

WOODGRAIN

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to 218.

Applications for the positions are now being taken and hiring will begin soon. The 35 new employees will be added in phases through March 2022, Hayes said.

Woodgrain is expanding its staff at the Island City plant because home construction is increasing in the West, which is creating a growing demand for particleboard products needed for homes, including furniture and cabinets, Hayes said.

The particleboard the Island City plant produces is tailor made for specific uses such as airport jet bridges and tables for table tennis.

The particleboard plant in Island City was built in 1966 and was owned by Boise Cascade throughout its history before it was acquired by Woodgrain in 2018. Woodgrain also acquired Boise Cascade's La Grande lumber mill at the same time.

Tom Lovlien, vice president of Woodgrain's Lumber and Composites Division, said he is optimistic and excited about this hiring initiative.

"It is an exciting time to be a part of Woodgrain,"

Lovlien said in a press release. "Our company has continued to invest in its facilities here in Northeast Oregon, and our leadership has complete confidence that the particleboard team will meet this new demand, while maintaining both customer and employee satisfaction. This is a place people want to be and we want them here."

Hiring for the particleboard plant positions will be conducted for entry level and supervisory positions. No manufacturing experience is needed for the entry level positions, for Woodgrain will provide all the training needed. Wages for entry level positions will start at \$18.31 an hour.

"All of our positions provide long-term family-wage careers," Hayes said.

Island City Mayor Dave Comfort said Woodgrain's announcement is most welcome.

"I think it is great news, not only for Island City but for Union County in general," he said. "I know of people who will benefit from this expansion."

The mayor said there is some concern about how McAlister Road in Island City will hold up

under the heavier traffic load it will shoulder as the 35 employees are added. Comfort said he will work to make sure steps are taken to keep McAlister Road strong enough to handle the added traffic volume.

Suzzanah Moore-Hemann, executive director of the Union County Chamber of Commerce, is also encouraged by Woodgrain's announcement.

"We are always very excited when any of our local businesses are able to broaden their workforce and provide good family-wage jobs that continue to add vitality and vibrancy to our community," Moore-Hemann said.

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage echoed this sentiment.

"This will be a big boast for Northeast Oregon," she said. "An expansion like this is exciting."

Woodgrain, with corporate offices in Fruitland, Idaho, is a family-owned company founded 65 years ago. Island City and La Grande are among more than 20 cities it has plants and centers in throughout the United States, including Pilot Rock, where Woodgrain also owns a sawmill.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

A metal lathe, left, and a drill press are two of the machines aviation students learn to use in Lexi Rindfleisch's aviation classes at Joseph Charter School.

FLIGHT

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... But I like to understand it. I took ground school in Hood River. ... I told my dad, 'I need to know how they work.' If I fly in the backcountry and something breaks down, I need to know how to fix it."

That led her to the two-year Aircraft Maintenance Technology program at Idaho State University in Pocatello.

"When I moved back to Idaho, I bought a house ... and decided I was going to go back to school to continue my education," she said. "Eight weeks later, I was accepted into the program at ISU."

Rindfleisch was eager to get the job at Joseph.

"My husband's cousin, who lives in Enterprise, said, 'I've got this perfect job for you.' So I talked to Lance Homan, the superintendent here, and sent him my resume, and he was like, 'When can we meet?'"

Her husband, Josh Rindfleisch, is a freelance videographer/photographer, she said.

She also is working on her pilot's license, but still lacks several hours in the air before that's achieved.

The program

Rindfleisch said that even once she gets her pilot's license, she's not sure she'll be able to teach flying as part of the school program. She did say it's conceivable she could teach the ground school portion of learning to fly.

"I don't know if that's

something we can do on school time, but we may be able to introduce them to pilot's certification and if that's something they want to do, we could help them get scholarships," she said. "Obviously, that would be working with their families."

In addition to the simulator — which still needs to be calibrated before it's usable — there are "parts of" three aircraft in the CTE Building. One of them is a Fisher Experimental with a Subaru automobile motor that has been retrofitted for use in the aircraft.

The students will be learning about aircraft mechanics in a truly hands-on way at the school. Rindfleisch said that once a plane is airworthy, the wings can be removed and it can be taken to the Joseph State Airport to fly. But that's still in the future.

