

WURA's Eagle Cap Train refuses to be derailed

Despite lack of federal funding, excursion train chugs on

By **AMANDA WEISBROD**
La Grande Observer

ELGIN — The Eagle Cap Excursion Train is running on a reduced schedule for the 2019 season due to a lack of funding from the federal government.

This year, The Wallowa Union Railroad Authority was expecting \$95,000 from The Railroad Track Maintenance Tax Credit, but did not receive it. Otherwise known as the 45G Tax Credit, this money helps short lines and general railroads across the country with maintenance costs through a federal income tax credit.

The lack of this funding has put a significant financial strain on WURA and the non-profit Friends of the Joseph Branch, which runs the Eagle Cap Excursion Train in tandem, but representatives from both organizations said they are dedicated to keeping the train running this season.

"We're working hard to keep this going, and any way we can try to find new monies is going to help," said Matt

Scarfo, Union County Commissioner and WURA general manager. "We do not want to see this go away at all."

"The Friends felt that canceling this (season) would really impact our business next year and the year after," said Ed Spaulding, Friends of the Joseph Branch president. "We really think we should continue to run as much as we can to keep the business building up."

The WURA board, composed of nine individuals, approved the full 2019 schedule of 18 runs in January but had to scale that number down to six after realizing the tax credit would not come through in time. WURA gave the Friends of the Joseph Branch the option to choose the six dates they thought would sell the most tickets.

Including the Mother's Day Brunch train, which ran on May 12, the Friends chose the following excursions to remain on the adjusted schedule:

- June 15, Gold Rush Bandits Robbery
- June 16, Father's Day
- June 29, I Love America! Veterans' Train
- July 27, Finding Big Foot
- Sept. 14, Fall Foliage Photo Run



EOMG file photo

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The runs on June 1 and Aug. 3 have been cancelled.

The Friends hope to add eight runs back to this list, but will first need to get approval from the WURA board at its next meeting on June 11.

"We're trying to work out exactly who's going to pay for what and how many trains can

run," Spaulding said.

While WURA covers costs associated with maintaining the track and right-of-way, the Friends are responsible for the operational and business sides of the Eagle Cap Excursion Train. Brock Eckstein, WURA manager and city of Elgin administrator, said it's been some time since the two groups have solidified an agreement on exactly who is paying for what, so he's working to create a budget to define the details.

"I'm trying to set up a good operational agreement that both sides will be OK with that explains each others' duties," Eckstein said, adding the discussion between WURA and the Friends on financial responsibilities is ongoing. "There has been quite a bit of confusion, so I'm going to work to be the conduit of information between the two organizations."

Eckstein said he's crafting the budget with the frame of mind that the federal govern-

ment will not retroactively distribute the 2019 tax credit, although Spaulding said he is hopeful it will.

The reality is it is unclear whether or not WURA will receive the 2019 tax credit retroactively, and this decision won't be made by Congress until the fall at least, but federal legislation is in the works to extend tax credits, according to the policy team of Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon.

Senators Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, and Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, have introduced a bill to extend tax credit items, including the 45G Tax Credit, for two years, and in January, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, proposed a bill to extend the tax credit for railroad track maintenance permanently.

Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts said without the tax credit, the excursion train's future is uncertain.

"We can either have limited runs and try to keep it out there in the focus, or we

could shut it down, and shutting it down doesn't seem like the right thing to do," Roberts said. "The only way we could allow the excursion train to operate is because of the tax credits. Without the tax credits, we wouldn't be running it at all because we wouldn't have any money."

Scarfo, however, said he is reluctant to continue to rely on federal funding for the excursion train and hopes to explore other financial avenues.

"After this season is over and we see what happens with the federal government's decision, we're going to try to break this all down and keep this train moving and hopefully self-sustain funding without having to rely on whether or not the federal government is going to pass the 45G Tax Credit every year," Scarfo said. "That's my goal, and for me, I don't want to see this going anywhere."

The impact of the Eagle Cap Excursion Train ceasing to run would spread throughout Northeast Oregon, according to Spaulding, because of the amount of people who travel to ride the train and subsequently spend money in Union and Wallowa counties, as well as the local businesses who cater the rides.

"This money gets circulated at various businesses around the area and the more things you have here the better because we don't have the big industries that used to be here, especially in Wallowa County," he said. "Tourism is kind of their thing these days."

Despite their situation, WURA and the Friends of the Joseph Branch are determined to come out of this struggle stronger than ever.

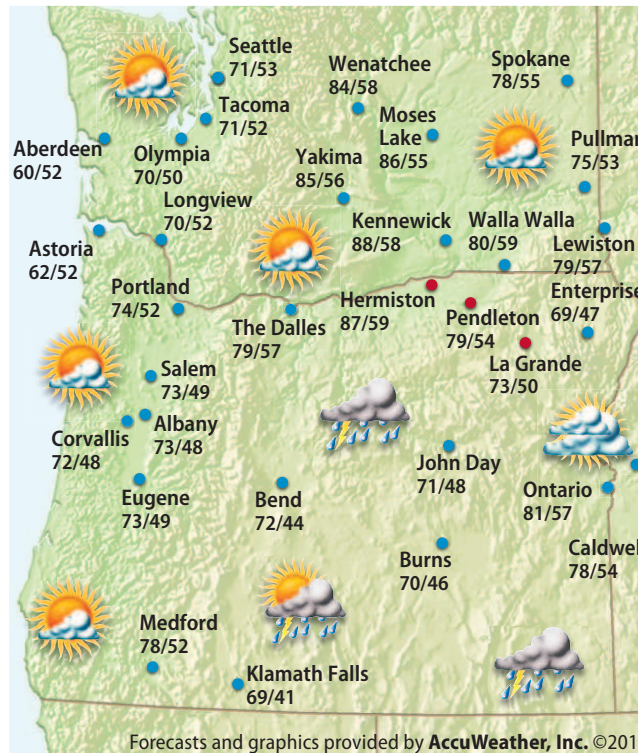
"My feelings on this situation are it's moving in a very positive direction," Eckstein said. "Things are moving forward, and even though we're missing grant money this year, I think both organizations have a great chance to succeed."

