

# THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

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## County election offices getting help

This is the first year ballots dropped in the mail by Election Day will be counted

By JULIA SHUMWAY  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — County election offices will soon get additional money to replace old election equipment and buy postal barcode scanners to comply with a recent law requiring that ballots dropped in the mail on Election Day be counted.

In 2021, Oregon legislators allocated \$2 million for Secretary of State Shemia Fagan to distribute to counties for election equipment, such as ballot tabulators and postmark scanners, or to add ballot drop boxes and upgrade video surveillance. That money went unspent, and this year election officials asked the Legislature to change what the money could be used for.

When the money was allocated last year, state election officials were under the impression that many counties needed new tabulation machines, said Molly Woon, senior adviser and strategic projects director in the secretary of state's office. They found that only one county needed such equipment, and started talking to the Oregon Association of County Clerks about better uses for the money.

A little more than half of the available money will be used for postal barcode scanners and other equipment, and Woon expects to announce grants to counties next week.

Dan Lonai, Umatilla County's director of administrative services and president of the Oregon Association of County Clerks, said the law went into effect Jan. 1, and counting ballots with

See, **Ballots/Page A6**



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Students at La Grande Middle School board school buses after class on Thursday, March 17, 2022. Local county and city resources are grappling with increased gas prices and how it impacts their services and budgets. The bus company's contract allows it to pass the cost on to the school district.

# GLOBAL FUEL CRISIS HITS HOME

Local entities adjust to increasing cost of fuel in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine

By DICK MASON and DAVIS CARBAUGH • The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Beyond humanitarian concerns, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is creating ominous clouds on the horizon for local cities, schools and public agencies.

The global rise in oil prices triggered by the invasion has made its way to local communities, with gas prices in Union County eclipsing \$4.50 per gallon. As drivers cross their fingers for the eventual lowering of prices, city and county agencies continue to grapple with the local impacts of high fuel prices.

"Like everywhere else in the world right now, fuel prices are a huge unknown," La Grande City Manager Robert Strope said.

In a move of solidarity with Ukraine, President Joe Biden announced earlier this month that the United States is banning Russian oil imports. The ripple effect has led to a sharp increase in local gas prices. The invasion sparked a rise in oil prices to record-high amounts, with barrels costing upward of \$130 last week.

As of March 16, gas prices at local stations averaged just over \$4.60 per gallon. According to the American Automobiles Association, Oregon's state-wide average cost per gallon is \$4.75, while the national average stands at \$4.31.

### Law enforcement

Local entities experiencing the effects of the increase in fuel prices include local law enforcement agencies, who utilize their vehicles for around-the-clock patrols.

"Like everyone else, operationally our fuel expenses are up," La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell said. "The good news



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

La Grande law enforcement service vehicles sit outside police headquarters on Thursday, March 17, 2022. Agencies report the skyrocketing price of fuel will impact law enforcement budgets but not services.

is that budget-wise we're able to continue operations as per normal."

According to Bell, the department, which has a total of 16 vehicles in its fleet, has requested a 24% increase in funds available specifically for fuel for the coming year's fiscal budget that begins on July 1. The requested increase is based on the department's spending throughout this fiscal year as well as projected spending throughout the remainder of the

period as gas prices continue to remain high.

"We have not used more fuel throughout this year," he said. "That is not a requested increase as a result of an anticipation that we are going to drive more miles or utilize more gallons of fuel, it is a direct result of the increase in costs."

Bell noted that while the police department traverses considerably less than Oregon State Police and the Union County Sheriff's Office, fuel consump-

tion is still high among idling vehicles. Bell stated that the La Grande Police Department does not have any plans to limit mileage or cut its services in any way amid the spike in fuel prices.

The Union County Sheriff's Office, which requires a greater number of miles traveled, is feeling the repercussion of increased gas prices across its fleet of roughly 25 vehicles.

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