DEQ issues three fines for asbestos removal in La Grande

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The demolition of a building in May 2019 at the La Grande/Union County Airport resulted in three fines in December 2020 for mishandling asbestos removal, including one penalty against Union County.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality issued penalties of $7,200 each against Union County and Wellens General Contractors Inc. of Enterprise and a penalty of $11,200 against Dustin Mulrony of Ontario.

According to the DEQ's notices of the civil penalties, Union County hired Wellens to demolish a building at the site, 60131 Pierce Road, La Grande. Wellens in turn brought on Mulrony, an unlicensed contractor, to demolish the interior of the building.

Mulrony created a debris pile approximately 50 feet by 20 feet by 15 feet tall, according to DEQ documents, and an inspection in June 2019 revealed the materials in the pile contained asbestos. The DEQ also reported a licensed asbestos abatement contractor in July 2019 completed the abatement of the pile.

The fines are for the open accumulation of asbestos-containing material, according to the notices. The DEQ also noted the county, Wellens and Mulrony failed to have an accredited inspector survey the building for asbestos prior to demolition, but the state environmental regulator did not issue fines for that violation.

The trio of fines was among 11 the DEQ issued in December, which included a $1,600 penalty against Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton for air pollution.

The largest penalties were against Columbia 410 LLC in Molalla and its parent company, CHTC Inc, and CEO, Jacob Crabtree, for ongoing air pollution. The DEQ issued a penalty of $198,786 against CHTC Inc., $196,288 against Columbia 410 LLC and $196,288 against Crabtree.

VACCINES

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Brown said her goal is "to get our kids back in the classroom this school year," but she received mixed responses for putting teachers first.

Some education groups say the move is crucial to help the state's students.

Others, including leaders of the Portland Association of Teachers and Oregon State University, have expressed concern, saying schools won't be safe until communities are safe. If schools open, they say, children and educators can still carry the virus home to other family members.

Even if all teachers get vaccinated, that doesn't mean all schools will open immediately.

Marc Siegel, spokesperson for Oregon Department of Education, told the Capital Press his agency's highest priority is "to return our schools to in-person instruction." But Siegel said each school has its own plan.

Some school districts, he said, are considering summer school options. Siegel said the state will use about $450,000 in incoming coronavirus aid money from the federal government to help make up for lost learning.

It could be months before farmworkers and others in the food sector get vaccinated.

Oregon has been vaccinating health care workers, the top priority group, since December.

The state has upwards of 400,000 health care workers, and as of Sunday, Oregon Health Authority spokesperson Jonathan Modie told the Capital Press 308,051 doses have been administered.

It also will take time to vaccinate educators, daycare workers and school staff — about 110,000 people, according to the Oregon Department of Education.

Then comes Oregon's 65-and-older crowd. According to Census data, this includes about 764,400 people. Health officials predict nearly 80% of seniors will be vaccinated by the end of the first week of May.

The second week of May, essential workers are expected to be eligible. This will include agricultural workers, but OHA has not yet announced who will take priority.

The tax credit fix many can't afford to miss

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Families battered by the pandemic recession soon may discover that the tax refunds they're counting on are dramatically smaller — or that they actually owe income tax. Congress offered a partial solution, but the fix hasn't been widely publicized, consumer advocates say.

Refunds are crucial to many lower- and moderate-income households, which use the money to catch up on bills and medical treatments, pay down debt and boost savings.

But the unemployment insurance that kept many people afloat last year may cause problems at tax time this year. Unemployment benefits are taxable, but tax withholding is typically voluntary — and many people who lost jobs either didn't know their unemployment checks would be taxed, or they decided against withholding. (Relief checks, such as the $1,200 sent out last year, are not taxable.)

Further, unemployment benefits are not earned income and so don't count toward two crucial tax benefits that keep millions of working families with children out of poverty: the earned income tax credit and the additional child tax credit.

"If you're a single parent or a couple with kids living on, say, $25,000 a year, you might see 25% or more of your annual income in the form of your federal tax refund because of these credits," says Timothy Flacke, executive director of Commonwealth, a nonprofit that promotes financial security.

There's a fix on credits, but people don't know about it

There isn't an easy workaround for tax refunds shriveled by inadequate withholding. But Congress provided a potential fix for the tax credits issue in the $900 billion coronavirus relief legislation passed last month: Filers can choose to use their 2019 income to determine their credits rather than their 2020 income.

