

Non-COVID stories: rock quarry, homelessness, new sheriff

The Observer

ROCK QUARRY FIGHT ENDS WITH PULLED APPLICATION

LA GRANDE — James Smejkal, of Banks, withdrew his application for a rock quarry off Robbs Hill Road before Union County commissioners could vote on Wednesday, April 7.

The Union County Planning Commission on March 22 voted to recommend the county commissioners reject Smejkal's application, citing the staff report that found numerous deficiencies in the 400-plus pages of the document. The county board had scheduled a public hearing to consider the application for the rock quarry about 1 mile from Perry. The quarry would have been at least 250 acres.

But Bill Kloos, legal counsel representing Smejkal, formally withdrew the application, according to information from Union County.

Steve West of La Grande, a member of the application team for the Robbs Hill Rock Quarry project, said the withdrawal is only temporary. He said the team wants to regroup and submit a better application.

"This project is not dead, and I want to thank the incredible number of people locally who support the project," West said in a statement.

West said one of his personal goals is to get out fact-based information to the public to offset what he said is disinformation from a small number of people who oppose the project.

"They truly represent a small percentage of the county's population, but they are loud and get heard," he said.

He said he believes a detailed public information campaign that outlines the facts will change public opinion and silence critics. West said the rock quarry project will be approved in the near future if such a public information campaign is undertaken.

But the real work would have to be a better application.

County Planning Director Scott Hartell for the March 22 planning commission hearing delivered a 17-page report that went through the Smejkal application and found it lacking throughout, beginning with proving a public need for the rock quarry.

VETERANS VILLAGE AND OTHER HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS

LA GRANDE — A one-of-a-kind neighborhood is officially up and running in La Grande.

Veterans Village Union County hosted a virtual ribbon-cutting event on Thursday, Dec. 9, which acknowledged the many entities that contributed to the village. The 10-house neighborhood is designed specifically for veterans who otherwise might not have a home.

"Through this amazing collaboration of efforts, we created something wonderful — permanent, well-built and energy-efficient homes for many veterans who would not likely get this



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A train in early March 2021 travels alongside Interstate 84 near Perry, the site of a proposed 250-acre quarry that would ship 2,000 tons of material per day. The Union County Planning Commission voted against the proposal March 22, and the property owner withdrew the application ahead of the county board of commissioners' vote Wednesday, April 7.



Davis Carbaugh/The Observer

La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell speaks with downtown business owners at Brother Bear Cafe on Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021, regarding recent concerns over crime and loitering at Max Square in downtown La Grande.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Suzanne Timms poses for a portrait at her home in Walla Walla on Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021, alongside a missing person poster for her mother, Patricia Otto, and a collection of documents pertaining to her disappearance. Timms believes Finley Creek Jane Doe, discovered near Elgin in August 1978, is her mother, who went missing in 1976.

opportunity without help," said Gust Tsiatsos, owner of GCT Land Management, who coordinated the project.

Tsiatsos and Veterans Village Advisory Council Committee Chair Lindsey Freeland hosted the event, which was attended via Zoom by about 40 people. Attendees included La Grande Planning Commission members and county commissioners from Union County as well as other surrounding counties.

The Veterans Village, 0.83 acres at the corner of Russell Avenue and North Pine Street, features fully furnished homes for veterans. Each unit is a cottage-style small home that includes a bedroom, living room, fireplace, fenced-in backyard and amenities. The 10-house village also has a community center that can serve as a gathering space for

fellow veterans to interact.

Tsiatsos recognized many individuals and organizations that assisted along the way in developing the village, among them Kevin Reed; Ace Hardware; Bob Haley, job site superintendent; Terri Bradley, marketing consultant; Seder Architecture; and Angel Smith, social worker.

"Through all the local group and individual support, the state of Oregon also recognized the project as a frontrunner at the state level and a worthy partner through the Oregon Housing and Community Services program," Tsiatsos said.

The HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program through Veterans Affairs finds individuals who meet the guidelines to live in the village, while the Northeast Oregon Housing Authority manages the prop-

erty. After the La Grande Planning Commission amended its codes to allow for tiny homes and cottage-style houses, the Veterans Village serves as the first example of what can be done to ease the city's tight housing market.