She hopes to see the school's aviation program expand to K-12.

"The goal is to expose kids to all types of aviation, from the mechanics side, the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the weather side, the pilot's side, air-traffic control — all of those pieces," she said. "That would be a beginning-aviation course work and classes and then actually dive into what they're really interested in. Eventually, I'd like this to be a K-12 aviation program."

Plans for the latter are underway.

"We're already working on little lesson plans for (younger students) for this

year, but hopefully it will be something that they do more often," she said.

'Community of aviators'

Two of the students with Rindfleisch during the Sept. 23 interview covered the gamut from "would like to" take aviation to one who already is.

"I have pilots in my class," Rindfleisch said.

"I remember graduating from aviation my freshman year," said Jett Peterson, who proudly showed off his student pilot's license. "It's just like a learner's permit only to fly."

Savanah Seeley, on the other hand, has yet to try her wings in the program.

"I want to take it, but I haven't yet," she said.

The two youths — and the other aviation students — are part of an active aviation community in Wallowa County. Although there are but the two public airports — in Joseph and Enterprise — there are a number of private landing strips scattered around the county.

"This is such a community of aviators. After I get myself a little more with them and their vision for it as well, and where they see themselves fitting," Rindfleisch said. "I certainly am not an expert in all things aviation and I want the people who are helping, as well, and involved with the kids and getting them excited. It's going to be a community process. In terms of the ground school, they can take ground school and take flying lessons at the same time."



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Demonstrators outside of La Grande City Hall protest against vaccine mandates on Saturday, Sept. 18, 2021. Citizens of Union County for Health and Safety, an impromptu group of local residents, say their elected officials don't represent their interests and submitted a letter with nearly 200 signatures stating their support for vaccinations and mask wearing.

LETTER

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advocating for frontline workers who are exposed to a large amount of people at their place of work every day. Multiple organizers of the group expressed their desire to help represent health care workers, government employees and retail workers.

"Our public health and government facilities and local businesses are not safe if staffed by people who are not vaccinated or tested frequently for potential infection," the letter reads. "We contend that the Union County Commissioners, and Sheriff Bowen, are representing a vocal minority of people in Union County who instead of unemployment could choose vaccination."

The letter from Citizens of Union County for Health

and Safety also states that health care staff shortages will not be settled if the mandate is lifted because more health care workers will be impacted by the effects of COVID-19.

"Staff shortages will not be resolved by lifting the mandate because workers, vaccinated and unvaccinated, who test positive for COVID-19 will not be able to work due to quarantines, illnesses managed at home, long-term hospitalizations and/or death," the letter reads.

County response

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage read the letter and was appreciative of the group exercising their freedom of speech.

"This is America and I appreciate hearing their opinion," she said. "If you have an opinion, you have the right to be heard."

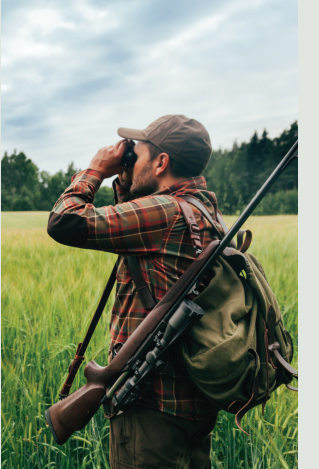
Beverage noted that the group organizing the letter may have misinterpreted parts of the county's resolution, but that hearing opinions from citizens is always welcomed.

"It's a big part of our job to hear opinions, so I appreciated that they voiced their concern," she said.

Beverage stated that the commissioners still believe in the resolution and emphasized the support for medical freedom.

She said that the letter will not change the county's status on the resolution, emphasizing the points made in the document regarding the availability of health care workers.

As of the Oregon Health Authority's report on Monday, Oct. 4, there have been 3,002 COVID-19 cases and 40 deaths reported in Union County since the start of the pandemic.




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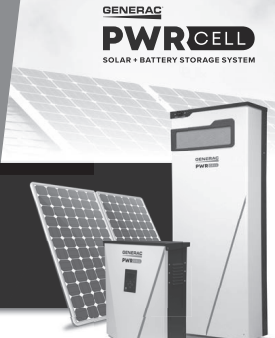


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