

BOND

Continued from Page A1

the school would rent on Adams Avenue at La Grande Light Truck.

“We have arranged to get a lease,” La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said.

May deadline

The school district is facing a deadline because in December 2021 it was awarded a \$4 million Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching grant from the state for the building of the academic and athletic center.

The school district will receive the \$4 million grant only if voters approve the \$4.845 million bond. Voters would have to approve the bond in May because this was the election date specified by the school district in its application for the matching grant.

“The only way we will truly get it is if we pass the bond,” Mendoza said at the Jan. 12 school board meeting.

School board member Joe Justice said the magnitude of the Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching grant the school district would receive should not be overlooked by taxpayers.

“They will be getting almost two times what they paid for,” he said.

District survey

The board voted after earlier seeing the results of a survey conducted by the La Grande School District. At least 142 people participated in the survey and a number of the responses were encouraging for the school district.

For example, one ques-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

The Annex building and adjacent maintenance shop on the La Grande Middle School grounds show their age on Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021. In the May 2022 election, voters will decide on a bond levy that would replace the structures with a pre-engineered building to be used as an academic and athletic center.

tion asked if people would favor a bond measure if the Annex building would be replaced with one like the proposed academic and athletic center. More than 55% of the respondents said they would favor such a measure.

Another question asked the respondents if they would support a bond measure if they knew it would result in the space near the La Grande Middle School becoming safer because the district’s maintenance, facilities and grounds services building would be moved to another area.

Respondents were told this would improve safety by reducing traffic in the parking lot shared by La Grande Middle School and the district’s maintenance, facilities and grounds staff members. Fifty-five percent of the respondents said they would support such a measure.

Same taxes

Voter approval of the \$4.854 million bond would not raise the school district property tax rates in place now. The district’s \$31.5 million bond that voters

approved in 2014 was refinanced in 2021, dropping the rate taxpayers are now paying from \$1.93 to \$1.65 per \$1,000 of assessed property value beginning in July, the same time charges for the \$4.854 million bond levy would kick in.

The rate per \$1,000 of assessed property value for the \$4.854 million bond would be 28 cents, district officials said, meaning property owners would be spending on school district bond payments the same in July as what they are paying today. Mendoza pointed out taxpayers could improve school district facilities without paying more in taxes.

Justice noted that the length of time taxpayers will be paying off the district’s bond debt will not be longer if the bond passes. It is now 13 years and will remain so if the new bond is approved in May.

Justice said the chance La Grande School District voters will have before them in May is “a rare opportunity that I don’t think any of us thought we would ever have.”

ties we have for different markets for the cow-calf producer,” he said. “That gives producers more options and it gives consumers more options.”

Now, only about 5% of the beef cattle born in Oregon are actually butchered here, McElligott said.

Both he and Martin pointed out that building a processing plant is no small undertaking.

“To say it’s complex is an understatement for sure,” Martin said.

Complying with federal food safety rules and other regulations is neither simple nor inexpensive, and Martin said he hopes the Biden administration’s \$1 billion campaign will also include resources to help potential entrepreneurs negotiate the regulatory labyrinth.

Among other things, he advocates for the federal government to eliminate or streamline regulations that deter people from pursuing regional or local processing plants, and to assign a coordinator to work with prospective owners to help them with all aspects of the endeavor, including financing.

McElligott said a significant obstacle in the industry for ranchers who want to sell beef directly to local customers is that packaged products must be inspected by someone certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He said he can sell a half of beef “on the hoof” to a neighbor, but not a single pound of packaged hamburger unless it’s been inspected.

McElligott said he’s encouraged that a draft plan for spending the \$1 billion includes \$100 million to pay overtime to USDA-certified inspectors, which could expand independent processing markets.

Truth in beef labeling

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county near Unity, agrees with Martin and McElligott that the Biden administration’s announcement is promising.

“I think it’s a worthy undertaking,” Bennett said.

“Any time you have concentration it limits competition and the opportunity for innovation. This whole discussion is really crucial.”

Bennett said one of the most common topics that come up in his conversations with other ranchers is mandatory country of origin labeling.

Although some meat sold in the U.S., including chicken, is required to be labeled to show where the animal was raised, that’s not the case with beef.

Beef can be labeled as a product of the U.S. even if the cattle were raised in another country but were butchered in the U.S.

(Retailers can also include details about where animals were born and raised; they’re just not required to do so.)

Ranchers and industry groups have been pushing for beef, which has not been subject to mandatory country of origin labeling since 2016, to be reinserted into the labeling law along with chicken and other meats.

“American consumers want to know where their beef comes from,” Bennett said.

