

THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

May 20, 2021

THURSDAY EDITION

\$1.50

Merkley: U.S needs to stand up to drug companies

Senator also calls for Olympics to pull winter games from China

By PHIL WRIGHT
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Oregon U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley during an online town hall discussed issues ranging from universal health care to pulling the Winter Olympics out of China.



Merkley

The virtual event Tuesday, May 18, was the Democrat's 15th town hall of 2021 and his 447th since becoming

senator.

"When I hear that number I can't believe it's 447 town halls. How's that happen?" he joked.

He started off the event with an overview of the American Rescue Plan, the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package that is sending \$350 billion to local governments, including about \$2.8 million to La Grande and \$5.2 million to Union County.

The plan was "designed to rebuild the economy from the ground up" and avoid sending the money to the states to distribute, Merkley told the more than 30 people who attended the virtual event. He also touched on President Joe Biden's plan to reinvest in the United States' infrastructure.

"I really feel like the infrastructure in America is sliding down," Merkley said, adding the nation has not kept up with maintenance and improvements.

And he expressed concern about the erosion of voting rights.

"The right to vote is basic to the vision of a republic," the senator said, adding the U.S. has a

See, **Merkley/Page 5A**

INSIDE

Observer reporter Dick Mason interviewed U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley before his online town hall for Union County on Tuesday, May 18. See **Page 2A** for more of what Merkley had to say.

Lucky La Grande High School senior gets a Soul



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A white 2011 Kia Soul sits outside La Grande High School Wednesday, May 19, 2021. Legacy Chrysler Jeep Dodge Ram of Island City donated the Kia, which is set to be the grand prize for the senior graduation party. "This is just a small contribution that we felt we could make, and with the pandemic, it's been rough for the seniors," said Brent Frizzell, a sales manager with the dealership. "Anything we can do to help is what we're all about."

'Superhero' lifts Joseph's clouds

Interim City Administrator Brock Eckstein meets with key figures regarding harassment

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The clouds that have covered Joseph City Hall with gloom for weeks — if not longer — may be lifting thanks to the efforts of its new interim city administrator, Brock Eckstein.

Last week, Eckstein met with Dennis Welch, the city's parks, Main Street and facilities supervisor, and discussed the harassment allegations that have kept Welch off work since March 22. He cited stress, "gaslighting" and harassment as reasons for his time off. Welch returned to work Sunday, May 16.

"The cloud is lifting and the sun's coming out and that's what I want," Welch said Monday. "I just want to come to work and do my job. I know the people here appreciate me. They've made that very clear."

Welch's allegation



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Dennis Welch, parks, Main Street and facilities supervisor for the city of Joseph, turns on a water valve at the Joseph City Park Monday, May 17, 2021, having returned to work after an eight-week absence because of health-related issues stemming from alleged harassment.

was the second of two that rocked Joseph City Hall this spring. On April 1 former city administrator Larry Braden told the city council that unnamed members of the council were in violation of the city charter, council rules and his own employment contract by interfering with his work. That sparked a debate between Mayor Belinda Buswell and Council-

woman Kathy Bingham on what elected officials were allowed to do when it came to dealing with city employees.

But Braden's concerns apparently went unheeded, and on April 16 he submitted a letter of resignation citing "constant harassment from members of the current City Council."

Braden has so far declined to return calls

seeking comment.

Eckstein said May 17 he plans to meet with Braden this week.

The interim administrator believes some progress can be made, though he does not know if Braden is planning any legal action regarding his resignation or the harassment allegations.

"I'm so glad he's

See, **Joseph/Page 5A**

Meeting foster care needs in a child care desert

State hired people to recruit and retain placements for children in need

Editor's Note

This is the first of a three-part series on foster care needs in Baker, Union and Wallowa counties. Next in the series: Meet families who foster children in Northeastern Oregon.

By LISA BRITTON
EO Media Group

The number of children in foster care has decreased across Oregon, but there still is a need for certified foster homes.

"We have fewer children in foster care than we have in years, but we're always looking for more resource families," said Tammie Blessing.

Blessing works for the Oregon Department of Human Services. She is the resource family retention and recruitment champion for District 13, which includes Baker, Union and Wallowa counties.

"Resource family" and "resource parents" are the new terms describing a foster family and foster parents.

On average, Oregon has about 6,000 children in foster care. On April 1, that number was 5,975.

In March, there were 40 children in certified foster homes across Baker, Union and Wallowa counties.

"Baker County has a high rate of abuse and neglect, per capita, compared to other places," Blessing said.

In Oregon, the DHS Child Welfare Director Rebecca Jones Gaston has released a "Vision for Transformation." The document is about 25 pages and is online at www.oregon.gov/dhs/CHILDREN/CWTransformation/Pages/index.aspx.

Blessing points to the

See, **Foster/Page 5A**

Moving into medicine during a pandemic



Jessica Roberts/Contributed Photo

Jessica Roberts, a 2008 graduate of La Grande High School, graduates Friday, May 21, 2021, with a doctor of osteopathic medicine degree from Western University of Health Sciences, Lebanon.

2008 La Grande High grad to specialize in family medicine after residency

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The COVID-19 pandemic likely is giving some medical students reason to consider leaving school because of fear for their safety and the potential of overwhelming caseloads.

This thought never crossed the mind of Jessica Roberts, a 2008 La Grande High School grad set to graduate Friday, May 21, with a medical degree

from Western University of Health Sciences in Lebanon.

"Not at all. For me personally there has never been anything else I have wanted to become except a medical doctor," Roberts said.

She also is driven to become a physician because she wants to share in the bond she observed among health care providers. Roberts said she has been struck by how health care providers are reaching out during the pandemic not

only to their patients but also their co-workers. She said this connection always has existed but the pandemic magnified it.

"It definitely has brought it out," Roberts said. "I want to be part of it and ease the medical burden."

She said safety is not a major concern because she has been fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

"I have a lot of confidence in the vaccine," Roberts said.

If it were not for the vaccine, safety would be a

See, **Grad/Page 5A**

INDEX

Business.....1B	Dear Abby.....8B	Opinion.....4A
Classified.....3B	Horoscope.....4B	Spiritual.....6A
Comics.....7B	Letters.....4A	Sports.....8A
Community.....3A	Lottery.....3A	State.....7A
Crossword.....3B	Obituaries.....3A	Sudoku.....7B

WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight 40 LOW A shower late		Friday 52/39 Showers around
--	---	--	--

CONTACT US

541-963-3161
Issue 58
3 sections, 24 pages
La Grande, Oregon

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



8 51153 00100 6

SATURDAY DONATIONS TO LOCAL SCHOOLS

Online at lagrandeobserver.com