"I think the concept works well in many applications, not just veterans housing," Tsiatsos said. "I hope to see other smaller units popping up here and there where we can get some more housing here."

BOWEN BECOMES SHERIFF, RESTARTS RESERVES, BLASTS KATE BROWN

LA GRANDE — It was a busy year for new Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen.

After unseating longtime sheriff Boyd Rasmussen, Bowen was sworn into the county's top law enforcement position on Monday, Jan. 4. Bowen on Facebook thanked his family and friends for their support and Union County voters for believing in him.

"I won't let you down," he promised.

A couple of months later, Bowen revived the county's deputy reserve program. Bowen, who started as a reserve officer in 2009, said the program is a critical way for the sheriff's office to get involved with the community — a hallmark of his campaign to bring transparency and openness to the law enforcement agency.

"It's an important way for people to give back to the community," Bowen said. "It's a necessity for this department to be a part of this community, and we have to have reserves."

Bowen said he wasn't sure why the previous administration canceled the program, but he hopes reviving it will provide open channels for the community to interact with the sheriff's office — and provide a way for people interested in law enforcement to become officers in the future.

Bowen said he hopes to add about 10 reserve deputies to the office through the program. He also said he's looking to hire more full-time staff in the future.

In August, Bowen made more news by penning a personal letter to Oregon Gov. Kate Brown regarding the recent statewide mask mandate for public schools. Bowen listed his reasons for concern and called for local control on decision making in a letter sent to Brown on Friday, Aug. 13, and posted on social media.

"I believe that as Americans, we have a right to choose," Bowen said. "This isn't a law and it hasn't been voted on by the people."

Bowen, a parent himself, advocated for parents making their own decisions on whether children in school should wear masks. In the letter, Bowen wrote that he hopes to open a dialogue and speak on behalf of Union County residents.

In the letter, Bowen said he believes the governor's mandate is unconstitutional and that he is against threatening the livelihoods of teachers, referring to the potential fines and loss of teaching licenses for teachers

and staff who do not enforce the mandate. This was a hot topic of debate at recent school board meetings in the area, with concerned parents and community members voicing their opposition.

FINLEY CREEK JANE DOE AND WALLA WALLA CONNECTION

ELGIN — Suzanne Timms was looking at a Facebook page that lists missing persons when she thought she saw someone familiar — herself.

"I said, 'Why am I there? I'm not a missing person,'" she said.

A moment later the Walla Walla resident became convinced that the picture, which she first saw in July, was not of herself but of her mother, Patty Otto, who has been missing since Sept. 1, 1976. What Timms saw was not a photograph but an image created in May by a forensic artist in Massachusetts, Anthony Redgrave, the operator of Redgrave Research Forensic Services. Redgrave was assisting a local group trying to identify a woman found in a shallow grave 10 miles northwest of Elgin in August 1978.

The group is led by Melinda Jederberg of La Grande.

Timms' mother, a Lewiston, Idaho, resident whom Timms last saw when she was 3 years old, may have been the person discovered in that shallow grave, which was near Finley Creek. She has since become known as the Finley Creek Jane Doe. Timms said the mystery involving the woman's identify is solved in her mind.

"I am certain she is my mother," she said.

Re-creating the face of what Timms believes is that of her mother took some creativity on Redgrave's part. Redgrave had no actual skull to work with, just the digital copies of the photos the Oregon State medical examiner took of the remains after hunters found her.

Timms is sure of Finley Creek Jane Doe's identity not only because of the forensic image but also the red pants and white blouse a medical examiner's report photo shows she was wearing.

"That was exactly what my mom had on the last time I saw her," Timms said.

A Sept. 8, 1976, story in the Lewiston-Morning Tribune also said that Otto was wearing red pants and a white blouse before she disappeared from Lewiston.

Other similarities include the light brown or blond hair the article described, the same color Timms' mom had. Size is another common characteristic. Finley Creek Jane Doe's estimated height was 5 feet, 2 inches to 5 feet, 4 inches, the same height as Timms' mother.

Timms now wants to get DNA to verify that Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother, which might prove challenging — Timms said Finley Creek Jane Doe was cremated in 1990 because her case had been closed by the state.

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Happy New Year!
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