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Alleged racism from La Grande football team still under review

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Allegations of racism from the La Grande football team remain under review.

Following a 34-12 playoff victory over Gladstone on Friday, Nov. 5, at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande's players were

accused of using racial slurs during the game in an article published by The Oregonian. The ensuing investigation by the Oregon School Activities Association, La Grande School District and Gladstone School District is still ongoing.

A player and parent from the Gladstone football team spoke out to The Oregonian on Nov. 11

regarding what they claimed was a persistent use of racial slurs from the La Grande team throughout the entirety of the first-round playoff game. Near the conclusion of the game, a verbal dispute ensued between the Gladstone sideline and players on the field.

Following the accusations, a full-blown investigation began led

by an independent investigator working alongside OSAA. The investigation included review of game film, interviews with those involved and amends between the two school districts.

According to La Grande Superintendent George Mendoza, the interviews and investigative section of the review is nearing completion and OSAA is

working toward a final decision on the allegations. The La Grande School District has cooperated in the investigation and provided due diligence in getting to the bottom of the accusations, Mendoza said.

OSAA Executive Director Peter Weber said that the independent investigator is nearing

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LA GRANDE

Shop with a Cop unwraps seasonal cheer

Law enforcement event provides gifts to local families, builds bonds with youth

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — In the spirit of the season, local law enforcement made it possible for students in the area to give Christmas gifts to their families.

The Shop with a Cop program, which is in its 13th year in La Grande, helps children intermingle with law enforcement while picking out holiday presents at Walmart in Island City. Selected students in grades one through six partook in the event on Thursday, Dec. 9, thanks to support from the community and local volunteers.

"The kids always enjoy it so much and they get very excited about getting gifts for their family members," La Grande Police Lieutenant Jason Hays said. "It really embraces that spirit of giving."

Hays has organized the event for the last 13 years and has seen it grow in popularity both with law enforcement and the community. The program has drawn deputies from the Union County Sheriff's Office and officers from the Oregon State Police.

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A long winter ahead

Labor shortage will make snow removal difficult for ODOT

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A shortage of road maintenance employees could create delays in snow removal this winter in Eastern Oregon.

"Fewer people will be running plows. Anytime you have fewer operators it means that work will take longer," said Oregon Department of Transportation spokesperson Tom Strandberg.

Craig Sipp, manager of ODOT's Region 5, which encompasses a high percentage of Eastern Oregon, agreed.

"If we have back-to-back storms, it may take us longer to get to some of the secondary highways," he said.

Sipp said ODOT's Region 5 has approximately 12 unfilled road maintenance

positions, significantly more than what is average for this time of year.

Open positions

Statewide ODOT has 167 road maintenance positions now open. There were 86 openings at the same time in 2020 and 29 in 2019 during the same period. Strandberg said ODOT's Region 5 has seen openings for maintenance staff steadily rise since 2019.

Strandberg said it is not known if the COVID-19 pandemic is partially responsible for the employee shortage. Strandberg said 99% of ODOT's employees in Oregon complied with the state's COVID-19 vaccine mandate that took effect in October. This meant that 99% of ODOT's employees either were vaccinated or filed for and received an exemption for health or religious reasons.

He said it is unknown if some of the employees who retired this year did so because of concerns about the state vaccine mandate.

ODOT always adds to its road maintenance staff in the winter, Strandberg said, and many of those hired are seasonal employees. He said that despite the labor shortage, travelers can expect to see ODOT maintenance crews clearing snow night and day.

"We will be keeping equipment on the road as much as possible," he said.

Ace Clark, ODOT's manager of District 13, which includes Union and Wallowa counties and most of Baker County, said that it has been difficult to hire road maintenance staff because there is so much competition now for employees due

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TOP: A plow drives through a snow-covered road near Imbler early in the morning on Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. ABOVE: A snowplow heads out to battle drifts on Highway 82, near Imbler, early in the morning on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021.

Photos by Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight 32 LOW A shower early		Wednesday 44/40 Mostly cloudy
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TUESDAY

LOCAL AUTHOR CONNECTS WITH RWANDA MAN

Online at lagrandeobserver.com