

## RADIO

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with a dim future.

“Radio may be obsolete in 10 years,” he said.

It thus does not make sense for KEOL to continue operating because the students working there would not be developing skills that would help them as they pursue careers after college.

Cahill wants Eastern to develop a class or club that would help students develop disc jockey-related skills that will be in demand, such as those needed to produce a podcast.

Sanchez said it is not known how many students tune in to KEOL.

“There is no metric for tracking how many listen,” he said.

Eastern’s Student Fee Committee also made its allocations based on how many students a program attracts.

“We looked at participation rates,” Sanchez said, noting that KEOL’s is low.

The committee also initially did not approve funding for Eastern’s student newspaper, The Voice. The SFC changed gears after representatives of The Voice appealed the decision. The SFC then voted to provide the newspaper \$7,500, which is \$10,500 short of

the amount The Voice initially requested.

Funding for The Voice was cut because of low productivity. Sanchez said that Eastern published just two editions in 2020.

“That is not sufficient,” Sanchez said.

One of the editions was a paper one and the other was online. Cahill said the paper edition could not be distributed because of COVID-19 concerns. He added The Voice’s future editions will be published online.

KEOL’s leaders, unlike those at The Voice, did not appeal the SFC’s decision to reduce its funds. One reason may have been that KEOL’s faculty adviser, Michael Williams, died in late 2020. Williams was the director of the TRiO Student Support Services program.

The Observer tried repeatedly to get a comment about the SFC’s defunding decision from a KEOL representative but no one returned phone calls.

KEOL’s history dates back to at least 1973 when it received its FCC license to operate, according to its website. The station was based in Eastern’s library from 1976 to 1991. It was then relocated into a small building north of the library. The station was moved into the Hoke Union Building in 2015.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A passerby reflects in the glass of the KEOL radio booth Friday, March 5, 2021, at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande. The university’s Student Fee Committee has voted not to fund KEOL in 2021-22.

## QUARRY

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1998. Smejkal about 10 years ago decided to sell the ranch, West said, and he wanted to buy it. But Smejkal, who is turning 83, “doesn’t like to let anything go,” West said, so they came up with a deal that he would eventually buy the property from Smejkal’s sons.

Except the ranch costs more than West said he could afford. The website Lands of America, which lists farms and ranches for sale, shows a \$3.7 million price for the Ponderosa.

West also said the ranch is not a tourism hotspot, but rather a special locale where he sometimes brings veterans or disabled youth to hunt. Creating a 250-acre rock quarry, though, where Robb’s Hill Road meets Interstate 84, would allow him to buy the ranch.

Not because he would be making money from the quarry that could cover the cost of the ranch but because the quarry comes with a conservation easement that would devalue the Ponderosa. If the quarry does not get approval there is no conservation easement, West said, and the days of the Ponderosa are numbered. If he can’t buy the ranch, he said, the owners will divide the property into 240-acre parcels that anyone can buy and develop housing on.

“That’s bad,” he said. “I’m doing everything I can to prevent that.”

The quarry and the easement, he said, are the “long-term plan to protect this mountain.”

### Addressing quarry concerns

West said he knows well the concerns locals have about the quarry, and the project has taken those seriously and studied the



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Steve West closes the gate to the Ponderosa Ranch property Thursday, March 4, 2021. The ranch, which includes a rock quarry near Perry, spans 4,885 acres in the skyline above La Grande.

right — and wrong — ways to build and operate a rock quarry. The 400-plus pages of the project’s application to the county, he said, goes through the numerous issues.

“We’ve addressed them all,” he emphasized.

The company studied berms at other quarries, for example, to understand how to dampen the noise at the pit.

“If you hear it, it will be a hum in the far distance,” he said.

The location of the quarry near Interstate 84 has to meet Oregon Department of Transportation’s mandates for dust control. He said there would be plenty of water on site to manage dust and they could bring in water trucks as well.

“We are committed in our business plan to dust mitigation at the highest levels,” West said.

The project is to expand the small, 15-acre quarry now at the site, he said, but expanding the pit to 250 acres will take a long time.

“It could be a hundred years before we get to the top of the hill,” West said, when the quarry would be visible from Perry.

While people from La Grande won’t be able to see it, drivers on I-84 would.

“But,” West said, “it’s not going to be as big an

eyesore as people think.”

He also said the project has some local support, and Union Pacific Railroad is willing to get on board.

The railroad in September 2019 sent West a letter stating it reviewed the request from Universal Exports Limited, the company out of Bozeman, Montana, seeking rail service for the pit. Union Pacific reported it was “pleased to notify you that we are looking forward to working with you on developing new rail service to this location.”

