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Protest letter penned by timber group

Eastern Oregon leaders presented letter against River Democracy Act as their view

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

LA GRANDE — U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden in August got a letter critical of his plan to preserve more Oregon streams from 14 county commissioners in Eastern Oregon.

They represented the letter as their view — but gave no indication the piece had been produced by the timber advocacy group American Forest Resource Council.

Oregon Wild, an environmental organization based in Portland, traced the emergence of the letter through a public records request to the Union County Board of Commissioners and shared its findings with the Capital Chronicle.

The legislation called the River Democracy Act, proposed by Wyden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, would add 4,700 miles of Oregon streams and rivers to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

It would also, according to the American Forest Resource Council, take about 3 million acres of federal land out of use for cattle and logging industries.

Some Eastern Oregon interests have pushed back on the proposal, fearing that it would impair ranching and forestry and pile on new federal regulations.

Among the records the group obtained was an email in August from Heath Heikkila, a government affairs officer at American Forest Resource Council and registered lobbyist, to Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes.

Anderes doesn't work in the timber industry but comes from a timber family in Roseburg, according to the Union County Commission site. He has been a commissioner in Union County for about three years.

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Workers put on the finishing touches for the cottage-style homes at Veteran's Village Union County on Russell Avenue in La Grande on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021. The affordable housing project is nearing completion and residents are beginning to move in.

It takes a village

Newly opened housing complex in La Grande offers housing to veterans in need

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — For local veterans, a new housing area in La Grande offers a chance for a clean slate.

Veteran's Village Union County, a micro-neighborhood of cottage-style homes, opened its doors to several veterans in need of housing on Wednesday, Nov. 3. The new homes provide homeless or low-income veterans with a safe, community-style living environment.

"This is my savior here, this place," local army veteran Dennis Scudder said. "It's a new place and a brand-new start."

The village, on the corner of Russell Avenue and N. Pine Street, features small fully furnished homes. Each unit includes a bedroom, living room, amenities and a fenced backyard. The first three units are completed and have new occupants, while construction on the remaining seven houses is still wrapping up.

Creating a community
Gust Tsiatsos, owner of GCT Land Management,



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Dennis Scudder, left, a formerly homeless Army veteran, relaxes and watches television in the living room of his new home at Veteran's Village Union County in La Grande on Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021.

spearheaded the project after seeing a need for affordable housing in La Grande. The project involves Veterans Affairs, which finds veterans who meet the guidelines to live in the village, and Northeast Oregon Housing Authority is set to manage the property.

"The need was substantial after we did some research on what that need really looks like," Tsiatsos said. "We just tried to create a community feel where they would be living with similar types of folks."

Brian Blais, the Veterans Services Officer at the Center for Human Development, conducts the general screening process and worked closely with Tsiatsos in the planning process. He emphasized that there is a major need for aid to homeless veterans.

"The housing shortage isn't a veteran-specific problem by any means, but it is estimated that there are over 1,300 homeless veterans in Oregon, and I am honored to be able to support my brothers and sisters

who served our country," Blais said. "Working with Gust has been an amazing experience, and I look forward to continuing the work that we do."

The project is roughly 75% grant funded, according to Tsiatsos. The bulk of that funding came from Oregon Housing and Community Services. Tsiatsos noted that there is specific grant funding for veterans in rural areas, which helped the Veteran's Village Union County score very well in the grant application process.

A major goal of the housing project is to foster a community of individuals with similar life experiences. Tsiatsos said the setup of the village allows the veterans to be as social as they would like, or have privacy if that is preferred.

"We have learned that this population of people has an interest in being in a more private setting and more of a closed community," he said. "We situated all the houses facing in and put up a private fence around it. We're hoping that a small, controlled space will be good for that demographic."

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Trail-with-rails project gets \$272K in grants

Trail would run 63 miles between Elgin, Joseph

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The Joseph Branch Trail Consortium, the nonprofit working to establish a 63-mile trail-with-rails between Elgin and Joseph in Northeastern Oregon, announced it has received two grants totaling more than \$272,000 that will fund construction of the first trailhead and inau-

gural trail segment, as well as final planning and design for another 13-mile segment.

The trail has been in the planning stages for about 10 years and will eventually offer a nonmotorized alternative transportation route to Highway 82 in the form of a trail that will run beside existing railroad tracks in the railroad right-of-way owned by the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority. With one end in Elgin, the other will terminate 63 miles later in Joseph.

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Joseph Branch Trail Consortium/Contributed Photo

Members of the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium help with trail cleanup along the tracks. A recent grant will go toward funding the first 13 miles of a trail that will ultimately run between Elgin and Joseph.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

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THURSDAY NEW NORTH POWDER MAYOR DISCUSSES GOALS

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