Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Austin Hawks, a paraeducator with La Grande High School, helps students as they receive their lunches at La Grande High School on Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021.

LUNCH

Continued from Page A1

"I'll have to do a last-minute menu change and that's sometimes hard — and sometimes impossible," Corta said. "Its difficult and stressful, but we still get those kids fed."

From shortchanged orders to out-of-stock staples and favorites, schools are making do with less. As well, the time it takes to order supplies has increased dramatically as filling the pantry now involves dealing with multiple vendors to fulfill ingredient requirements.

Michelle Glover, business director at La Grande School District, said that creating orders once took little over an hour on Fridays. That same order now takes as long as four to five hours to finish as kitchen supervisors scramble and broker with different suppliers to get ingredients shipped out in time for next week's lunch.

And even then, some supplies might be entirely out of stock, or orders arrive with less than was expected.

"Our orders are not being fully fulfilled, and so that's what's caused the real challenges," Glover said. "It looks like it's coming and it doesn't arrive. We don't get any notice in advance, so they're having to be creative and on their toes with alternate plans in place."

Even though school districts uses different suppliers and ordering methods, the same issue has been affecting many local school districts, including Imbler.

Corta said that each week is a struggle to get orders in for the Imbler schools. She now orders two weeks ahead of time, a method she employs to help dampen the effects of a supply chain that has been disrupted by worker shortages at manufacturing and processing plants, truck drivers shortages, and delayed shipments from cargo ships.

She's not alone. Schools both big and small across Union County — and Eastern Oregon — have suffered similar supply chain woes. Those issues aren't limited to just food.

At La Grande High School, foam lunch trays have been particularly difficult to procure, leading to lunches being served in plastic bags as opposed to trays. As well, the school has been shorthanded one kitchen staff member, meaning that lunches that once offered a variety of foods such as enchiladas or pizza have been diminished to sandwiches nearly every day of the week.

"They are definitely struggling with the supply chain for food items so definitely menu preparation (suffers)," Glover said. "If we're planning on serving this and then product doesn't arrive, or comes in short, and it's not enough to cover all sites — we are having to be flexible in meal preparation."

Pendleton shared similar worries with regard to supply chain problems — though like other schools, the situation is varied as different districts broker with different suppliers for food.

"We weren't able to get hamburger patties for a while, and so we would substitute chicken nuggets or burritos," said Suzanne Howard, director of nutrition services with Pendleton School District. "Or, we weren't able to get pizza for a while, so again we would either not serve them that day if we had other options to serve, like at the middle school/high school we served more than one. And then otherwise we would just have to replace it."

Programs such as the Summer Seamless Option — which provides free lunches to lower-income students over the summer — were also hit by supply chain interruptions. Those programs will continue to operate and feed students, according to Howard.

Still, the districts aren't worried about having to deny students lunch just yet.

"We're not always able to serve what I have on the menu, but we always have a backup. I feel a lot more fortunate than what I'm hearing in other parts of the country," Howard said.

MANDATE

Continued from Page A1

The hospital employs just under 800 employees, making it one of the largest employers in Union County. Grande Ronde Hospital released a statement that noted more than 99% of its employees will be remaining with the hospital, either having received the COVID-19 vaccine or by filing a valid exemption. According to the press release, the "greatest majority" of the employees are fully vaccinated.

"While we support compliance with Oregon's COVID-19 vaccination requirement in order to continue our mission, we have also respected our employees' right to make the choice whether to vaccinate or not," the press release said. "We provided guidelines and policies to help our employees navigate that choice, including the process for exemptions, and have offered vaccine availability for those who chose to vaccinate."

The press release emphasized sadness over the loss of employees and thanked them for their service to the hospital. The 99% remainder of employees indicates that roughly 10 or fewer employees left the hospital because of the the vaccine mandate.

Emergency services face minimal backlash

At the La Grande Fire Department, Chief Emmitt Cornford expressed his concern of losing employees in the months leading up to the deadline.

According to Cornford, the department lost one full-time employee who chose to take a job in another state and one part-time employee who chose to resign.

The department's remaining EMTs and staff have either received the vaccination or filed an exemption. Cornford noted that employees will have to work extra hours to make up for the lost positions, but that the department will still operate at the highest standards.

"Our service to the community won't change," he said. "When you're short of staff it can make it a bit challenging, but the public shouldn't notice any difference in our service."

Med Transport, Inc., an advanced life support ambulance service based in North Powder, has not seen much of an immediate impact from the deadline. According to owner Chris Arvidson, the privately owned service has flexibility with the mandate since employees are sent on jobs nationwide.

Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Demonstrators against the vaccine mandate gather outside La Grande City Hall on Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021.

"Our employees can pick and choose their assignments," he said. "If their assignment requires a vaccine, they can get a different assignment if need be. We're sending people throughout the country."

Arvidson noted that several employees on the medical services staff are currently in Louisiana, while a number of emergency service workers are aiding fire crews in California.

The company provides medical transport services, contracts nurses and paramedics and holds multiple state licenses in order to assist in medical staffing across the country.

Schools maintain majority of staff

Union County's public schools also do not appear to have been impacted in a major way by the mandate.

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said his district has lost four staff members, all non-teachers, because of the state's COVID-19 mandates. Mendoza said all the individuals resigned over the past six to eight weeks,

"They all had concerns about the mandates," Mendoza said.

The La Grande School District has more than 300 employees counting substitutes and coaches and Mendoza said many steps were taken to help all of its staff meet the state mandate. He said he is happy that a very high percentage of his staff will be remaining with the school district.

"I'm very thankful for the support we receive from our staff,'' Mendoza said.

