

Layoffs: Oregon senators respond with letter to Hinkle closure

Continued from Page A1

195 jobs exceeds \$9.7 million a year.

Using the common economic development trope that every \$1 in the local economy goes through seven trades, the payroll from the 195 jobs multiplies to more than \$68 million.

According to data in the city of Hermiston's annual financial report issued in June 2018, Union Pacific was the city's fifth-largest employer at roughly 500 employees. At the top of the list was Con-Agra Foods, at 1,600 employees, followed by the Wal-Mart Distribution Center, Good Shepherd Medical Center and Hermiston School District.

Assistant city manager Mark Morgan said in an email that Hermiston is working on a "small industrial lot project" with the Port of Umatilla to bring about 50 acres of industrial parcels (one of 5 acres in size) up to "shovel-ready" status. The project will extend roads and utilities to the parcels and connect the area on the southern edge of town to Highway 395.

A summary of the project lists the need for economic diversity as a driver behind the project, noting that in the past when large employers such as Hermis-

ton Foods have closed it has been a "major blow" to the economy. The city hopes bringing in more options for employment at smaller operations will help.

"[Tuesday's] announcement by UP only underscores why the Mayor and Council are committed to diversifying our employment base through this project," Morgan said.

Union Pacific delivers freight to the Port of Morrow in Boardman. Ryan Neal, the port's executive director, said he did not anticipate the port would sustain adverse effects from the cuts at Hinkle. But like others, he called the losses devastating for the area, particular because they are family-wage jobs.

"We don't ever want to see those go away," he said.

In response to Union Pacific's announcement, Neal said, the port issued one of its own showing a total of 62 job openings at businesses operating at the port, including a physical security manager for Amazon, maintenance mechanics for Pacific Ethanol Inc. and Lamb Weston and forklift operators at Lamb Weston and Boardman Foods Inc.

Union Pacific started cutting jobs at Hinkle in October 2018. Wyden and Merkley stated in the let-



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A string of rail cars sits on a rail line west of the Hinkle Rail Yard on Tuesday. Union Pacific filed notice with the state that it will lay off up to 195 employees at the rail yard near Hermiston.

ter those layoffs hurt agriculture producers and other shippers, who reported "difficulties reaching Union Pacific staff to resolve problems, or even reach a customer service representative."

Union Pacific's "failure to work with Oregon shippers," the senators continued, could create more congestion on freeways and undermine the state's transportation infrastructure. And the closure of the Hinkle mechanical locomotive shop would reduce

oversight inspection of trains carrying hazardous loads through rural Oregon communities.

To better understand the effects of eliminating the jobs, Wyden and Merkley asked Union Pacific for the following:

- The numbers of workers of each classification the company laid off or forced to relocate by Oregon county and facility, including car and locomotive repair and signal and track work.

- The number of these

workers Union Pacific hired in the last three years.

•The investments Union Pacific made in Oregon facilities in the last seven years, including any at Hinkle.

The senators asked Union Pacific if the Federal Rail Administration reviewed workers' safety concerns at Hinkle and other Oregon facilities since the company started layoffs in October. The *East Oregonian* reported on those safety concerns in late March: https://www.eastoregonian.com/news/local/union-pacific-layoffs-at-hinkle-yard-in-hermiston-draw-safety/article_3e56eb10-5197-11e9-93ad-07e07f8e8a36.html

Wyden and Merkley also warned Union Pacific about its consolidation efforts: "As UPRR adopts the Precision Schedule Railroad model to reduce operating ratios, cutting rural workforce and facilities, there are many cautionary tales where this strategy has not performed well over the long term."

Happy: Sunridge thinks outside the box to employ man with intellectual disability

Continued from Page A1

"He came and said, 'This is the right person. He can do the job,'" Williams recalled.

Williams said he doesn't regret the hiring decision, calling it a classic win-win. Virgil gets the fulfillment of working hard and earning a paycheck. Sunridge gets a clean school and the satisfaction of helping a man realize his potential.

Earlier this month, Williams and the district's director of business services, Michelle Jones, traveled to Wilsonville to accept an award from The Arc Oregon, which supports and advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The award goes to a business or individual employing a person with an intellectual disability for at least a year and elevating the person's independence, integration and participation in the community. Virgil nominated the school.

Williams, who called the award "humbling," said Virgil has more than proved he can do the job. The principal said he can set a clock by the custodian who walks by his office to punch in each day. Often they chat

about the Blazers. The contact inevitably leaves Williams smiling.

"Every bone in his body is happy," the principal said. "He's the nicest man."

Virgil said he likes custodial work and the predictability of each day's routine.

"It's a good job," he said. "I work hard. The kids are really friendly. The principal likes me."

Lebsock, the facilities manager, said the other three Sunridge custodians deserve some kudos, too, for showing Virgil the ropes and stepping in occasionally when he gets overwhelmed.

"It's a real team up there," Lebsock said. "They deserve credit for helping in Eric's success."

Virgil's mom gets emotional when she thinks about her son's journey.

"It took a long time for him to get community employment," said Jan Schroth. "I had actually kind of given up on it because he needed so much support."

She worried that if her son got a job, he might not be successful and she wondered how that could affect him.

She gets a little teary



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Custodian Eric Virgil looks over his checklist under the watchful eye of his job coach, Chris Humphrey, while working at Sunridge Middle School on Tuesday in Pendleton.

thinking of how well it has worked out.

"I'm really grateful to the Pendleton School District," Schroth said. "They are a good example to the community that this can work."

Paula Boga, executive director of the Arc Oregon, called Sunridge a leader.

"There are a lot of employers around the state who are not willing to do what they did," Bogle said.

"Their willingness to

make that work is good for others to see."

Having a paycheck has made Virgil's life richer. He loves to travel with his mother and stepfather, Bob Schroth.

Recently, the family

vacationed in the Caribbean.

"He pays his way," Jan Schroth said. "We let him pick the place."

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Health: Umatilla County gets mixed bill of health from researchers

Continued from Page A1

nosed or treated for anxiety or emotional problems, but they seemed especially averse to talking with a mental health professional to help them with those issues.

Only 1% of adults said they talked to a professional for either dealing with stress or getting emotional and social support.

In terms of dealing with stress, "talking with a professional" is below prayer/meditation, sleeping, alcohol consumption, marijuana use and "taking it out on others," and is on par with "gambling/lottery."

The data suggests that many Umatilla County residents have dealt with trauma in their pasts.

Twenty percent of adults said they had four or more adverse childhood experi-

ences in their lifetime, but that number spikes to 50% for adults under 30 and 52 percent for people earning \$25,000 or less.

Health disparity

At her presentation, Elliott said researchers were thrilled that 36.6% of respondents in the survey identified as being of "Hispanic origin," which is higher than the percentage counted in the U.S. census.

But researchers still didn't have the raw number of survey takers they needed to feel comfortable with the data, so they took it a step further.

Instead of being administered through the mail like the standard adult survey, the "Hispanic Adult Convenience Survey" was distributed at schools, medical centers, laundromats, workplaces,

and even door-to-door outreach.

The results show that, more often than not, Latinos in Umatilla County had poorer health outcomes than the general population.

While the rate of annual doctor's checkups and emergency room visits were in line with the county as a whole, 56% of Latino adults did not have health care coverage, eight times the rate of the general population.

In some of the most glaring disparities, Latinos were less likely to rate their health as excellent or good, receive dental care, or get a clinical breast exam.

They were more likely to report being diagnosed with diabetes, being forced to have sexual intercourse, or threatened or abused in the past year.

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