

NEWS IN BRIEF

Wyden to hold Wasco County online town hall May 2

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden has scheduled a live online town hall hosted by People's Town Hall for residents of Wasco County at 3:30 p.m. May 2. To watch, visit www.facebook.com/events/213222103510475.

Wyden will also host town halls in Morrow, Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties.

Wyden has postponed in-person town halls until there are clear-cut public health guidelines that a large open-to-all public meeting poses no unusual health risk for Oregonians. After the pandemic in March 2020 required Wyden's town halls to go virtual, he has continued to hold regional and county virtual town halls.

National Scenic Area discussed May 3

HOOD RIVER — The Hood River Board of Commissioners plan to discuss May 3 the pros and cons of adopting revisions to a management plan for the federal Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The Columbia River Gorge Commission, which oversees the federally designated area, adopted the changes in as required in the National Scenic Area Act.

March 16 the Gorge Commission sent a letter to the Hood River Board, requesting it incorporated the plan's changes into its zoning ordinances, giving the county 60 days to respond.

Hood River County for the past three years has included National Scenic Area provisions in its Zoning Ordinances and receives technical assistance funding to staff its activities. County staff recommend continuing Hood River County's support of the provisions, which will maintain its ability recommend changes to the plan.

Current revisions to the plan include added protection for streams and wetlands and sets new guidelines for farm stands, wineries, short-term rentals, recreation developments and dwellings, among others.

If Hood River County adopts the revisions, it has 270 days to incorporate the changes into its Zoning Ordinance.

Specific changes are listed in the May 3 Hood River Board of Commissioners packet.

Columbia Basin Care Foundation accepting scholarship applications thru May 15

THE DALLES — To grow and develop the medical community, the Columbia Basin Care Foundation is offering scholarships to local students pursuing careers in healthcare. Applications are due by May 15.

The \$2,500 scholarships support health-related studies in a variety of areas, such as nursing, food and nutrition, public health, social services, and more.

Scholarships are awarded in two categories: Residents of the Columbia River Gorge, and Employees of Columbia Basin Care.

Gorge residents

The \$2,500 scholarship encourages and supports individuals pursuing careers in healthcare fields. Applicants must live within the immediate Columbia Gorge region (Wasco, Hood River and Klickitat counties). Funds may be used for studies at any college, university, or trade school.

Employees

The \$2,500 scholarship encourages and supports employees working to further their education in order to better perform in their current position or to secure increased responsibility and advancement within the company. All employees are eligible to apply. Funds may be used for studies at any college, university, or trade school.

To apply

Scholarship applications are available on the Columbia Basin Care website, www.colbasin.com/foundation.

Completed applications must be received by May 15. Mail to Columbia Basin Care, 1015 Webber St., The Dalles, OR 97058, or email to DrewM@ColBasin.com. Awards will be announced in July 2021.

Glenwood Fire seeks levy adjustment

By Jacob Bertram
Columbia Gorge News

Klickitat County Fire District #7, also known as Glenwood Volunteer Fire Department, is running a levy lid lift proposal for the April 27 election this week which, if approved by a majority of Glenwood voters, would raise the maximum dollar amount levied per year by the district to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

The district is asking for the same levy lid lift as had been proposed in 2018, but since problems with the language invalidated the proposal, the district is running the ballot measure again this year to secure the funding, said Glenwood Fire Chief Brent Gimlin.

Gimlin said the proposal to raise the maximum levy amount comes from a need to update and maintain

fire emergency equipment, pointing to PPE and the district's ambulance, which is too small to carry certain equipment.

"As our community grows, we are receiving more medical and fire calls. With dryer than normal conditions, we have seen an increase in wildland fires in our area," Gimlin said.

Glenwood Fire Department volunteers held an open house last Sunday which allowed visitors to speak with Chief Gimlin and other volunteers, and to take a look at two new engines obtained at no cost through Clark County and Washington Department of Natural Resources.

Gimlin said the additional financial resources would also afford volunteers more time spent in training to perform their job safer and more effectively.

Help wanted: Service workers in the Gorge

By Gail Oberst
For Columbia Gorge News

HOOD RIVER — If COVID-19 restrictions continue to improve, this summer's tourist season in the Columbia Gorge promises to be better than last year — much better.

Now, area service industry employers are faced with a new worry. Will their workers return after last year's pandemic hiatus? Right now, it appears the answer is: Maybe.

This month Hood River county and port officials — both agencies hire summer help to do everything from pick up trash, clean bathrooms and staff special events — noted the lack of applicants for summer jobs. The worry was prompted by an unexpected sunny weekend flurry of visitors to port facilities in April, most of which were not yet opened. Hood River Port officials wondered if their official July 1 was an early enough start date, or if their seasonal worker budget, now at \$18,000 per month, was enough.

"Can we move that date to be sooner?" asked Port Commissioner Kristi Chapman, who noted that recent sunny weather was a wake-up call for already overwhelmed riverfront services. Waterfront Manager Daryl Stafford reported that the port, as of April 20, had no applicants and only two returning employees for at least 12 open summer positions.

"We can't open the restrooms until there's staff," Stafford said, although she said portable restrooms are an option. "This will be an ongoing problem for all businesses," she said of the possible lack of employees.

Service employee shortage far-reaching

Chapman and Stafford were not alone in their concerns. Gorge business owners who depend on visitors, hope to reopen their doors with a full crew. That hope, however, is looking bleak



Bartender Niki Piacente mixes a martini at Last Stop Saloon in downtown The Dalles. As service businesses in the Gorge look to reopen, managers are struggling to hire sufficient staff for the summer season, which is expected to be busier than normal due to pent up demand. Contributed photo by Hailey Gorbet

state-and-nationwide.

In Oregon, unemployment recovery has ticked up from 13 percent last year to 6 percent, according to State of Oregon Employment Department (OED) statistics. Two-thirds of the employment gains in March were leisure and hospitality jobs statewide, but the industry, which lost more than 100,000 jobs during the pandemic, still has far to go, according to Gail Krumenauer, state economist.

Local business owners agree.

"Hood River is a seasonal town. Our spring staff-up for restaurants is always a challenge. This year, however, is unlike any other. On top of the difficulties from COVID closures we face scarce options for capable hires. Our ability to recover, ultimately to survive this past year is at grave risk," Ben Stenn, owner

of Celilo Restaurant & Bar in Hood River, said in a recent Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association survey. ORLA conducted the survey to assess similar worker shortages statewide.

Aaron Baumhack, owner of Solstice Wood Fire Café in Hood River, said that many of his staff have left the hospitality business to take "9-to-5 jobs."

"If we don't have a cook, we don't have a restaurant," said Leslie VanSickly of The Dalles Country Club. Full Sail Brewery's restaurant in Hood River has curtailed its seating capacity and online orders due to a shortage of staff, according to Lisa Merkin, the pub's general manager.

While some local employers blame the slow return to work on extended unemployment benefits, statistics suggest other factors are in play, according to Dallas Fridley,

regional economist for the OED. Of more than 600 unemployment claims from hospitality workers last April in Hood River and Wasco counties, there now remain only 80 active claims in that sector. More likely, those workers have moved on to other industries, Fridley said. The pandemic has created other worries for returning workers: lack of childcare, lack of vaccinations, and concern for exposing susceptible family members at home. Better wages, flexible hours and better benefits are among ways employers can attract service industry workers, he said. Employers might also consider training inexperienced workers.

"Not a bunch of people are drawing claims and not going back to work. Claims are improving," Fridley said.

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