

Quick takes

Oil trains in Columbia Gorge

As long as the billionaires own the tried and true railroads in their portfolios you won't see many other viable ways of oil transportation any time soon.

— Nick Ritzer

Why is everyone trying to make this about the oil? This was just a train wreck and the cargo happened to be oil. The reality is, there are far worse things being hauled by rail than crude oil.

— Mike Navratil

Rail is probably the safest means of transportation. However, the towing cars should probably be double hull for oil transportation along with constant monitoring of the rails for any signs of deterioration or obstacles on the rails or anything.

— Davis Luong

Pendleton closes playgrounds

Very sad to see the loss of parks in Pendleton. I am curious though on what will be happening with Kiwanis Park. It has been closed off for a few months now.

— Danelle Springer

Yeah, those teeter totters and merry-go-rounds are super dangerous. Well, maybe not more dangerous than childhood obesity but apparently that's not a consideration.

— Josh Clark

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

Rules limit how city can spend money

Some people may ask: "Why is the city giving money to a developer to build roads, when they should be using that money to replace the playground equipment they are taking out of our neighborhood parks?"

It is no secret to many that the city of Pendleton entered into an agreement with a developer to build workforce housing on publicly owned land off Tutuilla Road, now known as Pendleton Heights. This project was a result of a housing study in 2011. We know that a lack of housing has contributed to a lack of economic development and growth in Pendleton.

Without exception, our manufacturing employers say that housing is a major obstacle to growing their business. A conclusion of the study was that in order to stimulate housing the city may have to find ways to offer incentives.

The city rezoned the property and found a developer. He agreed to construct 72 units as well as construct more than \$1.2 million in public infrastructure, required by ordinance. As an incentive, the city agreed to assist him by creating a local improvement district. An LID is a mechanism that is sometimes used to make public improvements.

The city borrows the funds to construct the infrastructure and property owners who front the street and benefit are obligated



ROBB CORBETT
Comment

to pay. During negotiations the point was made that half of a primary road is fronted by Olney Cemetery, property owned by the city. The city determined that it is was unfair to expect the developer to bear all of these costs and agreed to pay our part by contributing the property rather than cash.

Phase I is now completed with 32 units of new duplexes and a waiting list of people who want to move in. These homes are valued at roughly \$3.8 million. The expense to the city is the value of the property — \$175,000 — which represents our share of the road.

In April, the developer went to the planning commission and requested permission to change the remaining portion of his project — 40 additional units — to 100 apartments. This proposal was approved unanimously. The developer then came to the city council and explained that more infrastructure needed to be built and again asked for assistance. The city's "fair share" would be an estimated \$93,519 plus an additional \$83,132 that would extend the road across a parcel of land that is 100 percent owned by the city. This was approved by the council in the June 7 meeting.

Others ask: "Why is the city closing off playground equipment?"

The city was notified by our insurance provider, City County Insurance, that

given a recent Oregon Supreme Court ruling (Johnson v. Gibson), cities needed to take immediate action to identify hazards in our parks, and either fix them or close off the equipment until it can be repaired or removed. Previously, cities and their employees were protected from being sued as a result of faulty or hazardous conditions that may lead to injury.

While cities continue to have this protection, because of this court ruling its employees do not.

We have always kept safety as our primary focus.

However, sometimes it is a judgment call to take out equipment, knowing we don't have the resources to replace it. With this recent court finding, cities are being advised to more readily err on the side of safety, leading to closures of some playground equipment.

So back to our original question: Why would the city spend money to build a road rather than replace old playground equipment? The money we will use to pay our share of this road cannot be used for anything other than that. Government rules — in this case state rules — often limit how particular dollars are spent. We cannot collect money for new roads, water, or sewer lines and use it for anything other than that.

In order to stimulate housing, the city may have to find ways to offer incentives.

Robb Corbett is Pendleton city manager.



Keep ranchers on the land, and the land stays open

By ANDY RIEBER
Writers on the Range

It turns out that the men and women who graze cattle on America's public lands are largely a level-headed bunch. No one paying attention during the 41-day standoff at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon could have missed the deafening silence from about 22,000 public-lands ranchers when Bundy and Co. urged all of them to tear up their federal grazing permits and start demanding the "return" of public lands to "the people."

Absent any substantive evidence that ranchers are radicalized, opponents of public-land grazing are reprising the argument that ranchers are subsidized. This is a lesser evil, to be sure, but still a serious charge. Does the American taxpayer dole out dollars so ranchers can graze public lands on the cheap?

It is a fact that ranchers pay less for grass on public land. Currently, they pay \$2.11 per AUM, compared to about \$18.40 per AUM for private leases, where one "animal unit month" equals the forage necessary to graze a cow and calf or five sheep for one month.

Yet the complaint that public-lands ranchers get a sweetheart deal ignores the hidden costs of grazing on public lands. Economic studies concur that when other expenses are factored in — maintaining fencing, water development and invasive weed treatment, for example — the cost of grazing on public land is the same or possibly greater than grazing on private land.

