

THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

January 22, 2022

WEEKEND EDITION

\$1.50

Agency rules racism charges 'unconfirmed'

Investigation dismisses racist allegations against La Grande football team

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Oregon School Activities Association concluded its investigation into the alleged racist remarks made during a state playoff football game between La Grande and Gladstone, which determined that use of racial slurs throughout the game could not be confirmed.

OSAA released its findings in a statement on Tuesday, Jan. 11, which stated that the allegations made by Gladstone foot-



Andrew Cutler/The Observer, File

La Grande quarterback Logan Williams (center) follows running back Brody MacMillan during a OSAA 4A state playoff matchup against Gladstone at Community Stadium on Friday, Nov. 5, 2021. Gladstone players and coaches accused Tigers players of making racist remarks against opposing players during the game.

ball players against the La Grande team could not be verified. After a lengthy process involving a third-

party investigator, allegations of a solitary use of a racial slur during the game came back inconclusive.

Allegations regarding an official identifying a Gladstone coach by his ethnicity were confirmed — the investigation also confirmed that the official apologized to the coach during the game.

The OSAA Class 4A state playoff matchup between La Grande and Gladstone on Nov. 5, 2021, at Community Stadium in La Grande ended in turmoil, as the final minutes of the game resulted in a major dispute on the Gladstone sideline. Gladstone players and parents followed up with allegations of racism in the days after the 34-12 La Grande victory in the 4A first-round matchup.

The ensuing months involved a deep dive into the game by OSAA's third-party investigator,

interviews with players and staff from both schools and a joint statement between the La Grande and Gladstone School Districts.

"Although the evidence of a racial slur being used was ultimately inconclusive through the third-party investigation, the OSAA recognizes that students, coaches, and families were negatively impacted," OSAA Executive Director Peter Weber wrote in the statement. "The OSAA stands firm with the expectation that all involved in interscholastic activities can do so in an environment that is free from discrimination or harassment."

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza

See, **Football**/Page A5

'A major barrier'

Center for Human Development mental health director weighs in on Max Square concerns

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Recent concerns over homelessness in downtown La Grande have a number of entities looking for answers.

Mental health and homelessness often have a close-knit connection, prompting the Center for Human Development to take part in the ongoing discussion regarding the recent apprehension over disturbances in downtown La Grande and loitering at Max Square. As law enforcement faces certain legal barriers in focusing on downtown homelessness, CHD's mental health outreach efforts and approach to substance abuse could provide key services to assist in addressing these concerns.

"The Center for Human Development will continue to focus on addressing the mental health and substance use disorder needs of Union County including for those who are experiencing housing instability," CHD Mental Health Director Aaron Grigg said. "We acknowledge that while not all individuals experiencing housing instability have mental health or substance use challenges, we know that housing instability is a major barrier to stability in these areas."

Grigg noted that behavioral



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Max Square sits empty as snow melts in downtown La Grande on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The Center for Human Development says it will take part in the ongoing discussion regarding the recent apprehension over disturbances in downtown La Grande and loitering at Max Square.

health challenges and homelessness are not always a direct link, but that homeless individuals often experience mental health problems.

Behavioral health emphasis

The Center for Human Development does not currently provide direct housing resources, but the organization supplies a number

of services that can assist in providing a more stable living environment to those struggling with addiction and mental health issues — medication management, supported employment, mentoring, counseling, crisis assessments, substance use disorder treatment and outreach — and also partners with other local entities for emergency housing options related to

homelessness. Community Connection of Northeast Oregon is one organization providing direct housing services, such as a houseless resource fair that is set to take place at the Union County Senior Center from 2-5 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 26 — service providers will be present and supplies, food, resources and other items will be available.

"CHD hopes to find ways to provide more outreach to those in the community including those who are experiencing behavioral health challenges, both mental health and substance-use related," Grigg said. "This includes those who are without stable housing."

Grigg took part in a downtown meeting with local business owners on Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021, hosted by La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell, City Manager Robert Strope, Parks and Recreation Coordinator Stu Spence and Economic Development Director Timothy Bishop. Business owners voiced their concerns over recent accounts of criminal activity and issues with crowds of homeless individuals, while city officials gave their input and provided an in-depth analysis of what the city is doing to prevent disturbances downtown as well as roadblocks in the way.

Bell and Grigg interchanged ideas and answered questions from the public, emphasizing that CHD and the La Grande Police Department are working together to utilize local resources. Grigg also said at the meeting that building relationships with homeless people is an important approach for CHD, noting that building trust can often be crucial when someone is in need of resources.

Bell stated that oftentimes homeless individuals refuse services offered by law enforcement, but that persistent efforts to create connections goes a long way they find themselves in need of assistance.

See, **Barriers**/Page A5

Pandemic taking a toll on hospitals

Representative for hospital systems said staffing shortages compound problem

By FEDOR ZARKHIN
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon hospitals are facing a critical situation with coronavirus infections that may get worse in coming weeks, with particular challenges in overburdened emergency departments, the chief rep-

resentative for hospital systems said Thursday, Jan. 20.

"There is a war going on in our hospitals against this virus that isn't visible to the public," Becky Hultberg said.

Hultberg's comments came during a news conference organized by the Oregon Association of



Hultberg

Hospitals and Health Systems to address multiple challenges in the state's hospitals amid the omicron surge. The group lobbies for health care systems, and no one from hospitals, including workers on the front lines, spoke to reporters Jan. 20.

Coronavirus cases are hovering near all-time

highs, about four times higher than the peak of the summer delta wave. But the projected record-breaking hospital surge has yet to materialize statewide.

Approximately 980 people who tested positive for coronavirus are hospitalized, about 200 below the record, and far below the roughly 1,550 projected by month's end.

Oregon Health & Science University down-

graded its COVID-19 forecast Jan. 19 from 1,650 hospitalizations by Jan. 28 to 1,550 by Feb. 1. The forecast changed because Oregonians have taken measures to prevent spread, the university's analyst Peter Graven said in a statement.

"This update reflects the fact that Oregonians are flattening the sharp upward

See, **Hospitals**/Page A5

INDEX

ClassifiedB2	Horoscope.....B3	Opinion.....A4
Comics.....B5	Local.....A2	Outdoors.....B1
CrosswordB2	Lottery.....A2	Sports.....A6
Dear AbbyB6	Obituaries.....A3	Sudoku.....B5

WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight 21 LOW Partly cloudy		Sunday 38/23 Partly sunny
--	---	--	--

CONTACT US

541-963-3161
Issue 9
2 sections, 12 pages
La Grande, Oregon
Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page A4.

