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INSIDE

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City set to begin budget hearings

La Grande Budget Committee to review 2022-23 fiscal year budget

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Budget review has arrived for the city of La Grande. The La Grande Budget Committee is set to begin reviewing the proposed 2022-23 fiscal year budget, with budget hearings scheduled to start on Monday, May 16, and conclude on May 18. The La Grande overall city budget for 2022-23 is proposed at just over \$63 million, with a general fund of \$19.84 million. The budget hearings also cover the La Grande Urban Renewal Agency, whose general fund is requested at just over \$2.1 million.

Coming off the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city's proposed 2022-23 fiscal year budget takes into account the challenges presented by inflation, supply chain delays and heightened fuel prices. The city manager's top priorities for the 2022-23 fiscal year include American Rescue Plan Act funding, street and road infrastructure, housing, economic development, staffing, fiscal management, general fund capital improvements, wildland urban interface and Federal Emergency Management Agency maps and land use code amendments.



Stroppe

The La Grande City Council's annual retreat on Jan. 25 created the framework this year's budgetary priorities based on recommendations from the city's fiscal committee. The budget includes an emphasis on street and road infrastructure improvements, with some of the funding stemming from last year's budget and an increase in general fund revenues after an Urban Renewal Agency under levy of \$356,754. The proposed budget also outlines 113 full-time employees across the city's departments.

The Urban Renewal Agency budget includes a

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The Observer, File

Lindsey Meinhard, left, takes out prepared sack lunches from a fridge alongside head cook Kristi Ritchie in preparation for lunch period at La Grande High School on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2021. During the pandemic, school meals were free for all public school students in the United States because of the federal government's universal free meals program, which may change after the 2021-22 school year. Meals in the La Grande School District will continue to be free in 2022-23 regardless of what changes are made because it is part of the federal government's Community Eligibility Provision program.

No such thing as a free lunch?

Federal universal free lunch program may expire now that COVID-19 is subsiding

By **DICK MASON** • The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Fewer children in Union County may be eating lunches and breakfasts served at their public schools next fall.

There is a strong possibility the federal government's universal free lunch program, which allowed all public school students to eat school meals at no cost the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, will expire in June. This would mean many students attending Union County public schools will again be charged for school lunches and breakfasts.

"My guess is that this will cut back on the number of our students eating school lunches. We had a lot more

students eating lunches when they were free," said Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop.

The universal free lunch program was put in place in March 2020 to give school districts more flexibility and support as they tackled challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is now dramatically subsiding.

The funding needed for the continuation of the universal free meals program is not included in Congress'



The Observer, File

Austin Hawks, a paraeducator, helps students as they receive their free lunches at La Grande High School on Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. The universal free meals program, which the government provided during the pandemic, is not included in Congress' proposed 2022-23 federal budget.

proposed 2022-23 federal budget.

Free and reduced cost meals will remain for qualifying students

The good news is that funding is in the budget to allow students from low-income families to continue

receiving free lunches and breakfasts and for others from households with slightly higher incomes to receive reduced price meals.

Hislop is worried that not all students from low-income families will take

See, **Lunches/Page A7**

ODFW approves killing two wolves in NE Oregon

Kill permit issued April 29, allows Wallowa County producer to shoot two wolves from Chesnimnus Pack

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

JOSEPH — The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has issued a kill permit for up to two wolves from the Chesnimnus Pack in Wallowa County.

State wildlife biologists determined members of the pack were responsible for two confirmed attacks on

livestock between April 25 and 27 on a public grazing allotment north of Joseph, resulting in three dead calves.

ODFW can authorize lethal take of wolves that prey on livestock after two confirmed depredations in nine months. That is the current standard for "chronic depredation" in Eastern Oregon, where

wolves were removed from the state endangered species list in 2015.

Tom Birkmaier, who ranches along Crow Creek, said Tuesday, May 3, that he received the kill permit April 29. He is allowed to take two Chesnimnus Pack wolves in Dorrance Pasture or Trap Canyon Pasture, where the kills were confirmed.

The kill permit is good through May 24.

"I asked for the removal of the pack," Birkmaier said. "They issued me a kill permit for two."

He said his latest wolf

attacks were on April 30, when a cow took wolf bites to protect her calf.

"She saved her calf. She had two bite marks on her ribs," he said. "I walked that cow and her calf down 7 miles to my ranch and I'm now taking care of them."

He said his losses from the killed calves and the one injured April 30 — which he said likely won't be marketable — amounts to an estimated \$4,000.

Birkmaier said he's been working 20 hours a day over the previous eight or nine days to protect his cattle and use non-

lethal methods to deter the wolves.

Ranchers must also remove all carcasses, bone piles and other attractants and be using nonlethal deterrents such as range riders to qualify for lethal take of wolves.

In this case, ODFW reports the livestock producer has a history of using nonlethal deterrents to haze wolves in the area, including flashing lights, radios and hiring a range rider with funding provided by a nonprofit organization.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 46 LOW Showers around

Friday 57/42 Periods of rain

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