

HOUSING

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Some buyers are not wanting to be so competitive. I'm noticing more of a pull back on that," Howard said.

Shortage of houses is nothing new in La Grande

With inventory across the country at a significant low point, La Grande is already accustomed to a shortage of housing. The city and its planning commission continue to address the shortage of affordable housing in La Grande. A housing needs analysis in 2019 found that single-family homes are the biggest need in the area — that was before pandemic-related issues took the scene.

"I think it's a lot to do with the housing shortage," Walker said. "People are moving from different locations thinking the grass is greener on the other side."

Howard noted outsiders moving in have an impact on the amount of home



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Trayse Riggie of Eagle Cap Realty conducts a house showing on Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021. According to Federal Reserve Economic Data, in June 2021 houses for sale in La Grande stayed on the market for an average of only 36.5 days.

buyers in the area. He stated that new residents come to Union County for a variety of reasons, including retirement or wanting out of a larger city.

"We've noticed a lot of people that have been

moving to rural areas," he said. "We get people moving into our area from all across the states."

Howard also noted Grande Ronde Hospital's reputation as a high-quality hospital in the area

is attractive to an older population who might move to the area to retire.

Walker said the housing market in Eastern Oregon typically slows down during hunting season as well, a feature unique to

many other areas of the state: "It's been a yearly trend, we see things slow down when hunting and archery season starts. But then we get another boom right before school starts, when people want to get their kids relocated."

La Grande's rental market is another aspect of the local real estate scene. The presence of Eastern Oregon University students in La Grande affects the market, with many students typically keeping rentals from year to year. Fewer rental properties available can lead to more potential home buyers.

COVID-19 plays a role

In addition to its impact on labor, supplies and interest rates, the pandemic itself has played a role in housing.

"In my personal opinion, I don't think COVID has slowed the market down. It has, however, changed some of our rules," Walker said.

Walker said the process in which potential buyers are vetted before visiting a listing has changed, and

safety precautions due to the virus are now part of the home-buying process. Interested buyers must be bank qualified or have a letter in hand proving they can buy the house before visiting the property. Real estate agents also have a stricter sanitary routine when showing houses to prospective buyers.

COVID-19 also has impacted living situations, whether it be the ability to work from home or having to relocate because of an occupation.

"People's lives changed," Walker said. "With COVID we are seeing some people relocating because of their job situation. With the requirement for the vaccine, health care workers are walking away. Even here."

Walker stated she has seen one house sold for that reason in the area.

While no one can predict the future, the distribution of vaccinations provides a light of hope for coming out of the pandemic as a whole. A lessened burden on workers and supply chains could show dividends to the housing market.

LETTER

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of vandalism, trespassing and activities they felt to be unsafe. A total of 18 entities combined their concern in the letter, including about 10 local businesses.

In his response, the chief of police described an increase in activity at Max Square over the past several years. He noted that actions have been taken to limit vandalism and loitering, such as removing picnic tables, trimming low-hanging trees for enhanced visibility, turning off power outlets when events are not taking place and altering the Wi-Fi schedule at Cook Memorial Library.

"Our police officers have provided special consideration to these matters, inasmuch as we can, in an effort to have a positive impact," Bell wrote.

Bell also described a heightened focus through patrols, as well as efforts to make arrests for criminal law violations when necessary or provide assistance through partnering agencies.

"I think it's appropriate to share that our mission is to ethically protect the lives, property and quality of life of the La Grande community to the best of our ability, while respecting the constitutional rights of all persons," Bell said in the statement.

The challenge in any prospective action for law enforcement is the state's prohibition of cities banning individuals from sleeping in public places. Ordinances are in place in the city stating that if individuals are involuntarily homeless, their need for rest and sleep cannot be criminalized in a public space — this is applied unless there is a designated overnight camping area in the city or indoor housing options available for the homeless.

The city council members discussed a variety of ways to handle the concerns, and ultimately found that the court system does not provide much of an answer to the issues at hand. In the past, arresting individuals for trespassing or smoking in a public park ended up being dismissed in court. Bell also cited Measure 110 as a means of limiting the police department's ability to monitor the situation in the downtown area.

"This is a much larger issue than law enforcement, quite frankly," Bell said at the meeting. "There's a lot

of tools that we don't have in our toolbox anymore to fix some of these social issues."

At the meeting, Bell also stated that the department is getting less calls for complaints about the congregation of individuals at Max Square — he pointed out that locals are likely becoming accustomed to seeing it.

Bell later noted that when called to make contact with homeless individuals in the city, officers provide information, assistance and explain available resources.

"When our officers have contact with people who we believe could benefit from available resources, we do our best to coordinate appropriate assistance," he said. "Unfortunately, there are many times where individuals we communicate with are not interested."

