

**LGSB**

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Hanson, the owner and operator of an auto salvage company, is the Position 2 candidate. Michelle Perry, the Position 2 incumbent, is not seeking reelection.

The Position 4 race features two candidates with deep La Grande School District roots. Romer is a 2001 La Grande High graduate whose mother, Kristy Moore, teaches English at La Grande High School. Romer and his wife, Jeanna, are the parents of two daughters who attend Central Elementary School and a 3-year-old.

Shaw, who is completing his fourth year on the school board, is a 1987 La Grande High graduate whose mother, Carol Ann Farris, was a secretary at Island City Elementary School. Shaw's stepmother, Carolyn Shaw, also at one time worked in the school district. Randy Shaw and his wife, Kathy, are the parents of a daughter who is a freshman at LHS, a son who is a 2020 LHS graduate school and a daughter who graduated from LHS in 2009.

Shaw said he is running for reelection because he wants to help the school district finish a number of projects that were beginning when he joined the board in 2016. These include the expansion of the district's career technical educational program. Money from a \$31.5 million bond local voters approved in 2014 built new facilities for the program.

"I want to see it continue to grow," Shaw said.

Shaw is an auto body mechanic who trained at WyoTech in Laramie, Wyoming. He credited La Grande School District's CTE programs with having a big influence on his life while he was growing up.

The incumbent is pleased with the direction the district is moving. He said La Grande High School's graduation rate of 89.4% is an indication of how well the school district is doing at all grade levels. "We have phenomenal teachers. We are lucky to have the caliber of teachers we have," said Shaw, who also said he is impressed with the quality of the school district's administrators and staff.

One concern on the horizon for the La Grande School District is falling enrollment. The school district has 140 fewer stu-

*Look for articles about other candidates in Union County school board races in coming editions of The Observer.*

dents than it did before the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. Many likely left for the opportunity to be homeschooled or to enroll in online education programs outside of the district. Shaw is optimistic most of these students will come back because of the quality programs offered by the school district.

"I honestly think the majority will (return)," Shaw said.

Romer said he is not sure how many of the students will come back, noting concerns about COVID-19 vaccines may prevent the parents of some of these students from sending them back to school.

Romer, like Shaw, also likes the progress that the La Grande School District has made.

"I am impressed," he said of the district. "It has made so many strides since I left. I want to help it to continue to grow. It is important that we do not become stagnant."

Romer has traveled extensively throughout the world during the past two decades and said he wants to serve on the school board as a means of sharing what he has learned.

"I want to give back to a community that has done so much for me," he said.

Romer, who is a stay-at-home father, has two degrees from Eastern Oregon University: a bachelor's degree in sociology with an emphasis on social welfare and a master's degree in teaching. He and his wife taught English as a second language in Spain for a year in 2007.

The candidate said he has enormous respect for the teachers who guided him in the La Grande School District.

"They shaped the direction of my life," he said.

Romer said he is interested in education research and the ideas of Scott Barry Kaufman, an American cognitive scientist and author. Romer said Kaufman believes children benefit from imaginative play opportunities and more chances to express themselves. Romer said he would encourage the La Grande School District to look at Kaufman's ideas if he is elected.

**FIRE**

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through the Oregon Legislature's emergency board gave the department money to bring on some seasonal employees early this year and stage a pair of single-engine air tankers in The Dalles, within "striking distance" of Northeast Oregon.

A larger funding package, waiting approval by the full Legislature, is Senate Bill 762, which includes recommendations from the governor's wildfire council. If approved, \$150 million will be distributed among several state agencies for fire suppression, mitigation on private and public land, and to look at land use zoning and smoke impacts.

Hessel said ODF's funding is split between the state's general fund and landowners who pay an assessment on their acres for fire protection. This year, the northeast district will support 20 engines and a hand crew in Wal-

lowa, Baker, Union and Umatilla counties, two single-engine air tankers and a Type-2 helicopter stationed in Pendleton, and a detection plane based in La Grande.

The Umatilla National Forest fire staff is anticipating an above average fire year as well.

"The good snowpack at higher elevations are something we appreciate, but the presence or lack of precipitation in June can also set the stage for what type of fire season comes at us here in Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington," said Darcy Weseman, a public affairs officer for the Umatilla National Forest.

Fire suppression staffing will be similar to last year, Weseman said, with 10 engines and six hand crews, along with several staffed fire lookouts.

"One constant that we deal with every season is that our workforce is often asked to fulfill resource requests for fires in other parts of the nation, through engines, hand crews and

incident management team support," she said.

These requests are filled based on local fire danger, and forest staff has historically been a large contributor to these sort of efforts, Weseman said, as fire resources often see multiple assignments across the Western United States.

Higher elevation snowpack still is holding up well in the Blue Mountains and the Wallows where mid- and late-winter snowstorms pushed the snowpack well past the 100% mark. However, many of the lower elevation areas of the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests did not get the snow, nor have those areas received any spring rain, according to Nathan Goodrich, a deputy fire staff officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. He said conditions aren't good from a rancher's standpoint, because there is little grass for livestock, but good for fire suppression, because there will be fewer fine fuels to start fires, like cheatgrass.