Though federal grass itself may be cheaper, the expenses of running cattle

on public lands make it anything but a bargain.

Yet the federal grazing program in 2014 operated at a \$125 million shortfall. If taxpayers are annually sinking that kind of cash into it, what are they getting for their dollars?

The answer is far more than they realize. Consider, for example, that ranchers provide invaluable services like volunteer firefighting on public lands.

Fire is the single most destructive force on America's public rangelands: In 2015, range fires ravaged over 700,000 acres in the West and cost the Bureau of Land Management \$131 million for fire suppression and land restoration.

The total price tag for Idaho's 280,000 acre Soda Fire alone will top \$73.5 million over five years. Yet few people are aware that across the Great Basin, rancher-run Rangeland Fire Protection Associations mobilize as first responders to range fires, often extinguishing blazes hours before federal fire crews can arrive on site.

In Idaho alone, 146 rangeland protection firefighters fought 56 fires last year. Just by preventing one major fire, these ranchers provide taxpayers untold savings. Beyond that, you can't put a price on the value of the watersheds, wildlife, and vital habitat for sage grouse and other sensitive species that ranchers protect from wildfire.

And for those of us who would rather see ranches instead of condo developments that swallow up open spaces, a recent study ("The Disappearing West") funded by the left-leaning Washington, D.C., nonprofit Center for American Progress, found that between 2001 and 2011, a staggering 4,300 square

miles of natural areas in the West were lost to development. The study found that "development on private lands accounted for nearly three-fourths of all natural areas in the West that disappeared." If the study has a moral, it's this: To preserve the natural splendors of the West, we must find ways to keep undeveloped private land from residential, commercial and industrial development.

How? One way is to support public-lands ranching. The 250 million acres of federal grazing lands are integrally tied to the economic livelihood of individual ranches, which apart from their federal grazing allotments comprise 100 million acres of mostly natural, undeveloped private lands.

If these ranches are able to stay in business, that's 100 million acres of open space, habitat and ecosystems spared from the developer's bulldozers. Put a price tag on that, if you can.

Today, many environmental groups understand the critical role that ranchers play in the conservation of the West. The World Wildlife Fund's Sustainable Ranching Initiative, Audubon's Working Lands effort and The Nature Conservancy's numerous partnerships with ranchers all show that the custodianship of ranchers is highly valued. Teamwork and collaboration have come to define 21st century conservation on Western rangelands.

Grazing systems can and should be fine-tuned. But land, once developed, is lost forever. If American taxpayers value landscapes unbroken and unburned, they should tip their hats to the ranchers.

These hard-working men and women aren't on "welfare." They are fundamental to the welfare of America's wide-open West.

Andy Rieber is a contributor to Writers on the Range, an opinion service of High Country News. She is a writer in Oregon who covers ranching and rural America.

EOU faculty honored to host governor's commencement address

By Eastern Oregon University faculty

We the faculty of Eastern Oregon University want to thank Governor Kate Brown for taking the time to speak at EOU's 2016 commencement. This will be the first time a sitting governor has attended Eastern's graduation and we are honored that you will be part of our students' celebration.

One of the people sharing the podium with you will be the recipient of this year's Presidential Scholar Award, Cassie Jeffries. Cassie is a double major in History and Anthropology/Sociology whose research at Eastern has earned her numerous accolades. She plans to go on to graduate school in historical archaeology.

Cassie's award places her in distinguished company. Over the past sixteen years, an array of Eastern students—from Lostine to the Marianas Islands, from La Grande to Zimbabwe—have been recipients of the Presidential Scholar Award. We know, in most cases firsthand, how well their experiences at EOU have served them in their interesting and upward professional trajectories. We are proud of all of our graduates, and those newly minted will soon be pursuing paths nurtured by dreams and paved by sustained effort and determination.

As you may be aware, Eastern has faced and overcome many difficult challenges in recent history. Throughout this period we have weathered substantial cuts in faculty numbers and lost some academic programs. In fact some of our Presidential Scholars graduated from programs that are no longer offered. The joy of watching students graduate has been weighed against the sadness of losing cherished colleagues in these programs.

Yet the same force that embodies our students' spirit has remained constant throughout the many changes and leadership transitions: faculty's collective and unwavering commitment to train the region's next generation of thinkers and leaders, and through determined effort continue to provide the opportunities for students that change lives.

Our impressive list of Presidential Scholars is testament to EOU's kept promise and its future potential. We look forward to a productive collaboration between the Board of Trustees, Oregon State Legislature, EOU Administration, the Governor's Office and the State Higher Education Coordinating Commission that sustains this institution's commitment and capacity to serve Eastern Oregon and beyond with principle, transparency, mutual respect and thoughtful vision for at least another 87 years.

Signed by 65 faculty members of Eastern Oregon University. The address by Governor Kate Brown is June 11 at 10 a.m. in Quinn Coliseum in La Grande.

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The same force that embodies our students' spirit has remained constant throughout the many changes.

Be heard!

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