



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

The building housing La Grande School District's maintenance, facilities and grounds shop, seen through a window on Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021, is more than 100 years old. The structure might be torn down along with the adjacent Annex building to make way for a new athletic and academic center.

CENTER

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than eight decades old. The Annex building and the school district's adjacent maintenance, facilities and grounds structure — which is at least 100 years old — would both be torn down if a bond is approved. The maintenance, facilities and grounds services would likely be moved to a structure the school would obtain on Adams Avenue.

Should the \$7.1 million bond be presented to voters and passed, some money from it would also be used to do renovation work at Willow School, which is about 100 years old.

Voter approval of the \$6 million or \$7.1 million bond would not raise the school district property tax rates now in place.

"The existing tax rate would be maintained," Mendoza said.

The reason the tax rate would not change is that the \$31.5 million bond school district voters approved in 2014 was refinanced this year, meaning that rate per \$1,000 of assessed value taxpayers are now paying for it will drop from \$1.93 to \$1.65 per \$1,000 of assessed value beginning in July of 2022, the same time charges for the \$6 million or \$7.1 million bond levy would kick in. The rate per \$1,000 of assessed value for the \$6 million bond would be 24 cents and the rate for the \$7.1 million bond would be 29 cents. The amount property owners would be spending on school district bond payments would be the same in July 2022 as what they are paying today, Mendoza said.

\$4M matching grant

The clock is ticking for the La Grande School District because it was awarded a \$4 million Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching grant from the state for the building of the academic and athletic center earlier this month. The school district will receive the \$4 million grant only if voters approve one of the bonds being considered. Voters would have to approve the \$6 million or \$7.1 million bond in May 2022 because this was the election date specified by the school district in its application for the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching grant. If voters do not approve a bond in the May election, the school district would lose its \$4 million

OSCIM grant.

The school district would then have to apply for another OCSIM grant.

"There is a lot of competition for these grants," said retired La Grande School District Business Director Chris Panike, who will chair the political action committee for the school district's bond campaign if it goes forward.

Mendoza said he wants the La Grande School Board to decide in January if it will have the school district move forward with a bond levy in the May election and, if so, whether it would pursue the passage of a \$6 million or \$7.1 million bond. The superintendent said that deciding on both early in the year would give the school district plenty of time to take the steps needed to get a bond levy on the ballot.

The school board will discuss the proposed levy when it meets at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Mendoza said the board may decide at the meeting to move forward and seek passage of one of the bonds. Public input will be taken at the meeting.

La Grande School District voters have a mixed track record when it comes to approving bonds. Voters rejected capital construction and maintenance bonds in 2006 and 2008 prior to passing the \$31.5 million bond in 2014. The 2006 levy asked for \$30 million and the 2008 levy request was for \$18.1 million. La Grande School District voters also rejected a five-year option levy in 2011 that would have raised \$900,000 a year for the school district.

La Grande voters did approve a small technology bond in the late 1990s.

The La Grande School District has never sought a bond for which there was a state OSCIM grant available to match a portion of it. Mendoza noted that Oregon school districts seeking the passage of bonds have an impressive success rate when there is a matching grant. Voters in Union County school districts have approved all bond levy requests for which an OSCIM grant has been attached. Voters in the Imbler, North Powder and Union school districts all have approved bonds since 2011 that had OSCIM grants tied to them. In all three cases the school districts received \$4 million OSCIM grants after their voters approved \$4 million bond levies for capital construction and maintenance.

RELIEF

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they continue to experience significant financial hardships," U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a press release. "The infusion of these funds will be critical to ensuring rural communities maintain access to high-quality health care and addressing urgent needs like workforce recruitment and retention."

Payments ranged from as little as \$500, which went to providers such as individually licensed psychiatrists and social workers, to several million dollars. The largest single award for Oregon went to Central Oregon's Saint Charles Health System, which received more than \$10.5 million.

Of the nearly 500 awards distributed, the most frequent award was \$500, which went to 88 Oregon suppliers and providers.

