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INSIDE FAIR SEASON KICKS OFF, IN GO!

UNION

'The benefits will be huge'

Bond project work continues in Union School District this summer

By DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION — People who have mobility issues may soon feel as if they have wings when visiting Union High School.

Union High School's classroom building, which opened in 1912, in about four months will have an elevator to serve those who need a lift. The elevator will be one of the jewels of major renovation work to be conducted over the next 14 months in the Union School District, much of it funded by a \$8 million bond package voters approved in 2019. The package is made up of a \$4 million bond and a \$4 million state matching grant.

A significant portion of the bond work, which started in 2020 and is shifting into high gear this summer, involves making buildings far easier to get into for the physically challenged.

"We want people to be able to enter and leave buildings with dignity," said Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells while providing a recent update on how the renovations are progressing.

The elevator, which will be installed just outside the south side of UHS, will make it relatively easy for people to enter and exit each of the school's three floor levels, since it will take people to entryways to each.

The installation of the transport mechanism was scheduled to be installed this summer but has been delayed several months because of shipping delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shawn Towne, project

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New COVID-19 surge hits exhausted Oregon

State says delta variant has increased tenfold in the past two weeks

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A possible fifth wave of COVID-19 is swelling in a pandemic-exhausted Oregon that less than a month ago seemed to be on the verge of recovery. "The highly contagious delta

variant has increased tenfold in the past two weeks in Oregon, and it is now estimated to be associated with 80% of the new cases in Oregon," said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top epidemiologist, in a rare evening statement Tuesday, July 27.

While less deadly and sweeping than earlier spikes, hospitals are filling up with the unvaccinated as local and state officials in Oregon both decline to issue directives to curb the outbreak, unlike other states.

The U.S. Veterans Administration, as well as the states of California and New York, have issued requirements that workers be either vaccinated or face weekly testing for the virus.

Gov. Kate Brown's office over the past two days has said it was studying actions elsewhere and consulting with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Late Tuesday, the Oregon Health Authority suggested residents in all counties wear masks in public spaces indoors. But OHA under-

lined that it was not a directive.

Case counts are back on the rise

Oregon's latest rise in cases comes less than a month after a celebratory announcement that nearly all pandemic restrictions on business and social activities in the state would be lifted on June 30. Brown had said she would remove the risk level restrictions

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Filling vacancies

Union County schools face bus driver shortages as new school year looms

By CARLOS FUENTES
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Optimal hours. Weekends off. No experience required. A recruitment bonus check of up to \$1,500.

Even with these promised perks, schools in Union County are facing a bus driver shortage — and a strict deadline for hiring as the school year rapidly approaches.

"It's been an ongoing effort to get more drivers," said Chuck Moore, regional vice president of Mid Columbia Bus Company, which provides bus drivers to schools in La Grande, Union, Cove and North Powder. "It's been a struggle for a while, but now we're advertising everywhere we can and asking anyone we can."

Mid Columbia Bus Company has 28 bus drivers in Union County, but they are hoping to hire four more in the near future. These drivers typically serve around 1,400 students in the county, according to Kathaleen Maley, La Grande manager of MidCo.

The La Grande School District is the company's biggest client in the county, with 2,300 students across all seven of its schools. In the 2019-20 school year, 1,170 students in the district regularly rode a bus to and from school, Maley said.

According to Scott Carpenter, assistant superintendent of the La Grande School District, bus driver shortages have never stopped students from having access to a bus route.

"Routes are built every year based on the needs of the community," Carpenter said. "Historically, we've always been able to help families who need the bus and we think this year is going to be the same."

The school district hasn't yet created the routes for the upcoming school year, but MidCo is working hard to ensure they will be able to provide enough drivers.

The company is offering \$1,000 signing bonuses to applicants who don't have their CDL and \$1,500 to those who have a CDL, the highest signing bonus the company has



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A student boards a school bus after school on Friday, April 2, 2021, outside La Grande Middle School. As the school year approaches, schools in Union County and beyond are facing a shortage of school bus drivers.

ever offered, according to Moore.

Although the pandemic exacerbated the driver shortage, Moore said that recruitment and retention have been issues for many years. He estimates that 30% of new bus drivers leave within the first two years of employment.

"We've got drivers in La Grande that have been there

"I think people get intimidated or think it's hard, but it's not. We make sure people are fully trained before they go out."

Kathaleen Maley, La Grande manager of Mid Columbia Bus Company

20-plus years, but we also have some that last a year or two," he said. "If they stay for a couple of years, we usually keep them, but there's considerable turnover in those first two years."

The bus driver shortage isn't new, and it isn't just local.

According to a survey conducted in May by youth transportation company HopSkip-Drive, nearly four-fifths of school transportation professionals in the United States said they were experiencing a bus driver shortage. Bus drivers leave their jobs for various reasons. Some

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



SATURDAY

SEEKING THE SOURCE OF A GRAND RIVER

Online at lagrandeobserver.com