oregon.

"In terms of what FEAST can do, in the way we're looking at with Oregon Rural Action, is to create a really strong network of people in all facets of food that can continue past this grant cycle and can continue to have power to work on projects beyond," said Kagan Koehn, a community organizer with Oregon Rural Action.

Koehn said a big part of what the FEAST program would be aimed at doing in Union County was organizing local people and resources, helping them communicate, collaborate and find grant funding to tackle local food insecurity.

Food insecurity, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, has become an issue of increasing severity and urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the nonprofit Feeding America, more than 3,500 people in Union County were food insecure in 2018, and that figure is believed to have grown due to the pandemic.

> *"In terms of what FEAST (Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together) can do, in the way we're looking at with Oregon Rural Action, is to create a really strong network of people in all facets of food that can continue past this grant cycle and can continue to have power to work on projects beyond."*
>
> — *Kagan Koehn,* ***Oregon Rural Action***

Koehn said understanding the varying economic situations of Union County residents is important in determining how food insecurity can be best addressed.

"Of course, there's things that you can say that are needed, like more jobs," she said. "These are not the things that we're thinking of in terms of food security."

Koehn said the FEAST initiative will be more focused on food distribution networks, addressing "food desert" communities such as Summerville and North Powder, which have no dedicated local grocers, and coordinating with local food producers.

She also noted ORA and the FEAST program face numerous challenges in addressing the issue, including a potential reluctance of people in the community to take what might be perceived as a handout. Koehn also said there are systemic barriers to overcome, such as community isolation and a cultural identity of self-sufficiency.

"I think rural people hold that identity really close because you do have to work hard out here. Even if you have all the money in the world, you still have to drive maybe 30 minutes just to get your groceries. There's always a little bit of a barrier."

Oregon Rural Action is set to take aim at the mammoth problem of hunger beginning with the first FEAST meeting on Jan. 25. While Koehn said it could be some time before the public will be able to take part in FEAST meetings, it was a step in the right direction.

Union considers restructuring water, sewer rates

Plan would make rates more equitable, help town apply for grants

By DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION — A North Carolina firm is proposing the city of Union make its water rates more equitable.

City Administrator Doug Wiggins said the restructuring proposal would raise what the vast majority of Union residents pay for combined water and sewer service by $6 a month.

The Pioneer Consulting Group submitted a report to Union recommending the town alter its water rate structure so it is fairer, encourages conservation and puts Union in a position to have a more sustainable water system.

"The present water rate structure is not equitable," according to a report from Pioneer Consulting Group, which has offices in Jacksonville, North Carolina, and Harwich Port, Massachusetts. The city of Union contracted the firm to study its water rates and make recommendations.

The Pioneer Consulting Group's report indicates 70% of all customers do not use the minimum allowance of 1,000 cubic feet per month.

"These customers are paying for water they are not using," the report states.

This means Union's water rate structure is essentially putting low users in the position of subsidizing higher users.

To correct this, the Pioneer Consulting Group suggests the city set up a tiered base rate. Customers with a three-fourth-inch water pipes would pay $33 a month. The price would increase in the following increments: 1-inch pipe, $75; 1.5 inch pipe, $150; 2-inch pipe, $255; and 3-inch pipe, $400.

PROPOSAL FOR UNION WATER & SEWER RATES

WATER RATES: Customers with a three-fourth-inch water pipes would pay $33 a month; 1-inch pipe, $75; 1.5 inch pipe, $150; 2-inch pipe, $255; and 3-inch pipe, $400. Everyone each month also would pay half a cent for each cubic foot of water up to 1,000 cubic feet then 1.25 cents for each cubic foot of water in excess of 1,000 cubic feet.

SEWER RATES: Customers with three-fourth-inch pipes would pay $50 a month; 1.5-inch pipes would pay $250 a month; 3-inch pipes would pay $750 a month.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight: 22 LOW, Partly cloudy

Wednesday: 38/26, Partly sunny

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

THURSDAY LARGE TREE RULE CHANGE

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