

SCHOOLS

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a computer,” the sophomore said.

Bisenius also said he cannot wait to get to LHS where he will have the chance to see his friends again.

LHS counselor Teresa Dowdy said the sense of anticipation at the school as Jan. 27 approaches is a lot like the feeling students and teachers normally have in late August as the summer break ends.

“It is like the first day of school,” Dowdy said.

Teachers are delighted to have students back in class, she said, but noted in some cases their happiness is restrained because many educators here have yet to be vaccinated for COVID-19. She said teachers want



The Observer, File

La Grande Middle School students in May 2013 visit their lockers before heading to class following lunch. Seventh through 12th grade students in La Grande return to in-person teaching starting Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2021, the first time they will be in real classrooms since the state closed schools more than 10 months ago due to the pandemic.

to be vaccinated not only to protect themselves but also their students.

“I feel that some teachers would be a little more excited if they were already vaccinated,” Dowdy said.

Gov. Kate Brown

announced last week she wants to make vaccinating educators a priority, but it is not yet known when Northeast Oregon educators will be vaccinated.

The returning students will attend school in

A and B cohorts on alternate days to allow for social distancing. Grade seven through 12 students will be required to complete assignments on their own during the days they are not in class.

This unusual schedule is among new aspects the La Grande middle and high schools will have to adjust to. Dowdy said some students are nervous about the new schedules and social distancing rules they will have to follow.

“They will have to navigate some new things before they settle into a new routine and feel comfortable,” Dowdy said.

Eli Bisenius’s sister Aubrey, a La Grande Middle School eighth grader, also is looking forward to seeing her friends and having the opportunity to study at school where she

said there will be less distractions than at home.

Aubrey Bisenius said she is not worried about the new rules she will have to follow at LMS.

“I am fine with it as long as I’m going to school,” the eighth grader said.

LHS and LMS choir teacher Kevin Durfee also is delighted he will be able to instruct students in person once again. He said teaching students online is awkward and limiting. He noted it is impossible to get groups of students to sing together in harmony via internet teleconference sessions because of the difference in students’ home internet connections and computer equipment. Still, Durfee said he was impressed with the efforts the school district’s administrators and staff made to meet the needs

of students while offering Comprehensive Distance Learning.

“I don’t know anyone who has not worked extremely hard to do what is best for students,” Durfee said.

LHS Spanish teacher Anne March said she senses students are excited about returning to school for in-person instruction after being home for so long.

“They will appreciate the four walls of a classroom,” March said.

She said it has been difficult for students to study at home because of distractions such as loud siblings and home responsibilities.

March lauded how hard teachers and students have worked during the pandemic to overcome hurdles to education.

“It has been hard,” March said, “but we made it work.”

COUNCIL

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Clements said the costs of repaving city streets was prohibitively high given the budgetary restraints, and more funding would have to be made available to make improvements to La Grande’s street network.

“To take (the streets) all the way back down to gravel and build it back up, if I remember correctly, is about \$7.50 a square foot,” Clements said. “So take that street, and let’s say that street is 40 feet across, just to do one linear foot is about ... \$280, just for one linear foot. Now, you do 100 feet and you’re \$28,000, you do a quarter-mile and you’re well into \$450,000 to \$500,000.”

Options to increase funding for infrastructure include implementing a gas tax or a transportation system development charge.

“I think the council has been really hesitant to do this,” Howard said. “Six years ago, maybe seven now, they tried to pass a gas tax, and it failed ... I think that was a bit of a blow.”

The council also plan to discuss understaffing in the city’s information technology department, the police department and at the city library, which could add two part-time positions.

“We surely need some

extra support at the library, we’ve needed that for a number of years,” Clements said. “I don’t necessarily know that IT support requires us hiring someone, rather than ... we can just contract for more hours (with the city’s IT provider).”

Planning is another discussion item, which includes the adoption of a housing production strategy to address the city’s housing shortage. State law requires the city to adopt such a strategy and has received grant funding to assist with the effort to develop of housing for all income levels, including affordable, middle-income and university student housing.

The council could consider “targeted incentives” as part of the housing production strategy, including reduced fees, tax abatement for new housing developments, formation of new urban renewal districts and public-private partnerships.

Homelessness, which has been a growing issue in La Grande, also is on the agenda. Proposals listed include the formation or leadership of a committee or the hosting of a forum on homelessness with local organizations that deal with the issue.

In a related topic, the council plans to discuss the what role the city should play in addressing and alleviating causes of local poverty, including

housing, education and drug addiction.

On public engagement and communication, the council is looking at ways to get youth involved in city government, updating the city’s website and examining city departments’ use of social media accounts. Also up for consideration are La Grande’s recreation center, continued improvements of the Island Avenue corridor and changes to Cook Memorial Library’s services.

The council will also consider whether to continue development of a greenway, a project that neighboring Island City turned down grant funding to continue. The council will discuss potentially continuing development of the trail on existing city-owned properties.

Tourism also is on the docket. City Manager Robert Strope is recommending the allocation of “the entirety of funds dedicated to the Blue Mountain Conference Center” to the Union County Chamber of Commerce to reduce the impact of shortfalls in revenues.

The council also will explore undergoing a feasibility study for creating a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics center in La Grande for educational programs.

And, last but not least, considerations of the coming wildfire season and the wildland urban interface are on the agenda.

MERGE

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and a new property tax, then, would determine how much people pay for services. This would mean some residents might pay more for than what they are now and some might pay less.

Wiggins said having a single fire department serving the Union area would boost efficiency.

“It would create more unity than we have now,” Wiggins said.

It also would make situations more clearcut. Wiggins noted hen there is a fire in the Union area, one of two chiefs is in charge depending on the location. There would be no question regarding who is to lead the firefighting effort if there were one department.

Mayor Leonard Flint said one of the drawbacks of the potential merger is it would cost the city of Union a measure of local control.

Additional goals the city council tentatively agreed to for 2021 include continuing to get the ranger station buildings renovated for public use in the future and to get an asphalt trail in Union’s city park extended into the city.

The ranger station, near the northwest edge of Union, was built in 1937 and deeded to the city of Union in 1993. The station has a four-bedroom house, a three-bedroom house, a

two-bedroom house, an old oil storage building, a barn, a utility building, a utility garage and two garages detached from the houses.

The renovations of one of the ranger station’s homes is now progressing. The city council on Jan. 11 awarded a \$16,000 contract to Fred Daggett Plumbing to do plumbing work at one of the housing units at the station. Improvement work on a second housing unit could begin later this year.

Once renovations are complete, the council would like to have the city rent out the ranger station buildings for short term lodging. Their availability

could be a big plus for accommodating visitors when there are events in Union such as tournaments at its Buffalo Peak Golf Course, Wiggins said.

The trail project the city council discussed involves a path that would run along Catherine Creek in Union just as it does at the park. Wiggins said this would provide residents with a place to exercise and could draw in visitors from outside the area. He said the city is trying to obtain easements from landowners for the trail. Once the city obtains that public access, it would be able to apply for grants for the trail extension.

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