

# Sign of the times, LED replacing neon

By WILL DENNER  
East Oregonian

Perched above Pendleton near where Highway 11 meets Court Avenue, Hal's Hamburgers has drawn people in for a half century in part because of its neon sign.

A local landmark, the sign has stood in front of Hal's since it was built in 1952, catching the eyes of passersby, especially during the winter months when nights are darkest, owner Cindy Spiess said.

But over time the sign became more of a hassle than help, costing the restaurant money for repairs nearly every month.

"It was just becoming too costly for us to repair over and over," Spiess said.

Spiess sought the help of YESCO, a national sign installation and repair company, for a long overdue upgrade. YESCO replicated the sign's design using bendable light emitting diodes — better known as LED — tubes on the cursive "Hal's" and all caps "Hamburgers" lettering. The new-look LED has been up since early August.

Though neon signs still mark downtown Pendleton businesses, such as Rainbow Cafe, Prodigal Son Brewery, Hamley's and soon-to-be-open Oregon Grain Growers, places such as Hal's Hamburgers are altering that traditional aesthetic. Business owners and lighting experts are split on whether LED successfully replicates neon, but most agree that LED requires less expertise to install and maintain.

In the early 1990s, Japanese engineers Isamu Akasaki, Hiroshi Amano and Shuji Nakamura successfully created blue LEDs. Along with red and green diodes, their creation paved the way for white and brighter LED lights.

"The biggest problem we've had with LEDs is that they're too bright," said Jeff Young, YESCO's chief marketing officer. "The great thing is that you can dim them. You can't do that with neon."

Young has also seen an increasing number of businesses opt for LED screens, which give them the freedom to engage customers with customizable messages.

Contrary to popular belief, neon and LED actually consume similar amounts of energy. Neon transformers run on high voltage, meaning they use fewer amps to do the same amount of work, according to Young.

For the older signs such as Hal's, however, neon wiring



The old neon sign at Hal's Hamburgers in Pendleton was replaced by a new LED sign at the beginning of August.



The sign at Prodigal Son Brewery uses traditional neon gas for illumination.

systems are susceptible to frequent breakdowns. Spiess said they have wanted to replace the sign for years, but held off because they couldn't find a company that was able to bend LED tubes and fit the letters.

"Technology finally caught up with us," she said.

The project cost \$14,000, Spiess said, though Hal's wasn't eligible for grant money because it is located outside of Pendleton's downtown district. When Spiess drives by the restaurant now, she said the sign appears brighter than it did before the

renovation.

With the correct setup and upkeep, however, neon signs remain the preferred choice for many businesses interested in a classic look. Ed Miltenberger, owner of Pendleton-based SignMen, said he's serviced the Rainbow Cafe sign, located at 209 S. Main St., less than 10 times in his 37 years of work and has yet to repair the Prodigal Son sign at 230 S.E. Court Ave. since installing it in 2010.

Prodigal Son owner Tim Guenther said they didn't consider many other sign options besides neon. He

remembers seeing pictures of 1940s downtown Pendleton draped in neon that reminded him of the Las Vegas strip.

Since Prodigal Son is a few blocks from Main Street, Guenther said he wants people to know there's more businesses down the street. The sign has helped accomplish that goal.

"We ask on comment cards, 'how did you hear about us?'" Guenther said. "Tons of people say, 'saw the sign.'"

Miltenberger believes neon signs offer a "traditional look that's hard to come by." He said LED signs lack the sharpness of neon, particularly the lettering. Still, Miltenberger, who estimates he's sold \$90,000 worth of LED signs in the last four years, thinks the industry is trending towards the newer technology.

"(LED) is a good light — don't get me wrong — and it will have its run," he said.

**BRIEFLY**

**Old West proposes merger**

Old West Federal Credit Union could add a significant number of members and branches through a merger with Union Wallowa Baker Federal Credit Union.

Union Wallowa Baker Board President Carol Kroll said the La Grande-based bank sought a merger with Old West because it would keep ownership local.

"Being able to offer the products and services that members want while maintaining a local, personalized presence is an expensive proposition for any credit union and combining our assets with Old West will help ensure that a local, accountable cooperative is here to serve our members," Kroll said in a statement.

The merger could be finalized by the end of the year pending regulatory and member approval.

The combined credit union would have assets of more than \$160 million and serve members in eight Eastern Oregon counties.

Old West is headquartered in John Day and has branches in Pendleton, Hermiston, Baker City and Prairie City.