Union Pacific also stated it was moving forward with track authorization based on the conceptual plan and as long as the project can meet certain requirements, including the design and installation of track and powered switches that meet UPRR standards.

### Making improvements

West said this project for more than two years has spent “hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of man hours” to make sure the quarry is done the right way.

That includes meeting the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s mitigation requirement to improve 250 acres of wilderness as an offset for

### PARTICIPATE IN THE HEARING

The Union County Planning Commission is holding a public hearing Monday, March 8, at 7 p.m. via teleconference to consider approving the application for a quarry at Robbs Hill Road and Interstate 84 near Perry. To listen to or participate in the hearing, call 253-215-8782 or 669-900-6833 and enter meeting identification No. 995 6180 8582.

the quarry. That mitigation, West said, is at the top Mount Emily in what he described as “uber critical” elk habitat. The work has involved tree thinning and the installation of lay-down fencing, which is easy to erect to contain cattle that graze the area May 15 to Aug. 1.

“We use the cattle as a tool to prevent catastrophic wildfire,” West said. “My intention is to do this project for the long-term betterment of the wildlife.”

West said he even would be willing to take anyone up there to show them the work that has gone into mitigating the quarry proposal.

### Laying it all out

The debate over the quarry gets a public airing at the Union County Planning Commission’s meeting March 8 to consider approving the project. West said he of course will attend over the phone as will other supporters to plead for approval. The opposition also will get to make a case.

If the county decides to nix the deal, West and his side could appeal to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals. West said that would cost more money and require another attorney and could take years for a decision. In that scenario, West said, his side would take a hard look and see if the fight would be worth the cost.

## CASES

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restrictions are in place on businesses, dining and activities.

It was a dose of good news after a period in which most of the state had been in extreme risk at one point or another.

“For the second time in a row, we are seeing great progress in stopping the spread of COVID-19 across Oregon and saving lives,” Brown said on Feb. 23.

Of the counties on the extreme risk rating prior to Feb. 23, Brown announced seven had dropped one step to higher risk: Crook, Jackson, Lane, Marion, Polk, Umatilla and Yamhill counties. Malheur and Union dropped to medium, while Wasco fell all the way to lower.

Union County’s cases since Sunday, Feb. 28, increased from 1,281 to 1,305 as of Friday, March 5, according to the Oregon

Health Authority. The number of deaths in the county from the virus remained at 19.

Wallowa County has its fifth fatality this week from COVID-19. The Oregon Health Authority on Thursday morning, March 4, reported the death of a 47-year-old man from the county, who was among 27 COVID-related fatalities the OHA announced in its latest report. The individual died on March 2 at Portland’s Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, according to the report — more than a month after testing positive for COVID-19 on Jan. 25. The man had underlying conditions.

Wallowa County has reported 144 cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic started a year ago. The fifth death moves the fatality rate of confirmed cases in the county to 3.5% — 2.5 times the state rate.

And two more Baker County residents died from COVID-19, the

Oregon Health Authority announced Tuesday, March 2. The deaths bring the county’s total to nine during the pandemic.

An 87-year-old Baker County woman who tested positive on Feb. 24 died on Feb. 26 at her home, according to the OHA. She had underlying conditions. And an 88-year-old man who tested positive on Feb. 24 died on Feb. 26 at his home. He also had underlying conditions, according to the OHA. Baker County’s case total as of March 5 stood at 673.

The state as of March 5 reported 2,284 COVID-related deaths out of the 156,673 cases. There also have now been more than 1 million doses of the vaccine administered in Oregon.

Five counties: Benton, Coos, Douglas, Jefferson and Josephine remain on the extreme list.

Risk level adjustments are made every two weeks. But measurements are taken every Friday and

analyzed each Monday. The numbers are published weekly, with the period between reassignments called “the warning week.”

With the next assignment of risk levels set to be announced March 9 and go into effect March 12, state officials evidently saw some counties trending back up to extreme risk.

Brown’s office did not say what counties were of concern. The “warning week” numbers indicate trends, but the final status would be determined adding in the as-yet unknown statistics of this week through Friday.

Among those that dropped out of the extreme risk category but are showing a reverse in trends

during the warning week are Jackson and Malheur counties. Among medium and small counties, Baker showed an increase in cases and infection rate.

Less clear is the status of Marion County, which includes the state capital of Salem. It has seen a moderate upswing in numbers. State health officials and the governor will make the final decisions based on the most recent data.

The drop in infections was part of the recent good news that has seen overall new infections down after winter holiday period highs. A third vaccine, made by Johnson & Johnson, has arrived in the state and the first 100 doses sent to each county,

with a total of 34,000 expected to immediately follow.

But there was cautionary news as well. Two potentially more virulent and easier to spread versions of the virus showed up in Oregon.

—EO Media Group staff contributed to this article.

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