There has been some interest in Congress in reinstating mandatory labeling for beef. It ended after officials from Mexico and Canada vowed to impose tariffs on American beef if the mandatory labeling continued.

A group of U.S. senators introduced legislation in September 2021 calling for the U.S. Trade Representative and U.S. Department of Agriculture to come up with a plan to improve beef labeling transparency.

McElligott said country of origin labeling “really needs to be addressed.”

He pointed out that Americans’ demand for beef has continued to grow even with rising retail prices.

He considers this evidence that people recognize the value of beef.

“If you look at everything beef gives you from a nutritional standpoint, it’s still an economical part of your plate,” McElligott said.

TESTING

Continued from Page A1

levels of SARS-COV-2 throughout the state. The program was launched in September 2020.

Limited staff

La Grande began testing when OHA began the initiative, but ultimately ended the local testing at the end of January 2021. According to Bridge, the sanitary sewer and wastewater treatment center stopped sampling for COVID-19 due to two main reasons — short staff and skewed results.

The local wastewater testing facility employs four workers, in addition to Bridge. With a slim number of employees to cover a seven-day work week at the facility, a single absence has a large impact on day-to-day operations.

“Anytime someone has the sniffles they have to go home,” Bridge said.

Bridge stated that the process of sending off the samples took about an hour per day, but that the limited number of staff members played a major role.

“It really wasn’t that lengthy, but every week we’d have to mail out a sample,” he said.

Outside factors

Bridge also noted that the La Grande wastewater treatment center takes in waste from the rest stops along the interstate, which affected the results. Bridge and the staff had no sure way of knowing if the results indicated the virus among La Grande residents or travelers passing through town.

“I couldn’t get them to understand that we take wastewater from the rest areas, we have a direct pipeline into it,” he said. “Just because we had COVID hits or something happened, we could not identify where it was coming from.”

The sampling was never a requirement from the state, but La Grande volunteered to take part in the early stages of the pandemic. Health officials at OHA have used the test results to detect new strains of COVID-19. This was the case throughout 2021 when the delta variant emerged in the summer, and wastewater testing is expected to detect omicron spread in local communities, according to the state’s COVID-19 blog from Dec. 8.

“Wastewater surveillance complements individual-level surveillance testing,” Dr. Melissa Sutton, OHA’s medical director of viral pathogens, wrote in the Dec. 8 blog post. “It offers several advantages over individual-level sequencing — it is cost-effective and detects infections that may be asymptomatic or occur in people who haven’t been tested.”

The La Grande wastewater treatment center also utilizes ozone, an oxidant used to remove pollutants and microorganisms.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Melting snow reveals a sewer manhole cover on Sixth Street in La Grande on Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022.

Bridge noted that this treatment method was another factor skewing results when La Grande was operating as a COVID-19 wastewater treatment center.

“We use ozone in two of our lift stations to cut the grease down,” he said. “Ozone kills everything. There would have been nothing left in those two lift stations, and they treat half the town. At that point, I just thought it was a waste of time.”

Increasing viral loads

Baker and Pendleton are the nearest active COVID-19 wastewater testing centers, reporting regular updates since September and as late as Jan. 3 — OHA collects and releases wastewater sample results once per week.

Wastewater monitoring levels are measured on a scale of viral concentration, while OHA’s dashboard reflects recent trends from city to city. A rating of 6.25 and below is considered low, 6.25 to 7.25 is considered moderate, measurements from 7.25 to 8.25 are viewed as strong, and a value between 8.25 and 9.25 is considered very strong.

Pendleton’s latest report showed a viral concentration of 8.109, and its registered trend has been a sustained increase for the last two weeks. In Baker City, the samples have shown a plateau since late September, and the most recent report revealed viral concentration of 8.102. Ontario and Hermiston are the next closest testing sites, which both have shown sustained increases over the latest reports.

OHA is ranked No. 11 nationwide in proportion of all specimens sequences during the pandemic — the organization’s website indicated that OHA sequenced 7.1% of all molecular specimens. Testing through local cities in Oregon accounts for roughly 60% of the state’s population, according to OHA.

While communities throughout the state use the wastewater testing, La Grande’s wastewater treatment officials ultimately found it to be a logistical burden.

“They were asking us to, it wasn’t required,” Bridge said. “I did it for a few months and we knew (COVID-19) was going to be there, we just don’t know exactly where it’s coming from.”

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET VACCINATED.

COVID fatigue is the biggest threat to keeping Oregon schools open and kids safe this winter. But, getting vaccinated is just one of 11 health and safety measures we can take to protect what’s most important. Find out more at Oregon.gov/readyschools.



Oregon achieves... together!