"Because they had different storm patterns the desert could be active in May and June," he said.

The dry conditions have one other positive for land managers — the opportunity to meet spring prescribed burning targets. Steve Hawkins, a fuels program manager for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, said some aspects of the forest are fairly dry, especially large fuels like downed logs.

The south end of the forest is dry and 2,000 acres have been burned on the forest already, Hawkins said, including 1,500 just this past week ahead of rain and snowstorms predicted over the past weekend.

"Near Baker City we've been way down on precipitation for the last two months, but one event can change things," he said.

No prescribed burning has begun on the Umatilla National Forest yet, Weseman said, outside of pile burning on the North Fork John Day Ranger District.

**Spring cruising through Union County**



A vintage baby blue Chevrolet cruises down 26th Street in Island City under bright blue skies on Monday, April 26, 2021.

**LEVY**

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Noxious weeds also choke out crops, destroy range and pasturelands, clog waterways and threaten native plant communities, Guttridge said.

Weeds create fire hazards and make land susceptible to erosion, Clapp added. He explained weeds have shallow root systems. This means when weeds take over an area it is vulnerable to erosion when there is flooding or heavy rain.

Clapp said 120-150 landowners participate in the Union County Weed Control Department's cost share program each year. Through this program the county provides up to \$500 in matching funds to landowners spending money fighting noxious weeds.

About \$40,000 a year is dedicated to the landowner cost share program a year.

Cost share projects sometimes involved multiple landowners. For example, many get together on an almost annual basis to pay, with help from Union County matching funds, to have a helicopter spray a herbicide for yellow star-thistle. This is a weed that can take over elk habitat, crowd out nutritious plants and rob farmers of cropland, Clapp said.

Weed removal is also important, according to information provided by the Union County Weed Advisory Board, because some are toxic to horses and cattle. These include leafy spurge, tansy ragwort, poison hemlock and hound's-tongue.

Another of the many weeds the county weed department treats for is puncture vine, commonly known as goatheads. It is well known for puncturing bicycle tires and getting caught in the soles of shoes. Puncture vine also can cause injuries to humans, pets and livestock if stepped on.

Ballots for the mail election must be returned to the Union County Clerk's office by mail or a drop box by 8 p.m. May 18. Drop boxes are at the Cook Memorial Library in La Grande; the city halls in Cove, Imbler, Island City, Union, North Powder and Elgin; and the Union County Clerk's office, 1001 Fourth St., La Grande.

**RISK**

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Columbia, Crook, Deschutes, Grant, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, Lane, Linn, Marion, Multnomah, Polk and Wasco. The affected counties account for more than half of the state's 4.3 million population.

The extreme risk level shuts down indoor dining, limits crowd sizes, caps entertainment and exercise activities, and requires most businesses to close by 11 p.m.

"If we don't act now, doctors, nurses, hospitals, and other health care providers in Oregon will be stretched to their limits treating severe cases of COVID-19," Brown said.

The governor said health officials would review infection statistics each week and no county would remain at extreme risk level for more than three weeks.

Hood River County



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/OJB

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown tours a drive-thru mass COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Portland International Airport, April 9, 2021. The governor on Tuesday, April 27, announced 15 counties are in the extreme risk category, but Union and Wallowa counties remain in the lower risk group.

and Umatilla County are moving to the high risk category, increasing restrictions on businesses and gatherings as cases are rising in the counties.

At high risk, restaurants, religious establishments and fitness facilities can remain open at 25% indoor capacity. Grocery stores and other retail establishments can also remain open at 50%,

according to the state.

Umatilla County recently was in a "two-week caution period" after surpassing the mark of 100 cases per 100,000 people over a 14-day period, which would move it from moderate to high risk.

Now, with 114 COVID-19 cases reported over the past two weeks, Brown announced the county would move back to high risk.

Umatilla County officials have said many of the cases are being traced to social gatherings. Officials also pointed to the county's low vaccination rates as part of the reason why infection is spreading rapidly.

"In almost every single case, the people who are now being infected aren't vaccinated," Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said.

Umatilla County has long reported some of the lowest vaccination rates in the state. According to the

Oregon Health Authority, approximately 23% of the county's population is at least partially vaccinated, the lowest total in Oregon.

To cushion the financial blow to businesses, which will again have to shut their doors or curtail capacity and hours, Brown said she is working with the Oregon Legislature on an emergency \$20 million financial aid package.

The new limits will go into effect Friday, April 30, for at least two weeks.

Brown said April 6 that no county would be moved into the extreme risk level as long as less than 300 people statewide were hospitalized for COVID-19.

OHA on Monday, April 26, reported 319 cases, bringing the three-week hiatus of the most severe restrictions to an end.

Oregon on Friday, April 23, reported more than 1,020 new infections, more than double what it was two weeks ago — the sharpest spike of any state.

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