Addressing concerns

A week after the November council meeting, Bell met with City Manager Robert Strobe and Parks and Recreation Coordinator Stu Spence for a follow-up discussion. According to Strobe, the officials discussed options and possible directions that the city can go regarding the public concerns. They also spoke with several businesses and took suggestions to garner community involvement. Strobe said Bell's letter is the next step following that meeting, serving as a means to raise public awareness and continue to gather more input.

"I view it as the start of an ongoing discussion," he said. "We need to figure out what we can collectively do moving forward."

Bell concluded the letter by calling on residents to contact the La Grande Police Department if they witness any criminal violations, which he stated will help the department address the situation in the best way possible.

The police chief and other city officials will be holding a forum in the near future to gather more public input, answer questions and determine the best plan moving forward. The time and date of the forum will be released in the coming weeks.

"I can assure you that this is felt collectively and we're working on it," Bell said at the city council meeting. "We need public engagement and I think part of that is the education component so that our downtown, our business owners and people are aware that it's not just going unattended."

MERA

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a fire-resilient forest and boost recreational opportunities in MERA.

"MERA is an incredibly important part of the community. The last thing we want to see is for it to be degraded in any way," he said.

Anderes said the members of the board of commissioners have a lot of confidence in Chambers and Sarrett.

"We are going to leave it up to the professionals. We are not going to micro-manage this," the commissioner said.

Chambers' original plans called for the project's request for proposal, which will list objectives, deadlines and more, to go out Nov. 15 and for a bid to be awarded Dec. 10. However, these dates were pushed back due to the concerns expressed during a field review on Nov. 10.

Chambers said MERA is close to his heart and he will do everything to protect it so that it will be available to future generations.

"We all appreciate what a gem this is for our community and are intent on making it shine brighter," he said.

A draft RFP, created in part by Chambers, was presented to the Union County Board of Commissioners at the meeting, and none voiced objections to it. The finalized RFP will not have to be approved by the board, though the commissioners will have to approve any contract before one is awarded to a successful bidder, according to Union

County Administrative Officer Shelley Burgess.

Chambers said because of a concern for public safety there will be a need to close areas while work is being done. Commissioner Donna Beverage compared the need for upcoming closures to the delays motorists encounter while repair work is being done on a highway.

Locals speak out against forest management plan

Thirty people attended the Dec. 1 meeting via Zoom or phone. Several individuals spoke out against heavy-handed logging, emphasizing the importance of the area as a hub for recreation. A majority of those who talked at the meeting also mentioned a need for more public input in the decision-making process, which the commissioners took note of.

Many of those speaking against the logging plan asked for the proposal to be pushed back or reconsidered. One individual called upon the commissioners to create a more detailed plan involving more public input and to plan to secure funding in case trails need to be restored after the forest management work.

Approximately 20 opinions were gathered by letter or public comment as the board of commissioners listened to input from locals. The interactions became contentious at times as a variety of concerns were brought up.

"MERA is not an ATM machine. Any management activity has to be secondary to its primary purpose of providing recreation," said La Grande

resident Dan White in a written letter. "MERA is one of the best things this county has done, and we're proud and protective of it."

White, like many others, advocated for fire prevention at MERA but voiced concern over potential damages to recreation.

Several articulated frustration over not seeing any notice of MERA discussions on the county's agenda or on social media platforms. A general consensus from those speaking at the field review on Nov. 10 and the commissioner's meeting was a desire for more public involvement in decision-making regarding MERA.

Many who gave comments emphasized their apprehension about closing the park off, in addition to potential damage to the trails. Angela Mart, the president of the Wal-lowa County Bike Club, wrote into the meeting and described how MERA is a recreational destination for surrounding areas. She described that visiting counties look fondly on the volunteer work from the Blue Mountain Single Track Trails Club that went into constructing and maintaining many of MERA's trails.

"As a multi-use area close to town for both motorized and non-motorized vehicles, it would be a shame for the constituents of La Grande to lose access to MERA," Mart said.

'Best interests of MERA at heart'

Michael Hatch, outdoor adventure program director at Eastern Oregon University, wrote in and

emphasized MERA's role in local recreation and challenged the county's management of the area.

"This land needs to be managed like a park, the main reason it was set aside for, not as an extracted-resource revenue generator," Hatch wrote. "MERA was not created to be a revenue source for the county, it was meant to be an area that offers opportunities for recreation and protects vital wildlife habitats."

Bart Barlow, a former member of the MERA Advisory Board who has voiced his opinion against the plan, spoke at the meeting and encouraged the county to improve communication with the public on its decisions. He also encouraged fire management at MERA, but in a way that does not damage the recreational aspect of the area.

"MERA is a recreation area that needs to have an active forest management and wildland fire management plan. However, those practices must take into consideration that this is a recreation area," Barlow said.

Forrest Warren, also a member of the MERA Advisory Board, said that he empathizes with the situation Chambers and Sarrett are in.

"They have the best interests of MERA at heart. They are in a tough spot," he said.

Still, Warren said some changes in the forest management plan should be made because of the push-back it has received from the public. Warren said this would indicate the public input provided is being given serious consideration.

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