**Heppner luncheon provides update**

HEPPNER — An all entities report is planned during the upcoming Heppner Chamber of Commerce meeting.

The no-host luncheon is Thursday, Sept. 1 at noon at Heppner City Hall, 111 N. Main St. Bucknum's will provide chicken fajita salad, breadsticks and dessert. The cost is \$10.

To ensure there's enough food, those planning to attend are asked to RSVP by Tuesday, Aug. 30. For more information or to make a reservation, contact heppnerchamber@centurytel.net or 541-676-5536.

**Business luncheon focuses on civilian response**

HERMISTON — A pair of upcoming events will provide the public with information about safety and law enforcement.

The Hermiston Chamber of Commerce B2B Luncheon will feature a program on Civilian Active Shooter Response Overview and Community Policing. The event is Tuesday at 11:45 a.m. at the Hermiston Conference Center, 415 S. Highway 395. The meal, provided by Simply Catering, is \$10 for members and \$13 for non-members.

In addition, Coffee with Terry Rowan is Thursday at 8:30 a.m. at the conference center. There is no charge. People are welcome to sit down for a cup of joe and talk with the Umatilla County sheriff.

For more information or to RSVP for the luncheon, contact 541-567-6151 or kelly@hermistonchamber.com.

**Tax on feminine hygiene products repealed in Illinois**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner has signed a law eliminating sales taxes on feminine hygiene products.

The Republican signed the law Friday repealing so-called "pink taxes" on items such as tampons and menstrual pads. The change takes effect Jan. 1.

The Brennan Center for Justice says Illinois is the third state this year to eliminate the taxes after New York and Connecticut. California's State Assembly is close to sending a plan to the governor, and 11 other states proposed legislation this year.

Illinois officials did not respond when asked how much it will cost in annual revenue.

## BANK: 24-mile round trip to cash a check

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letter, the part informing customers that employees at Milton-Freewater and Pendleton branches would be honored to assist Athena customers. Hansell read the next line aloud, deadpan.

"I hope you will come in and meet our friendly staff at one of these locations just up the street from you," Hansell intoned, increasing his volume on the last six words of the sentence.

The room exploded in a group guffaw at the notion that a 24-mile round trip is just up the street.

Hansell said he had called the division manager in Bend to get details about the closure. The branch isn't losing money, Hansell said he was told, but has low potential growth and isn't meeting financial goals. He said the branch is the only one in Oregon on the chopping block and that there was no attempt by U.S. Bank to market the branch to another bank.

U.S. Bank wouldn't confirm or deny any of that on the record. Spokeswoman Jennifer Fredrick gave only a general reason for closing branches.

"We review our branch locations on a regular basis to make sure we are meeting the needs of customers in the

**"If you're abandoning my community, my account isn't going to stay with U.S. Bank."**

— Sen. Bill Hansell, Athena resident

communities we serve," Fredrick wrote in an email to the *East Oregonian*. "Customer preferences and traffic patterns change, and we prepare for those changes by adding, relocating or consolidating locations to maximize reach and convenience."

At the town hall, Hansell's legislative director Porsinger explained a possible avenue of appeal. The regulatory agency that oversees national banks — the federal Office of the Comptroller of the Currency — cannot stop a bank closure, but it may help communities find alternative services.

"We have an option to appeal this to them," Porsinger said. "The appeal process allows members of the community to voice their concerns about what will happen to the community if the bank leaves — in this case the only bank in town."

Porsinger said the OCC insures fair and equal access to financial services outlined in the Community Reinvestment Act.

from community members.

Their concern comes in many forms. Some worry that the bank's decision follows on the heels of the shuttering of the PGG hardware store — an empty 9,000-square-foot storefront located kitty-corner from the bank — and could trigger a domino effect. Others simply don't like traveling so far.

"It's so nice to be able to walk in and get my check cashed instead of driving to Milton-Freewater or Pendleton," said Ellame Kennedy. "Half your day is gone."

More than a few in attendance said the closure might be an opportunity to replace the national financial institution with a local bank. If that happens, most in attendance said by show of hands they would close their U.S. Bank accounts and support the new institution. Hansell was among them.

"If you're abandoning my community," he said, "my account isn't going to stay with U.S. Bank."

Contact Kathy Aney at [kaney@eastoregonian.com](mailto:kaney@eastoregonian.com) or call 541-966-0810.



## Annual Clearance event



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