

**FUEL**

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In preparation for the upcoming fiscal budget planning, the Union County Sheriff's Office is looking at adjustments that might need to be made.

"It's going to have a huge impact," Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen said. "We're prepared for it and planning on it. We should be OK. We still have lots of money in the budget as far as that goes, there's the rest of the fiscal year until July."

Bowen said the office will not make any changes to its patrols and services, but deputies are aware of the current financial burden of gas.

"I've asked the guys just to be conscious of it," he said. "It's one of those things that we have to do what we have to do."

**Road maintenance**

Union County Public Works Director Doug Wright said that the higher gas prices are not having an immediate influence on the work his department is doing but he worries that it could in the future.

"The real issue is will the prices stay up?" he said.

Wright said continued high prices could effect how much road repair and maintenance work the county can do. He noted that higher fuel costs are driving up the price of asphalt, which oil is a major component of.

This would mean that chip seal and patch repair work on Union County roads might have to be cut back, he said.

The city of La Grande Public Works department has not been struck hard yet by the recent price spike because it purchased its current supply of gas and diesel fuel before it hit, according to its director, Kyle Carpenter.

"We were very fortunate with our timing," he said.

Carpenter said his department's current supply of fuel will last another one to two months. The public works department, which purchases its fuel every two or three months, has a storage capacity of 10,000 gallons for gasoline and about 5,000 gallons for diesel.

Carpenter, like Wright, is also worried about the rising price of asphalt. He noted that the cost of oil used to make asphalt has jumped 50% in 2022.

"That could have an impact on how much road work we do in the coming year," Carpenter said. "We will be taking a very close look at our budgets."

According to Strope, La Grande Public Works will be seeking out a 10% increase in its budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

"We're right in the middle of department budget requests, so I'm seeing an increase in requested amounts related to that," Strope said. "I'm not sure where we're going to land on that, but we're absolutely planning on increasing the budget based on what we're seeing."

**School districts**

Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop, whose school district provides its own bus service, has a hard time believing what he is seeing.

"It is crazy," Hislop said about the skyrocketing cost of fuel.

Hislop said the district has been able to absorb the price spike in part



A La Grande Middle School student looks out from a bus after class on Thursday, March 17, 2022. The school district, city and county law enforcement agencies, public works and public transportation are all being impacted by the rising cost of gas.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

because when preparing its spending plan for 2021-2022 it budgeted its anticipated expenses on the high side and it projected revenue on the low side. Hislop said this has put the school district in a better position to absorb the cost increases.

The superintendent said he feels fortunate that there are just 50 days left in the school year, which will limit the effect of the price spike on busing costs.

"If this was happening in September, it would have a far bigger budget impact," he said.

The superintendent said there are no plans to curtail scheduled trips to athletic events including

track meets this spring. He said, though, that should a coach ask to send athletes to compete at an event like a track meet in Southern Oregon, the request would likely not be approved.

Mid Columbia Bus Company, which provides bus service to students in the La Grande, Cove, North Powder, Burnt River and Long Creek school districts, has not yet been affected by the recent price spike. The company made its last fuel purchase in mid-February, said Kathleen Maley, location manager for the Grande Ronde Transportation Branch of Mid Columbia Bus Company.

The fuel is stored in La

*"We are reminding them not to idle. If bus drivers arrive at a school 10 minutes early we do not want them to have engines idling during that time."*

— Chuck Moore, Mid Columbia Bus Company region vice president

Grande, and Maley said it will last through the middle of next week.

Chuck Moore, region vice president for Mid Columbia Bus Company, said that if gas prices do not go down by the middle of next week when fuel for the Grande Ronde Branch is purchased, the school districts in the branch will be charged more for the

bus service they are provided. He said the contracts Mid Columbia Bus Company has with the school districts allows for this when there is a significant increase in fuel prices.

Moore said Mid Columbia Bus Company is taking steps to boost how efficiently its buses are operating. For example, its bus drivers are being told

to avoid letting engines run when they are waiting for students at a school.

"We are reminding them not to idle," he said. "If bus drivers arrive at a school 10 minutes early we do not want them to have engines idling during that time."

**Public transit**

Kane Lester, Union County manager of Northeast Oregon Public Transit, which provides free public transportation throughout Union County, said there has not been a significant increase in ridership since the recent dramatic jump in gas prices. He anticipates the number of people using public transportation will go up, though, as the weather improves in the next week. He said Northeast Oregon Public Transit's ridership traditionally rises when the weather improves and gas prices are high.

Lester said that there are not any planned changes in the fixed route bus service Northeast Oregon Public Transit offers in La Grande and part of Island City. However, in its Connecting All Towns service, which provides free rides to individuals anywhere in Union County, attempts will be made to coordinate rides so there are fewer instances in which vehicles are driven with no passengers in them.

For example, if a person in Union calls for a ride to La Grande, the individual may be asked if they can be picked up at a different time when the Connecting All Towns vehicle is taking someone to Union.

"We will ask people how flexible they can be," Lester said.



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