

# THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

January 15, 2022

WEEKEND EDITION

\$1.50

EDUCATION

## Voters to decide on La Grande school bond

School board passes a resolution for the bond with a unanimous vote

By DICK MASON  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande School District will have a bond issue on the May primary ballot for the construction of a new academic and athletic center.

The La Grande School Board unanimously passed a resolution on Wednesday, Jan. 12, that will give voters a chance to approve or reject a \$4.845 million bond for the facility.

“I’m optimistic that we will be able to pass the bond. There are always a lot of improvements that can be made in school district facilities and this would go a long way toward helping us address our needs,” said Robin Maille, chair of the La Grande School Board.

Passage of the proposed \$4.845 million bond would not raise the total school taxes paid by property owners, district officials said, because of the recent refinancing of the 20-year \$31.5 million bond voters approved in 2014 for capital construction and maintenance.

Money from the bond would pay for the construction of a multi-use academic and athletic center next to the La Grande Middle School, where the Annex building is now. The new building would include two gyms and two classrooms that would be used for a variety of classes, including health, science and technology courses.

The building would be a pre-engineered metal structure that would be available for public use and would meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, which the current Annex building does not.

The aging Annex building, which has a gym and is about 10 feet north of La Grande Middle School, along with the school district’s adjacent maintenance, facilities and grounds structure — built in 1911 — would both be torn down if the bond is approved. The district’s maintenance, facilities and grounds services would likely be moved to a 10,500-square-foot structure

See, **Bond**/Page A5



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Riley Martin throws out hay to feed his cattle at the Martin family cattle ranch in North Powder on Monday, April 5, 2021. Martin, along with his father, Curtis Martin, are among several ranchers who are former skeptics of the Biden administration. That skepticism was eased by the Biden administration’s initiative, announced on Jan. 3, 2022, to increase competition in the meat processing industry.

## Meat of the matter

Ranchers optimistic about attention to lack of competition in meatpacking

By JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald

NORTH POWDER — Curtis Martin doesn’t expect a problem that was decades in the making to be solved by a single announcement from the White House, even one that comes with a billion-dollar pledge.

But Martin, a North Powder cattle rancher and past president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, is nonetheless encouraged by the Biden administration’s effort to increase competition in the meatpacking industry that is dominated by four corporations.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Martin said of the administration’s recent announcement that it would divert \$1 billion from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act to address problems in the meat processing system and try to encourage the construction of smaller, regional meat processing operations and, potentially, curb a recent rise in beef, pork and poultry prices at the retail level.

“It’s really a positive report, and I think the best thing ranchers can do is engage in it and help Tom Vilsack,” Martin said.

Vilsack is the U.S. Agriculture Secretary, and one of the federal officials who met with Biden recently in a virtual meeting to discuss the situation.

The resulting plan, which was announced on Jan. 3, has among its goals enforcing existing competition laws and making the machinations of the cattle markets more transparent.



Bennett



McElligott



Martin

*“It’s something we in the industry have been talking about for a long time, the need to have a more vibrant and competitive industry.”*

— Matt McElligott, Baker County cattle rancher

That new federal focus is welcome news for Martin, who has been concerned for many years about what he considers an unfair manipulation of beef markets by the four companies that control about 85% of the country’s cattle processing — Cargill, Tyson Foods, JBS and National Beef Packing.

While retail beef prices have risen by 21% over the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that trend hasn’t been reflected in what ranchers are receiving for their cattle, Martin said.

Tom Sharp, former Oregon Cattlemen’s president, addressed the rise in beef prices in an October 2021 interview with

the Pacific Northwest Ag Network when he was still president of the OCA.

“Those profits have largely gone solely to the major beef packing companies that dominate boxed beef production here in the United States,” Sharp said. “There’s really four multinational companies that produce 83% of the total boxed beef for retail consumption here in the United States.”

Martin said he believes one way to reduce the dominance those four companies have is to encourage more local and regional processing of beef.

That would also give ranchers more options for marketing their cattle, and boost consumer choice, potentially affording them the option of buying beef raised, and butchered, in the same county where they live.

Martin said there is a sufficient number of beef cattle in Eastern Oregon and Western Idaho to support processing plants with a capacity to handle 250 to 500 head per day.

But now, he said, “we have absolutely no competition in the Northwest. There’s no negotiation. You take what is given to you (in terms of prices).”

Martin pointed to Agri Beef’s construction of a beef processing plant in Jerome, Idaho. It’s expected to open by the end of 2022, and will have a capacity of about 500 head per day.

“That’s a great thing, but I still see the need for more competition,” Martin said.

See, **Cattle**/Page A5

## Flushed: La Grande ends wastewater testing

Short staff, skewed results end local COVID-19 testing program

By DAVIS CARBAUGH  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Wastewater testing has become a trusted method with the Oregon Health Authority, relying on waste samples in local communities

across the state to detect COVID-19 trends and the emergence of potential new strains.

While La Grande took part in the sampling during the early stages of the pandemic, a short staff and problematic pipe connections to rest stops near Interstate 84 led the city to discontinue sending samples.

“It became a time issue, especially with a small staff,” La Grande Sanitary Sewer and Wastewater

Superintendent Lyle Bridge said.

La Grande is still listed as a wastewater testing site on the OHA’s COVID-19 dashboard. More than 40 communities are included throughout Oregon, but just six cities in Eastern Oregon take part.

The state works with Oregon State University to monitor wastewater testing throughout communities in Oregon, reporting back

See, **Testing**/Page A5



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A danger sign hangs near the entrance to the La Grande Wastewater Lagoon Headworks on Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022. The treatment center stopped testing for COVID-19 in January of 2021 after experiencing difficulties related to a short staff and skewed testing results.

INDEX

Classified.....B2	Horoscope.....B4	Outdoors & Rec B1
Comics.....B5	Lottery.....A2	Sports.....A7
Crossword.....B2	Obituaries.....A3	State.....A6
Dear Abby.....B6	Opinion.....A4	Sudoku.....B5

WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight		Sunday
	27 LOW		39/27
	Mostly cloudy		Mostly cloudy

CONTACT US

541-963-3161  
Issue 6  
2 sections, 14 pages  
La Grande, Oregon  
Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page A4.