The Cove School District will be retaining all of its teaching and non-teaching staff, according to superintendent Earl Pettit. Still, the school district did suffer some losses — two coaches and four substitute teachers. One of the coaches was with a fall sports team and the other was a spring sports coach.

Pettit said the loss of the four substitute teachers will reduce the school district's pool to six. The superintendent said this is below the number he believes the school district needs and that he will be trying to add to the district's list of substitute teachers.

The Elgin, Imbler, North Powder and Union school districts each also will be retaining all of its staff, the districts' superintendents reported. Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop said he is delighted that he will be able to keep all of his staff, noting that it will help maintain stability for the students.

"We want to be as normal as we can be in an unnormal time," he said.

Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells also said he is delighted that his staff is still intact.

"It would have been horrific to have lost staff because of the mandate," Wells said. "Each and every staff member plays a vital role in our daily operations."

Wells said that his staff members, including non-teachers, build important relationships with students.

"When you lose a trusted adult it has a detrimental impact on students because of the relationships built with them," he said.

EOU plans ahead for in-house deadline

Employees of Eastern Oregon University are not impacted by the state mandate. However, Eastern has put a similar vaccination mandate in place, with a deadline of Oct. 22.

Tim Seydel, Eastern's vice president for university advancement, said EOU's employees were asked to submit their plans regarding the university's mandate by Sept. 15. This was done to give the university a better idea of what to expect and to make it easier for it to plan.

The process leading up to the Oct. 22 deadline has been smooth.

"We have a good response. We have not had any issues," Seydel said.

State agencies retain bulk of staff

The Oregon State Police, in addition to schools and health care providers, also fall under the umbrella of the state's Oct. 18 vaccination mandate. A press release from the OSP indicates 93% of its employees have met the requirements of the mandate and that the remaining 7% have applications for exceptions that are now being reviewed.

Of the OSP's employees, 78% have been fully vaccinated and 15% have been granted exceptions for religious or medical reasons. Ninety-six percent of the exceptions were granted for religious reasons.

A total of four OSP employees in the state are known to have resigned in response to the state's vaccination mandate. Each of the four cited the state's mandate when they resigned, according to the press release.

The Oregon Department of Transportation, another state agency affected by the mandate, also has a high employee mandate compliance rate. Katherine Benenati of ODOT said that as of the morning of Oct. 19, 95% of the agency's employees had met the requirements of the mandate. This meant that 4,406 of ODOT's 4,627 employees had met the standard, Benenati said.

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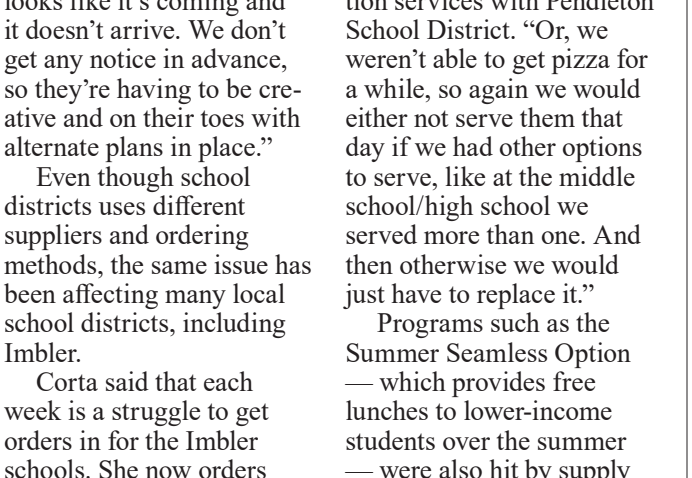

The Observer, File

The renovation of the historic Liberty Theatre in downtown La Grande — shown here in its earlier stages — is about 75% complete, its supporters said in October 2021.

LIBERTY

Continued from Page A1

The foundation's grant from the Wildhorse Foundation went toward installing sound and light equipment. At the La Grande Urban Renewal Agency meeting on Oct. 6, the city agreed to extend the loan agreement with the Liberty Theatre Foundation following delays due to COVID-19.

The original hope was for the venue to be ready in some capacity before this year's Eastern Oregon Film Festival, but supply shortages and spikes in prices during the pandemic have delayed that vision. According to O'Toole, the opening will likely be delayed until next year.

The 12th rendition of the film festival is set to start on Oct. 22, utilizing the McKenzie Theatre at Eastern Oregon University.

The Liberty Theatre will eventually serve as the home base for the film festival and open its doors for live performances from local orchestras, choirs, performing groups, and theater companies.

"We are committed to a long-standing partnership with the film festival in any capacity possible," O'Toole said.

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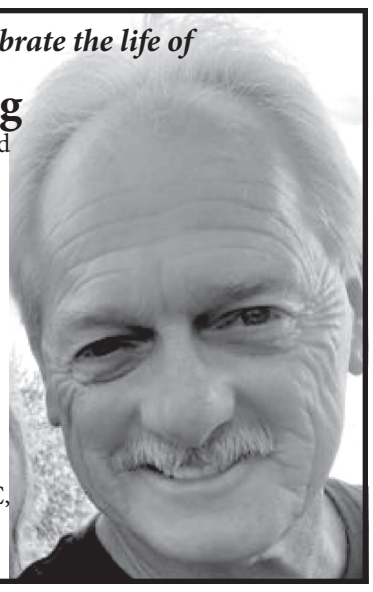
Please come and celebrate the life of

Steven R. King

born June 1st, 1959 passed away August 17th, 2021.

Steven's Celebration of Life will be Sat., October 23rd, 2021 at 2 pm at Island City, City Hall, 10605 Island Avenue.

He was co-owner of Countryside Kennels LLC, with his wife Molly.