

70-plus-mile chase ends with arrest in La Grande

Robert Akil faces multiple charges after Monday pursuit

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — A Portland man landed in jail Monday in Pendleton after trying to escape police across more than 70 miles of Interstate 84.

Robert Isaac Akil, 23, faces charges of unauthorized use of a vehicle, felony fleeing, reckless driving and recklessly

endangering another person.

Oregon State Police Lt. Mike Turner, who oversees the agency's post in Pendleton, tried to stop a 2014 black Dodge Charger early Monday for speeding near milepost 186 while heading east on I-84. The driver took off, according to state police, and reached speeds in excess of 100 mph.

Rather than enter into a dangerous chase, Turner followed at a safe distance and called in the car to area law enforcement.

The Charger continued to La Grande, where city police were ready at the I-84 exits at Island Avenue and Gangloff Park. Akil took the Gangloff Park exit at milepost 259, where a police spike strip blew two of the Charger's tires. La Grande police took Akil in to custody and soon handed him off to the state police, who brought Akil back to Pendleton and booked him into the Umatilla County Jail.

The district attorney's

office brought the initial charges against Akil on Tuesday. According to the court documents, the state alleged Akil stole the Dodge from MLK Auto Sales, Portland. Circuit Judge Jon Lieuallen set bail Akil's at \$40,000. The case has a probable cause hearing Tuesday.

Court records also show Akil has traffic and criminal convictions going back to 2015. His most recent criminal conviction was in March in Multnomah County for misdemeanor theft. He received a sentence of four days in jail and five years court supervised probation.

Another person, identified as Akil, is also in custody. The district attorney's



Akil



Staff photo by E.J. Harris, File

Snow collects on Bob White Field in late February, a month that saw Pendleton alone receive 32.5 recorded inches of snow during that month, up from 16.8 record inches in 1994.

Federal grants now available following winter storms

Umatilla County is eligible to receive federal disaster relief dollars

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

PORTLAND — Umatilla County is one of nine rural counties eligible to apply for grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture following severe winter storms that took place earlier this year, which may have caused extensive damage to different areas.

The funding, totaling \$150 million, comes from a \$19.1 billion bipartisan disaster relief package passed by Congress this summer.

According to a recent press release from the office of Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, municipalities, public bodies, tribal nations and non-profit organizations are eligible to apply for the grants through the Community Facilities Program. The other eligible counties include Coos, Curry, Douglas, Grant, Jefferson, Lane, Linn and Wheeler.

In February, heavy snowfall broke records for towns across Umatilla County. Pendleton alone received 32.5 recorded inches of snow during that month, moving up from 16.8 record inches in 1994.

Pendleton had 22 days of snowfall, and Hermiston had 19 during the month. The storm resulted in school and business closures across the county. Snowpack was up by 160% in some parts of the state.

"It was significant for us just that typically in February, we're beginning to wind down our snow removal," said

Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith. "We had a lot of labor costs."

Stanfield public works director Scott Morris said that damages caused by snow were minimal for the city.

"Our biggest challenge was keeping Pilot open. Trucks get stuck," Morris said. "We're not very big, we've got a couple of snowplows. But we do a good job of keeping everything open."

But Merkley and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., both stated that the damages were extensive for many across the state.

"In some cases, families and businesses struggled for weeks without power or other basic resources — and many still live with the financial consequences of those storms," Merkley stated in the press release.

Snowmelt the following spring was a contributing factor in the county-wide flooding that led to the Umatilla County commissioners declaring an emergency in April.

Getting into the Round-Up spirit



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Averi Montee, 4, has her face painted to resemble Spiderman by artist Toni Elder at the Main Street Carnival on Thursday afternoon in Pendleton.

Irrigon Chamber of Commerce searching for new director, building

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

IRRIGON — The Irrigon Chamber of Commerce is in transition as it searches for a new director and a new home.

The chamber had previously operated on an all-volunteer basis, but over the last six years grew from six members to about 70.

"With that comes revenue," Phyllis Danielson said.

Danielson, a previous chamber president acting as spokesperson for the chamber board, said they decided to use some of their membership revenue to hire a part-time director to put in about 20 hours a month. The first person they hired left as soon as she was trained, however, and they are "back to square one" on finding a director.

Danielson said they hope to find someone who is perhaps retired or a stay-at-home parent who wouldn't mind working a

handful of hours a week to offer office hours, answer phones and email and help put on chamber events. If the director was successful in pursuing new members, that revenue could possibly open the way to add more hours to the position in the future.

"It's a sweet little job," she said.

As the board searches for a director, they are also searching for a new home. The past four years they have been operating a small visitor center at 490 E. Highway 730, but the building they were leasing was just sold.

Danielson said that on Monday, minutes before the chamber's board was preparing to meet, she received a call asking if the chamber would be interested in new office space being added to the area next to city hall where the farmer's market is located.

"It's a very promising location," she said.

She said it was a "brand new, fresh idea" they were still discussing, but pair-

ing a visitor center with the farmer's market would be a great partnership. In case that idea doesn't pan out, however, she said they were also interested in hearing about any other leads on space for lease.

The chamber's seven-member board has three positions up for re-election in November, so Danielson said they were also interested in hearing from applicants who would like to throw their name in for consideration.

While the chamber has hit some bumps this year,

Danielson said they are still "flying well" and the board is excited to see what opportunities the changes will bring. On Wednesday, the chamber's monthly luncheon brought out about 25 people, whom Danielson encouraged to share any tips on possible new directors, board members or locations.

During the current transition, anyone with information for the chamber can contact Danielson at her business, Stokes Landing Bed & Breakfast, at 541-922-3857.

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