

RENEWAL

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full \$250,000 that we had budgeted for that fiscal year, which is pretty typical for us in the past," Strope said. "We've generally had more requests for funding than we've had dollars available."

The Raul's Taqueria funds — \$21,000 out of a \$46,000 project cost — involved an expansion into the adjacent space that previously housed Looking Glass Books. The renovation increased Raul's capacity from roughly 30-40 customers to upward of 90, according to co-owner Arturo Escamilla.

"It's definitely increased business and we've been happy," Escamilla said.

Funds from the grant helped pay for the expansion, as well as renovation in the original restaurant space. The Adams Avenue business has been in operation since 2011, but can now cater to an expanded customer base with the addition of a functioning bar in the new space.

"Everyone seems to like it," Escamilla said. "We have had a lot of compliments from our regular customers, as well as getting new customers to come in."

The \$64,220 in Urban Renewal grant funding at The Local were used in renovating the former Texaco station on Adams Avenue into a coffee and ice cream shop with indoor and outdoor seating and a drive-thru window.

In the 2020-21 fiscal year, \$69,708 was used to assist Hines Meat Co. in adding coolers and equipment to meet USDA standards and increase offerings.

Another URA project in the fiscal year spent on renovating the Slate Building on Fir Street. The report indicated that \$34,700 was spent on the building, which includes housing units and street-level businesses. The renovations



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Gust Tsiatsos, owner of The Local in downtown La Grande, works on improvements to the coffee and ice cream cafe on Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2022.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Marisol Cisneros, an employee at The Local in downtown La Grande, prepares drinks for customers on Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2022.

involved improvements to HVAC systems, electrical systems and mechanical systems.

The final project of the

fiscal year improved the parking lot and landscaping at The Copy Club, a highly visible business at the busy intersection of Adams and

Island avenues.

According to Strope, the amount of requests for funding has trended down in recent years. The agency

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— Arturo Escamilla, co-owner of Raul's Taqueria, about the renovation

received more than 20 applications several years ago, but is currently handling two total projects in the current fiscal year. Strope noted that having fewer project requests than dollars available was a bit of an anomaly in comparison to typical fiscal years.

"The budget proposal that I'm looking at submitting for the coming fiscal year is going to maintain the call for projects at that higher budget amount in hopes that we'll have more projects," Strope said. "We are seeing increased interest in calls for projects, which

is promising."

The COVID-19 pandemic played a role in project costs and material availability, affecting how the agency went about its projects during the last fiscal year.

The agency's plan does not expire by a specific date, but rather has an allotted \$9,407,121 remaining indebtedness.

"It can change based on if we have major projects," Strope said. "We still have several years remaining that we can continue operating and do projects at the level we currently are."

ABUSE

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"That would be on the basis of the sufficiency of the evidence," Schaeffer said, though that would be for her appellate attorney to determine.

According to court records, the specifics of the 20 counts include payment of Wayne Lathrop's bar tab, the purchase and installation of new flooring in Betsy Lathrop's home in Lostine, the purchase of a Lexus, the purchase of a pickup for Betsy Lathrop's daughter and cash withdrawn and/or checks to Betsy Lathrop.

Lathrop also was accused of eight counts of identity theft — also a Class C felony — on various dates between October and December 2016 when she allegedly wrote checks using her father's identification, according to court records. She was acquitted on the identity theft charges.

Lathrop was convicted of the counts that accused her of purchasing and having installed new flooring and a washer and dryer at her Lostine home. She also was convicted of using her father's money to pay for expenses at her home and of withdrawing cash or writing checks on the elder Lathrop's bank account for her own use.

Class C felonies can be punished with up to five years in prison, Wallowa County District Attorney Rebecca Frolander said in September 2020. However, she said then, defendants rarely get the maximum sentence for a variety of rea-

sons. Christian Stringer, an elder abuse resource prosecutor who assisted as prosecuting attorney, said Feb. 14 that sentences on felony convictions are subject to the Oregon Sentencing Guideline Grid, which can make them even more complicated.

Kristina Edmunson, of the state Department of Justice, agreed on the use of the grid, saying it's unlikely Lathrop will get the maximum.

"It will likely be a probationary sentence with some local jail time possible," Edmunson said in a Feb. 14 email.

She said the court also may order restitution. Schaeffer said Lathrop may appeal any court-ordered restitution, but that wouldn't be decided until the sentence is handed down.

"The issue of restitution will likely be a contested issue," he said.

The lead prosecutor was Colin Benson, a senior assistant state attorney general. Lathrop's defense counsel was Jim Schaeffer, of La Grande. He was unavailable for comment Feb. 14 or to ask if Lathrop planned an appeal.

Frolander said Sept. 21, 2020, that her office referred the case to Victoria Roe, a senior assistant attorney general and elder abuse resource prosecutor with the Oregon Department of Justice. Frolander said the referral was because that is often the case in complex legal matters that require extensive investigations that local law enforcement has neither the time or expertise to handle.

DEERVID

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COVID-19 to the wildlife population in Oregon, and to hunters.

The veterinarian also noted that in the case of a disease such as COVID-19, that the virus would change due to absorbing DNA from the host.

"When a virus goes into a new host or a new species, it takes on some of the genetic material of that species or host and it changes the virus a bit," Gillin said.

Gillin also said that there's "not a lot of evidence at this point that it easily goes into other species of deer like blacktail deer, mule deer or elk."

"It may," he said, "but so far there's been no evidence that it causes disease in the deer, and there's no documented evidence that it comes back out of the deer, so it's acting like a zoonotic disease."

Deer aren't the only animals to have been known to suffer COVID-19 infections. Early in the pandemic, mink farms suffered tremendous losses as farms across the world culled their minks due to the virus running rampant. Denmark culled nearly 17 million minks in November, 2020, after it was found the virus had been transmitted from minks, mutated and was transmitted back to the human handlers, according to reports from



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

A group of young deer make their way across a field near Hunter Road in Summerville on Monday, Jan. 17, 2022.

NBC news.

But whether or not the virus will be seen in Oregon's deer population remains a mystery. Officials with the ODFW aren't actively testing or researching the virus in Oregon herds. But it's also unlikely infected deer from the Midwest would end up in Eastern Oregon, given that the longest recorded migration path of a white-tailed deer is less than 400 miles.

Still, Gillin said the state is keeping close watch on any new developments regarding COVID-19 in the wildlife population.

"There's quite a few really good researchers out there working on this

in the Midwest. They're putting a lot of resources into it and we're in contact with those individuals," Gillin said. "We

have our ear to ground on the topic, but we're not engaged in active research in Oregon because of the low risk."

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