

**PRODUCTION ISSUES**

Due to production issues, the Saturday, Feb. 19, Observer was printed missing two pages. The stories on this page did not run in their entirety and are being reprinted here.

# District offers look at possible future athletic-academic center

Artistic renderings of multi-use building released ahead of May vote on proposed bond

By **DICK MASON**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Less imagination is now needed to visualize a major addition proposed in the La Grande School District.

The La Grande School District has released artistic renderings of how the exterior and interior of a proposed new athletic and academic center on the grounds of La Grande Middle School would appear if voters approve a \$4.845 million bond in May for

its construction. The structure would replace the current Annex building, which was built more than eight decades ago, and the adjacent maintenance facility.

Joe Justice, a member of the bond's political action committee, Citizens for School Renovation, said the renderings will give its campaign a boost.

"People are visual," he said, noting that a "picture helps people understand" what is being proposed.

The new building, according to preliminary plans, would have two full-size gyms, locker rooms and two classrooms. The current Annex building has a single full-size gym as its primary feature, one used by middle school physical education classes plus other classes and the community.

"That gym has gotten a lot of use. A lot of kids have benefited from the facility. However, we need a more modern building for the future," Justice said, adding that the current building would not be torn down until the new one was built because it is used so much by the middle school.

Preliminary plans call for the new multi-use building to be near the middle school's greenhouses.

The proposed athletic and academic center has been a popular topic since Wednesday, Jan. 12, when the La Grande School Board unanimously passed a resolution giving voters a chance to approve or reject a bond for the facility in the May election.

Passage of the proposed bond would not raise the total school taxes paid by property owners,

Justice said, because of the recent refinancing of the 20-year \$31.5 million bond voters approved in 2014 for capital construction and maintenance.

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 is adjacent to the district's maintenance, facilities and grounds structure — built in 1911 — that would also be torn down if the bond is approved by voters. The district's maintenance, facilities and grounds services would be moved to a 10,500-square-foot structure the school district would rent on Adams Avenue at the

Adams Professional Plaza.

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 matching grant only if voters approve the new \$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 grant.

Joseph Waite, the La Grande School district's facilities manager, said if voters approve the bond, construction of the new multi-use building could start as early as the spring 2023.

# Campus food drive aims to combat local food insecurity

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon University community is doing its part to make sure those in need have food on the table.

The university is halfway into its month-long annual campus food drive, which is on pace to reach its donation goals. The food drive is aimed to not only help the local community but students and faculty on campus.

"It all goes back here," said Kate Gekeler, administrative program assistant in EOU's Office of Regional Outreach and Innovation. "We are one of the biggest places that goes out and really tries to rally the troops and build up that supply."

Gekeler, who is in her first year as the food drive's director, helped organize the event alongside eight regularly volunteering students and others looking to get involved on campus. The food drive, which has occurred for more than 20 consecutive years, began Thursday, Feb. 3, and concludes March 2.

Prior to Gekeler, Bill Grigsby served as the food drive's campus coordinator for roughly 15 years and helped pass the torch to the next wave of campus leadership and students. What started as an assignment in an upper-division anthropology and sociology class has evolved into a campus-wide effort.

"Our campus community has been very generous over the years," Grigsby said. "We always find building coordinators and our shipping department helps us get the food loaded and sent out to the local food banks in a timely manner. It has been a pleasure to be part of this cause and work with other like-minded folk."

**All hands on deck**

In this year's rendition of the campus food drive, the university set the goal of collecting 1,000 pounds of goods and \$5,000 in funds. According to Gekeler, the food drive at the halfway mark has reached 95% of the food goal and 68% of the monetary goal.

The month-long event is a part of a larger statewide month of giving initiative, which targets food insecurity in Oregon. Eastern partners closely with Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, which assists in distributing the food throughout Union



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**Organizers and volunteers with the Eastern Oregon University annual food drive pose for a group photo outside Loso Hall on Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. The group is nearing its goal of collecting 1,000 pounds of goods and \$5,000 in cash to donate to local food banks.**

County. The food drive also gives back to students and faculty at the university who could benefit.

A big emphasis for Gekeler has been student involvement, which she says has been instrumental in coming up with new ideas to collect donations.

"They are so hands-on," she said of the students. "When we were thinking about different ways to raise funds, they were involved in the planning and the building, and they are incredible."

Students have participated in the food drive in a number of ways, including gathering donations outside of Safeway every Friday.

Regan Braden, a junior at EOU, noted that asking for donations was a bit of an unusual experience at first, but seeing the community's involvement firsthand has been a promising experience. Braden played a big role in organizing the food drive's donation efforts.

"I think it shows how amazing this community is," Braden said. "As a person who was asking for donations and speaking with the people who were contributing, they were all very willing and very interested in it."

Gekeler and Braden noted that a dollar donation equates to four pounds of food that can be donated. Communicating this equation has helped them promote their efforts and also created a shift toward monetary donations during the food drive.

"A lot of people maybe don't have four pounds of food to easily donate in their pantry, but most people have a dollar or change in their car they can add to our donation fund," Gekeler said.

In addition to gathering donations on campus and in

La Grande, Eastern athletics programs are involved in the food drive — the event has become a competition to see who could raise more donations. At the basketball games on Feb. 12, the teams raised \$500 on raffle tickets. The football team gathered upward of 750 pounds of food, while the basketball teams gathered enough money for 780 pounds of food.