Caveats in the program allowed providers in the Portland metropolitan area to receive funding, even

LOCAL HEALTH CARE TO BENEFIT FROM ARPA FUNDS

ENTERPRISE — Two health care facilities in Wallowa County are the recipients of part of more than \$118 million going to 481 rural providers in Oregon for COVID relief under the American Rescue Plan Act, according to a Nov. 30 press release from U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley. The Wallowa County Health Care District is receiving \$736,938.37 of that money and Winding Waters Medical Clinic is receiving \$100,833.56, according to the release. Brooke Pace, communications director for Wallowa Memorial Hospital, and Nic Powers, CEO of Winding Waters, both said in emails that the money was something their organizations applied for. "The amount was a surprise," Pace said. "We did not know how much we would be awarded." "We had no idea of the amount until the award announcement was made," Powers said. Both, also, expressed gratitude for receiving the federal money and emphasized its need. "We are of course incredibly grateful for these funds

and to be able to continue to provide top-notch COVID response to the people of Wallowa County," Pace said. "We're grateful for these funds," Powers said. "Nationally, health care is in a state of turmoil. Locally, due to careful management and good partnerships, our health care providers are much more stable. These funds are a piece of ensuring that remains true." The money will largely go to maintain current health care services, Pace and Powers said. "The funds will be used for several things, including but not limited to supplies, PPE (personal protective equipment), testing, diagnostic equipment, treatment equipment, screening, etc.," Pace said. "These funds will be used to maintain good access to COVID-related services including six days a week of walk-in testing and vaccination, monoclonal antibody therapy and daily home visits," Powers added. — Bill Bradshaw, Wallowa County Chieftain

though there was a separate fund of \$9 billion already earmarked for providers and suppliers in non-rural areas. Clinics and providers in Portland that received funding included Northwest Urology in the Pearl District of Portland, which received just more than \$90,000.

According to U.S. Health and Human Services, providers who serve Medicaid, CHIP and Medi-

care patients who live in rural communities are eligible for the ARP rural payments. As well, providers who serve any patients living in Federal Office of Rural Health Policy-defined rural areas with Medicaid, CHIP or Medicare coverage, and who otherwise meet the eligibility criteria, will receive a minimum payment. Other Portland businesses that received

funding include optometrist clinics, acupuncturists, a dentist office, retirement homes and Portland State University — which received just more than \$1 million, though the university does have its own on-campus clinic.

U.S. Health and Human Services did not respond to requests for comment about the requirements for the payments before publication.

EOU

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is between 75-80%. The school during the holiday break has reminded students and staff who were traveling to practice safety measures to avoid contracting the virus.

"When we start up again, all unvaccinated students, if they can't or don't have proof, then they'll get tested," he said. "And then we'll continue monitoring them and our employees. If they're vaccinated, we already have their proof. And then if they're unvaccinated, then we'd have them continue to do their weekly or daily health checks."

Omicron's rise

The rapid rise of the omicron variant has stirred considerable panic since news about the highly transmissible strain caught international attention in late November. The Oregonian reported on Dec. 23 the state's COVID-19 omicron hospitalization peak won't be nearly as bad as forecasters predicted earlier this month, but still could overwhelm the health care system within weeks with about as many people needing hos-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Hanna Saunders, a freshman accounting student at Eastern Oregon University, studies in EOU's library on Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021. School officials are keeping their options open about instituting COVID-19 booster shot requirements amid a sharp national spike in coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant, which is expected to peak in early February 2022.

pital beds as did during the delta wave. Oregon Health & Science University revised its omicron surge projections, down from about 2,400 people hospitalized at the peak of the upcoming surge to about 1,200, provided Oregonians take steps to prevent the spread of infections.

The peak, which is expected to hit in early February, could exceed 1,700 if Oregonians' behavior doesn't change, though it always has in the past when infections have started to climb, OHSU

data analyst Peter Graven told The Oregonian.

But while the downward revision could be heartening, the predicted wave of hospitalizations still could rival or exceed Oregon's peak in early September.

"The risk of overwhelming hospital systems is real," Graven told The Oregonian. "We're seeing a dire situation."

On-campus protocol continues

As the omicron surge unfolds nationwide, Seydel

said Eastern Oregon does not anticipate a change in on-campus activities.

"Eastern put protocols in place and worked to have students in class on campus, even at limited capacity," he said. "That really worked well for our students, and we want to keep doing that."

Seydel said the school has been successful in keeping case counts low this fall, an indication that EOU's protocol is working and that students are monitoring themselves.

"If they're not feeling good, they're getting over to our Student Health Center and getting tested," he said.

Seydel said Eastern Oregon will continue to hold vaccine clinics during the winter term to further encourage the extra shot. During two recent clinics held on campus, approximately 80 booster shots were given, according to Seydel.

"We've had four clinics already, and we're planning to hold another one in January. And at the last one, we had just a lot of booster shots, which again is another really good indicator," he said. "We had a lot of students and employees going in to get their booster."

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Warm Wishes of the Season
from
Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics

As we take the time to enjoy the holidays and reflect on what matters most, we thank you - our friends and neighbors - for the trust you place in our hands every day. It is our honor and privilege to care for you and your loved ones. We wish you peace and joy this season, as we hope for good health and happiness in the new year.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
from your entire Grande Ronde family.





Nicole Cathey

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