



Getting a fresh look

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THE OBSERVER

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Good day to our valued subscriber Laurie Larson of La Grande

Quarry vote delayed

Most callers oppose project during county planning group's hearing on Monday

By PHIL WRIGHT
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The Union County Planning Commission held off Monday night, March 8, on saying yea or nay to the proposal to create a rock quarry at the bottom of Robbs Hill Road near Perry. Instead, the commission voted to delay the decision until its next regular meeting, March 22.

The move came after about two and a half hours of testimony during a phone-in only hearing to consider approving the plan for the 250-plus acre quarry on the property of James Smejkal of Banks.

Curtis Shuck of Shelby, Montana, attorney for the quarry applicants, represented the project along with Smejkal's son, Bob Smejkal of Eugene. Shuck said putting together the 400-page application "has been a journey of discovery" that has made the project stronger.

The quarry aims to use trains to ship more than 2,000 tons of rock per day for more than 100 years, he said, and the application lays out plans to control pollution and curtail noise. He asserted the regulation of quarries has never been more stringent. Quarry operations that don't abate these issues, he said, face severe fines and even the revocation of operating permits.

He also said the project would not be visible from La Grande or Perry, although he admitted east-bound drivers on Interstate 84 coming into the Grande Ronde Valley would see the quarry near milepost 256.

Still, Shuck said, this quarry would be a model of "how quality of life and industrial development are not mutually exclusive" and the quarry would be a "22nd century opportunity here to be a smart development."

Bob Smejkal said his father, who is in his late 80s, loves and enjoys this property for all purposes and its natural beauty. He said the application's big game easement and forest stewardship plan are integral to how the area would function. The project

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Taylor Gould, acting director of the Union County Warming Station board, rests against a refrigerator at the station in La Grande on Tuesday, March 9, 2021, near piles of donated food and supplies. The station is set to close March 16 for spring and summer.

Warming station wraps up

Union County location will end first season in new home March 16

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The curtain is drawing to a close on a pivotal chapter of the Union County Warming Station, one lacking high drama but filled with characters who have stories of trial and inspiration to share.

The station's first winter season at its new location in Suite B of a business building at 2008 Third St., La Grande, concludes the morning of Tuesday, March 16.

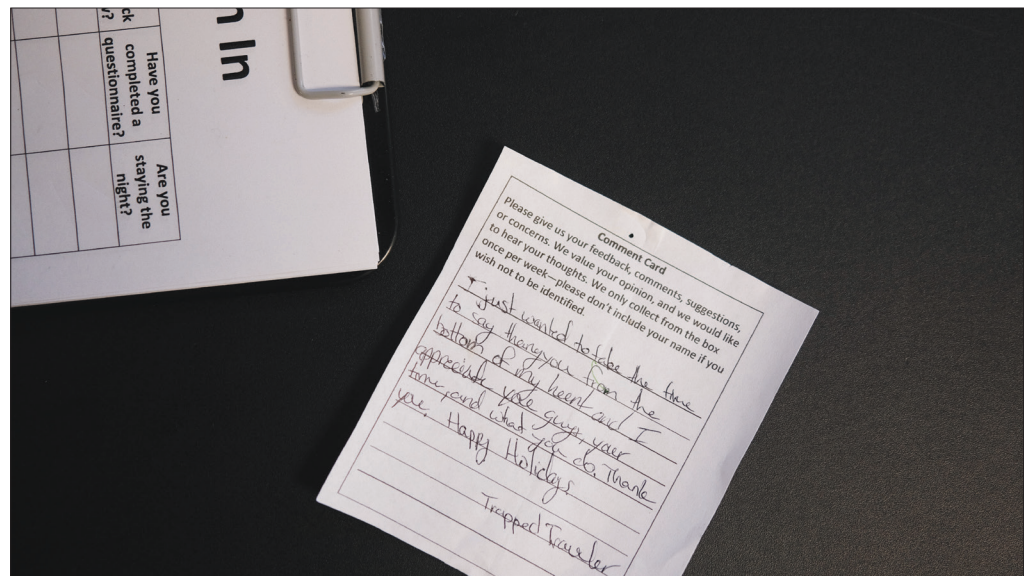
An average of 13 people have been coming to the warming station each night since February after a slow start on Nov. 15, 2020, when one man was the lone guest on a chilly night.

"That man told us he would get his friends to come and the next night we had five people (he and four friends). He is their guardian — he looks out for homeless people in town," said Taylor Gould, acting director of the warming station's board.

The warming station drew an average of eight people a night for two and half months after it opened, until snow hit in February when the average jumped. Gould said snowfall has a bigger impact on the warming station's turnout than temperature.

"A lot of our people sleep in the woods and when the ground is wet they come here," Gould said.

The warming station moved from a home on Willow Street in late 2019 to its present location for more space. The switch, which required approval from the La Grande Planning Commission, stirred major controversy with proponents arguing the warming station filled a critical void and others contending its presence would boost crime in



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A note from a visitor to the Union County Warming Station reads, "I just wanted to take the time to say thank you from the bottom of my heart and I appreciate you guys, your time, and what you do. Thank you. Happy Holidays. — Trapped Traveler"

the west part of the city.

La Grande Police Department records indicate the warming station's presence has caused relatively few disturbances. City police, as of Tuesday, March 9, have responded to 13 calls for service at the warming stations site since Nov. 15, 2020, according to records from LGPD Chief Gary Bell. The most serious calls have been for complaints of loitering, assault, trespassing, theft from a vehicle and harassment at the site of the warming station. Police officers, however, made no arrests and issued no citations with

regard to these complaints.

"I would offer we have not had any significant problems at the warming station (in 2020-21)," Bell said.

Bell noted his department has been in contact with people living in the neighborhood of the warming station and continues to invite them to contact him if they have any concerns.

Gould said the warming station and the police department have a strong working relationship. She noted La Grande police

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Redistricting hearings start despite uncertainty

Legislature working without maps, data

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Despite no redistricting maps or data to show voters, the Legislature moved ahead this week with hearings on plans for redrawing 2020 political districts.

Ten hearings are planned, two for each congressional district.

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REDISTRICTING HEARING SCHEDULE

1ST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Includes Clatsop, Columbia, parts of Multnomah, Washington and Yamhill counties.

First hearing: March 9 at 5:30 p.m.

Second hearing: March 20 at 9 a.m.

2ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Includes Deschutes, Umatilla, Jackson, Baker, Crook, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Hood River, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake, Malheur, Morrow, Sherman, Union, Wallowa, Wasco and Wheeler counties and parts of Josephine County

First hearing: March 10, 5:30 p.m.

Second hearing: March 20, 1 p.m.

3RD CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Includes parts of Multnomah and Clackamas counties

First hearing: March 11, 5:30 p.m.

Second hearing: April 10, 9 a.m.

4TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Coos, Curry, Douglas and Lane counties and parts of Benton Linn and Josephine counties

First hearing: March 16, 5:30 p.m.

Second hearing: April 10, noon

5TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Includes parts of Benton, parts of Clackamas, Lincoln, Marion, parts of Multnomah, Polk and Tillamook counties

First hearing: March 18, 5:30 p.m.

Second hearing: April 10, 3 p.m.

MORE INFORMATION

Legislature's redistricting website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/redistricting/

Map to locate your legislative and congressional representatives: www.oregonlegislature.gov/findyourlegislator/leg-districts.html

Sign up to testify online or submit written comments: olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Committees/SRED/Overview

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
22 Low
Cold



Friday
53/25
Sunny

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La Grande, Oregon

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



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SATURDAY COVID-19 UPDATE

Online at lagrandeobserver.com