"It's just so amazing to see how we can all come together for a good cause," Braden said. "I think it really just shows the love and good in the community."

Student body president Alexa Jamison helped organize student efforts for the food drive, from garnering volunteers to fundraising events.

"Student involvement is an important element of this fundraiser because they directly benefit from its proceeds," she said. "A portion of the proceeds and donations goes to the county's food bank while a portion goes to EOU's food bank. On top of this direct benefit, the drive is a good opportunity to get EOU students connected to the community."

Coming from a background in a big city, she noted that the month-long fundraising effort has illuminated the sense of community in La Grande.

"I think that it shows how caring the EOU and La Grande communities are," Jamison said.

**Raising awareness**

Another on-campus initiative to raise funds for the food drive involves a direct deduction from employees' paychecks. Faculty members can choose an amount, large or small, to deduct from their compensation by the month or one time. The

system aligns with Community Connection and puts the donation directly to use in Union County.

Gekeler noted that the food drive accomplishes two important tasks, spotlighting an awareness of food insecurity in Union County and the importance of looking out for your neighbors.

"There are people hungry in our community and we're responsible for each other," she said. "I think in the last two years or so, people are really getting on board more than ever."

The food drive also takes place in the winter, which is considered a peak time for food insecurity. Gekeler, who has a background in social services, noted that limited job opportunities and colder weather during the winter months contribute to the trend.

"In the winter months, food insecurity gets significantly worse," Gekeler said. "Having the Union County Warming Station as another area I touch on, we see that people are struggling in the winter more than ever."

Since its establishment more than 20 years ago, the food drive has collected more than 180,000 pounds worth of food donations.

"I always focused on a theme of basic household food security, meaning some certainty of supply," Grigsby said. "As far as wealth in this country, there is no reason why anyone should be worried about their next meal, or actually even going hungry."

EOU food drive volunteers throughout the month will continue to collect donations outside of Safeway and Grocery Outlet on Fridays as well as organize on-campus collections. Donation pickups can be coordinated by emailing Gekeler at kegekeler@eou.edu, and students looking to get involved can contact Jamison at aspres@eou.edu. EOU's student-run emergency food bank can be reached at 541-786-3663.

"I think as employees of EOU, our job is to work with the students and help them," Gekeler said. "They're learning so many things from their professors that are going to prepare them for their careers. Efforts like this prepare them as human beings. We want to have that next generation of compassionate leaders who are going to go out and change the world and rally the troops."

# Oregon could be 'masks off' by March 20

By **GARY A. WARNER**  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The first day of spring could be a new beginning in the COVID-19 pandemic, with the likely lifting of indoor-mask mandates, a state report forecast on Thursday, Feb. 17.

The drop in daily hospitalizations from the omicron wave of the coronavirus is accelerating and is expected to fall below 400 per day by March 20, according to the latest forecast by Oregon Health & Science University.

Gov. Kate Brown said Feb. 7 that she would lift the state's indoor-mask mandate when hospitalizations fell below 400 or no later than March 31. At the time, the OHSU forecast put the hospitalization goal at the far end of the timeline.

But the incredibly rapid rise of the omicron variant to record numbers of cases is now being matched by its decline.

"Oregonians are doing the right thing, and it's paying off," said Dr. Peter Graven, OHSU's lead forecaster.

Brown had not yet commented on the new forecast as of Feb. 17. The forecast was released late in the afternoon.

The OHSU report cautioned Oregonians to not get ahead of current public health recommendations. The new forecast date is still more than a month away, not today.

"It will be important to keep it up if we're going to have a more manageable impact on our health system," Graven said.

Dropping safeguards early could slow the decline of omicron and push the end of the mask mandate closer to the March 31 date.

"This doesn't mean that we're out of the woods," Graven said. "The number of cases are still significantly higher than they have been for most of the pandemic, but the decline over the past week provides relief for hospitals operating under severe strain."

Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington said that he would order indoor-mask mandates dropped March 21, a day after Oregon's projected date. Inslee said his order would include schools.

New Mexico dropped indoor-mask mandates immediately on Feb. 17. California announced plans to move COVID-19 from pandemic to endemic status, meaning it would be handled as a major but manageable ongoing risk.

"We're going to live with this," California Gov. Gavin Newsom told the New York Times. "We're not in denial of the hell that has been the last two years. This is not like World War II, where we can have a ticker-tape parade and announce the end."

OHSU's forecast showed a strong trend toward significantly lower infections, hospitalizations and eventually, deaths.

OHSU said Oregon masking rates have remained among the highest in the nation, with surveys showing roughly 80% of residents have continued to cover up indoors.

Oregon was one of the last states to drop outdoor mask mandates when Brown lifted the restriction in November.

Graven said the forecast was starting to show state residents have begun to gather indoors again with people outside of their households.

"Those rates have begun to tick up," the OHSU statement that accompanied Thursday's forecast said.

Graven cited Denmark as an example of where omicron seemed on the way out, only to rebound because of the public getting ahead of pandemic policies.

"They gave up on public health measures at what they thought was the peak — and it turned out not to be the peak and they had even more people hospitalized," Graven said.

The highly contagious omicron variant was first confirmed in Oregon on Dec. 14.

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