Forecast for Pendleton Area

| TODAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| | | | | |
| Partly sunny and pleasant | Pleasant with periods of sun | Pleasant with clouds and sun | Partly sunny | Partly sunny |
| PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST | | | | |
| 79° 54° | 79° 54° | 79° 54° | 82° 56° | 85° 57° |
| HERMISTON TEMPERATURE FORECAST | | | | |
| 87° 59° | 86° 59° | 86° 59° | 90° 61° | 93° 61° |

OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.

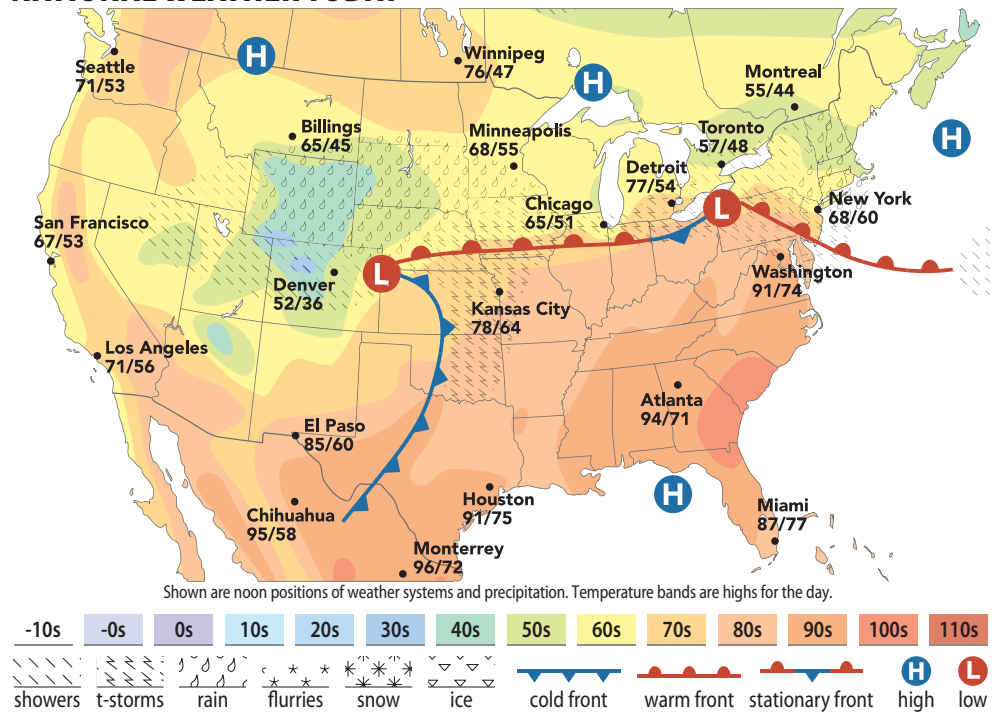


NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 104° in Jacksonville, Fla. Low 23° in Lodgepole, Calif.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Huntington fire started after threat by suspect

Blaze destroys three businesses in downtown district

The Baker City Herald

The shell of a block of historic buildings in Huntington was demolished Friday after a fire swept through three businesses in the downtown business district Thursday night and Friday morning.

Gone is the structure built in 1890 that housed the well-known Howell's Cafe and Streamliner Lounge and Grady's Tavern.

A press release from the Baker County Sheriff's Office stated that a deputy and an Oregon State Police trooper initially responded to what was reported as a "disturbance" at Huntington about 10:45 p.m. Thursday.

Little did the officers know the call would turn into an investigation of a first-degree arson fire that burned through the night and destroyed the historic structures in Huntington's main street business district.

Raynmon Haze Garcia,

21, who is described as a transient, has been charged with first-degree arson. He was arraigned Friday in Baker County Circuit Court. Garcia is being held at the Baker County Jail in lieu of \$50,000 full bail, a corrections deputy said.

That means Garcia could not be released unless he posted the full amount; in many cases suspects can gain release from jail by posting 10% of the bail.

The press release stated that Deputy Chad Mills and OSP Trooper Tim Schuette responded to the initial call and talked to the victim involved in the reported disturbance.

The victim told officers that Garcia had stated "he was going to burn the bar down," the press release stated. Garcia had left the residence where the disturbance had taken place. The officers made contact with him later and determined that no crime had been committed at that point.

Mills noticed a large amount of smoke coming from the area of Grady's Tavern at about 11:40 p.m. Thurs-

day, according to the press release. The Huntington Fire Department was called and firefighters found the tavern, Howell's Cafe and the Streamliner Lounge all fully engulfed in flames.

In the meantime, Mills and Schuette located Garcia, who had remained in the area, and arrested him on the first-degree arson charge.

In addition to the Huntington Fire Department, Sheriff's Office and OSP, other agencies at the scene included Fruitland and Weiser, Idaho, fire departments, Treasure Valley paramedics, Baker, North Powder and Haines rural fire departments and the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office.

As the investigation continued, Highway 30 through downtown Huntington was closed due to fire traffic.

The city's annual Huntington Catfish Derby continued during the Memorial Day weekend with a few alterations. The Lions Club park was closed and most activities were moved to the City Park and the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall.

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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