

# THE OBSERVER

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**UNION COUNTY**

## MERA forest management likely to proceed

Commissioners meeting draws feedback from public about forest management plans

By **DICK MASON and DAVIS CARBAUGH**

The Observer

LA GRANDE— A controversial forest management project in the Red Apple portion of the Mount Emily Recreation Area may go forward this winter.



Anderes



Beverage



Scarfo

Union County Parks Coordinator Sean Chambers and Union County forestry consultant Chuck Sarrett were given a vote of confidence by the Union County commissioners during a meeting on Wednesday, Dec. 1. Chambers and Sarrett are developing a plan for the forest management project at the 300-acre Red Apple site, MERA's most popular location for hiking and mountain biking.

"If they want to go forward they can. We trust them and their decisions. That is why they are in the positions they are in," said Matt Scarfo, chair of the Union County Board of Commissioners, following a meeting where a number of people expressed concern that the potential Red Apple project could do significant damage to its trails and rob the area of valuable trees.

Chambers, stressing that no timeline has been set, said he hopes most of the work can be done this winter.

"The intent is to make this a winter project," he said.

**County expresses confidence in project**  
Chambers said doing most of the work in the winter with snow cover and frozen ground would reduce damage done by crews.

The goals of the project, according to Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes, is to improve forest health, promote

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**HOUSING MARKET**

## A RETURN TO NORMAL?

White hot sellers market cools to red hot, but affordable housing still is out of reach for many

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The year 2021 has been unprecedented in many ways, including for those looking to buy a house.

Supply-chain issues and inflation have created challenges for people wanting to buy or build, while low mortgage interest rates have spurred a fast-moving, competitive market, driving up prices and making it a good time to sell. There is uncertainty across the board as to what is to come in 2022, and local real estate agents are hoping for a more mixed market.

**Inventory at record lows**

Across the nation, the total inventory of houses has reached record lows, with listed units flying off the market. In La Grande, Federal Reserve Economic Data showed that in June, houses stayed on the market for an average of 36.5 days. While that average was up to 53 days in October, the city still is in a seller's market.

The COVID-19 pandemic, supply-chain disruptions and labor shortages are some of the factors local real estate agents see as impacts on the current housing market.

"I don't know if it's all necessarily from COVID, but inventory has definitely been more scarce. It's been much harder for buyers in the last year, year-and-a-half," said Anna Goodman, principal broker at Eagle Cap Realty in La Grande. "At some point it's going to level out, but the supply shortage is playing a big role."

Price hikes in lumber led to increases in housing prices earlier in the year, and there's been a recent spike in the cost of other construction items, including concrete and paint. Lumber was nearly three times its typical price at the peak of the increase but during the past year prices have steadily fallen back to a more normal price point.

One major question looming over the housing market moving into 2022 is whether supply chain shortages will continue to impact homebuilders.

For John Howard of John J. Howard



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A sign marks a home for sale in La Grande on Friday, Nov. 26, 2021. Real estate agents are hoping for a more balanced market coming into 2022, as opposed to the erratic seller's market that made short work of the housing inventory.

& Associates Real Estate in La Grande, inflation rates are the biggest thing buyers should keep an eye on in the coming year.

"The inflation makes me a little nervous going into next year," he said. "The cost of goods — and so many supplies are limited — could impact the market a bit."

Labor shortages and inflation increases play a major role, but it is uncertain what the outlook is moving forward, with increases in inflation caused from supply-chain setbacks leading to increases in mortgage rates.

"If the interest gets up to four-and-a-half, pushing 5%, that's going to put a damper on the market," Howard said. "Hopefully the supply will be increased and that will ease the inflation."

Increasing inflation and mortgage interest rates — the average interest on a 30-year fixed mortgage rate currently stands around 3% — could stem the flow of motivated buyers and bring down asking prices.

Heightened inflation rates have a large impact on the cost of average 30-year fixed mortgages, with the average interest on a 30-year fixed mortgage rate standing around 3%. A continued increase could play a big role in the future of the housing market, as heightened monthly payments could stem the flow of motivated buyers and bring down asking prices.

**Buyers outnumber sellers**

"It's something that I haven't quite wrapped my head around — the prices," said Holly Walker of RE/MAX in La

Grande. "I would have never imagined when I started this business 26 years ago that I would see this level of interest."

The high demand from buyers drove significant hikes in asking prices this year. Buyers have faced bidding wars and have often overpaid for listings over the past year, as they sought to take advantage of the low interest rates.

According to Federal Reserve Economic Data, the median listing price in La Grande reached an all-time high of \$385,000 in May. From December 2020 to February 2021, the median listing price in La Grande jumped from \$232,450 to \$339,000. That median price has leveled out since, coming in at \$285,000 in October. Across the country, the median price of a new house sold increased from \$344,400 in September 2020 to \$408,800 in September 2021.

"During the summer and spring there was a lot of competitiveness for properties," Howard said. "Some people paid over value, but they just wanted that particular house and were willing to go over and above other buyers."

Walker, Howard and Goodman all noted the competitive nature of the housing market has been noticeable locally during the last year, with the ratio of buyers to sellers at times resulting in bidding wars. Howard noted that this could cool off a bit in the coming year, which has started to take form this fall.

"That part is starting to pull back."

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## Chief responds to downtown business concerns

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**

The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande city officials are looking at ways to address issues of crime and homelessness in the downtown area.

Police Chief Gary Bell issued a letter to downtown merchants and community partners on Monday, Nov. 29, pointing out key issues and how the police department is working to improve the area. The letter came after the situation was discussed at the November city council meeting, prompting an ongoing discussion with local input.

"Our hope is that this may serve to reassure you and your employees that we do hear you and that you have my personal commitment, and that of the city of La Grande and the La Grande

Police Department, to do all we can within our resource limitations to provide for the safety and felt security within our downtown and our community," Bell wrote in the letter.

At the La Grande City Council meeting on Nov. 3, Councilor John Bozarth raised the issue of loitering at Max Square.

"It's an eyesore for the community," he said at the time. "There's been a lot of problems there."

**The issues**

Bell's letter is in response to the discussion that ensued after Bozarth's comments, as well as a memo of concern from a number of downtown businesses and residents who reported occurrences

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Dakota Walker, who grew up in Union and graduated in 1996, is among a handful of transients who often stay at Max Square in La Grande during the day when shelters are unavailable. City council member John Bozarth raised the issue of loitering in Max Square in a council meeting on Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2021, calling the situation an "eyesore for the community." The comments sparked a discussion that led to Police Chief Gary Bell penning a letter regarding the issue.

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**WEATHER** Full forecast on the back of B section

	<b>Tonight</b> 31 LOW Rain and snow		<b>Sunday</b> 38/29 Colder
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**CONTACT US**

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**TUESDAY**

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