But that fix hasn't been widely reported, says Leigh Phillips, chief executive officer of SaverLife, a nonprofit that encourages working families to save. Not everyone uses up-to-date tax software or well-informed tax preparers, and Phillips worries that many eligible people won't learn about it before filing their returns. The IRS will begin accepting returns Feb. 12.

"People are going to start trying to file taxes as soon as they possibly can," Phillips says. "If you think that you've got thousands coming in the mail or to your bank account, you're there day one with your paperwork ready to go."

People who rely on refunds tend to file early

Research confirms that the earliest recipients of refunds each year tend to be lower income, says Fiona Greig, co-president of the JPMorgan Chase Institute, which studies data from millions of customer bank accounts.

"(A tax refund) tends to be a larger relative cash infusion event for them, and as a result, they tend to seek their refund earlier in the tax refund season," Greig says.

In typical years, tax refunds equal almost six weeks' take-home pay for the average recipient, the institute found. Last year the average refund was more than $2,500.

Families who qualify for the earned income tax credit can receive thousands more. The maximum credit for working families with three or more children is $6,660 for 2020, and it's refundable, which means filers get the money even if they don't owe any tax.

The amount you can earn and still qualify rises with family size, so that a married couple with three or more children could get at least a partial credit with adjusted gross income up to $56,844. A single person without children may qualify for a small credit with an adjusted gross income up to $15,820. Meanwhile, the regular child tax credit for children under 17 is $2,000 and not refundable. But low-income families may qualify for a refundable credit, which can be up to 15% of earned income over $2,500, up to $1,400 per child.

Tax credits have widespread support

The credits have been around for decades and have widespread bipartisan support among lawmakers, Flacke says.

"It's one of the few areas of some consensus across the parties that rewarding workers on the low end of the wage spectrum with these tax credits makes sense," Flacke says.

If you might qualify for one of the tax credits, make sure your tax software or tax preparer looks at both your 2019 and 2020 incomes before submitting your return. If you find out too late that you could have received a bigger refund, you can file an amended return, but you may face a longer wait. Instead of getting your refund in a few weeks, an amended return can take up to four months to process.

Going forward, President Joe Biden has proposed one-year expansions of the credits as part of his coronavirus relief package. He wants to increase the maximum earned income tax credit for childless adults from $538 to nearly $1,500 this year and to raise the income limit.

Biden also wants to increase the child tax credit to $3,000, plus an extra $600 per child under age 6, and make the full amount refundable. If enacted, these credits could be claimed on returns filed in 2022.

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Liz Weston is a columnist for the personal finance website NerdWallet.com, which provides columns to The Associated Press.

Business BRIEFS

La Grande conducting business survey

LA GRANDE — The city of La Grande, with support from Rural Development Initiatives and in collaboration with other La Grande area partners, is conducting an online review of the regional business climate.

The city is seeking input from area business owners to help it identify business needs and to develop regional strategies.

This survey takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

"Results from this survey will be aggregated and anonymized to protect business privacy," according to statement on the survey website, which is available here: https://bit.ly/3psMV2Y.

Workshops focus on workplace culture

ENTERPRISE — The Northeast Oregon Economic Development District announces it is hosting two workshops on creating a productive and inclusive workplace culture.

The workshops are for business owners, nonprofit and government employers, team leaders and human relations staff, according to the press release from NOEDD. The series of two workshops cost $40. One workshop costs $15-$25. The cost for additional participants from the same organization is $25 for the two workshops or $10-$20 for one.

The first workshop is "Designing an Irresistible Workplace," Feb. 11, 9 a.m. to noon, and outlines an effective framework for creating cohesive teams and a workplace in which employees feel engaged and valued, according to the press release. The workshop covers how to sustain a values-based culture, increase trusting relationships and create a trusting team environment. Topics include the future of work, team purpose and mission and commitment via "gives and gets."

Each participant who registers by Jan. 31 receives a set of "values cards" to use during the workshop.

The second workshop is "Building Inclusive Work Environments," Feb. 18, 9 a.m. to noon, and focuses on creating a framework to foster the type of inclusive environment that enables high engagement and improved business results.

Operations with high diversity are 15% to 35% more likely to outperform their peers, according to the press release. Topics include business benefits of diversity, practicing inclusive behaviors and recognizing biased mindsets.

Jennifer Coyne, CEO and majority owner of The PEAK Fleet, will present and facilitate these workshops. The PEAK Fleet is an organizational development company. During the past 20 years, Coyne developed a successful track record of team leadership in the high tech and financial services industries.

To register, visit the upcoming events page at www.neoedd.org.

— The Observer