

Passenger trains could come back to Eastern Oregon

Meeting conducted to inform on how rail service could be reintroduced

By DICK MASON
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Cook Memorial Library’s Community Room was probably as crowded late Saturday morning as the city’s Union Pacific Railroad Depot was on Sept. 27, 1937, when people gathered for the train carrying then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to arrive.

FDR was asleep when his train stopped in La Grande around 12:30 a.m., but First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt did appear and spoke briefly to the crowd.

Few if any of the more than 100 people at La Grande’s library Saturday were the same ones who saw FDR’s train arrive in 1937, but many lived here when La Grande last had passenger train service. The desire to see passenger rail service return to Northeast Oregon is what drew the crowd to Saturday’s Eastern Oregon Rail meeting, which was held to inform people how they could help bring back Amtrak’s passenger service.

Those in the audience included an individual who wrote on a display paper asking people why they



EO Media Group Photo/Dick Mason
Joe Nuxoll, president of the Association of Oregon and Transit Advocates, speaks at the start of Saturday’s Eastern Oregon Rail Summit at Cook Memorial Library in La Grande.

want passenger train service to return: “I’m 79 — don’t know how much longer I can drive long distances. I need to travel monthly to Boise and Portland.”

Others at the meeting learned what steps need to be taken to make this dream become a reality during a program put on by the all-volunteer nonprofit Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates, with help from All Aboard Washington. AORTA is proposing to revive at least the Portland to Boise portion of the old Amtrak Pioneer

route, which was discontinued in 1997 because of funding issues.

“We need your help if (the return of passenger train service) is going to happen. It will be a longer term effort,” said AORTA President Joe Nuxoll of Eugene.

The need for passenger train service in Northeast Oregon is greater now than it was in 1997, Nuxoll said. A big reason is that Greyhound Bus now provides one westbound and one eastbound bus a day, while 22 years ago at least two westbound and two eastbound buses made

daily stops in La Grande.

Nuxoll would like to see as much of the Pioneer route, which ran from Portland to Salt Lake City, Utah, restored as possible. However, he said it is more realistic to start small by first attempting to restore the Portland to Boise part of the Pioneer route.

The AORTA president said when people are speaking up in support of Amtrak, they need to address one of the most common criticism of it — that it’s subsidized with government funding. This is a weak and unfair argument, according to Nuxoll, because all modern transportation receives substantial government funding.

“All transportation is subsidized,” he said.

He explained that virtually all highway construction and maintenance is funded by the government and air travel is possible because of airports, which receive significant levels of government assistance.

Nuxoll emphasized that the best way to get members of Congress to begin looking into expanding Amtrak’s routes is for local city councils and county commissions to pass resolutions in support of having local and regional passenger rail service. He said when senators and members of Congress learn of the resolutions, they will know that the people they represent want passenger trains to return.

Mark Meyer of Portland, an AORTA board member, said he

believes there is strong bipartisan support in Congress for expanding Amtrak.

One of these leaders is Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Portland, who is a supporter of Amtrak, according to Jeff Broderick, a graduate student at Portland State University who is earning a master’s degree in urban planning. He also noted that Rep. Peter Defazio, D-Eugene, who is chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, is in a good position to help boost Amtrak’s expansion.

Broderick, like other speakers at Saturday’s meeting, emphasized the importance of communicating with legislators about restoring Amtrak service in Northeast Oregon.

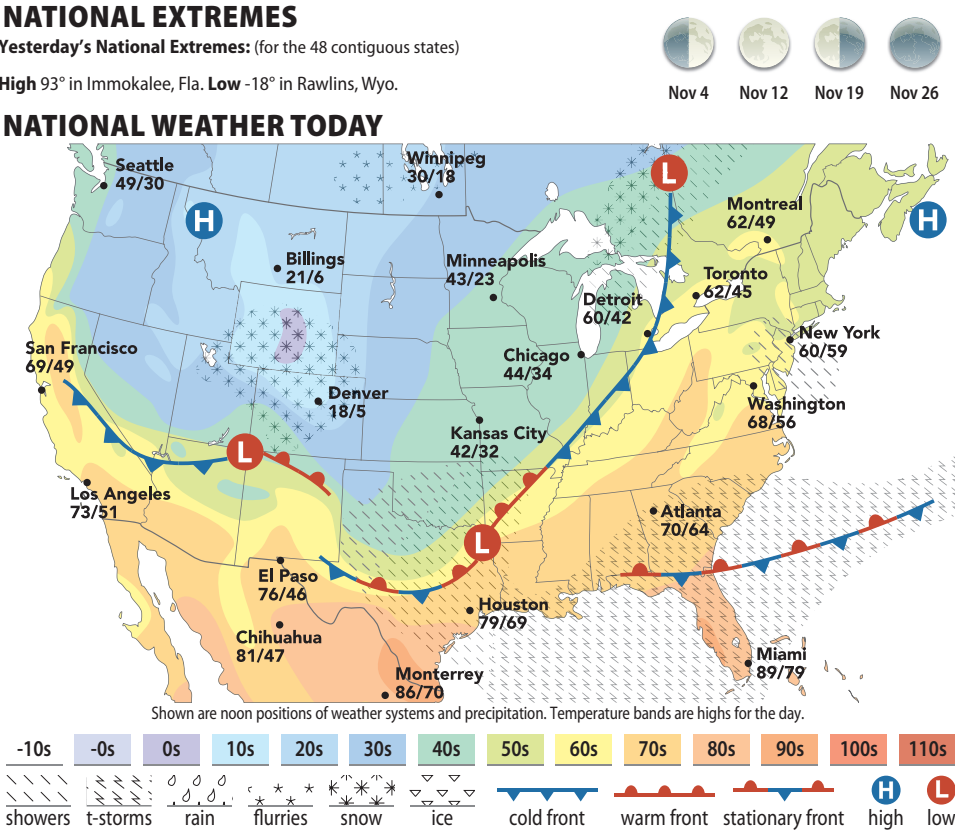
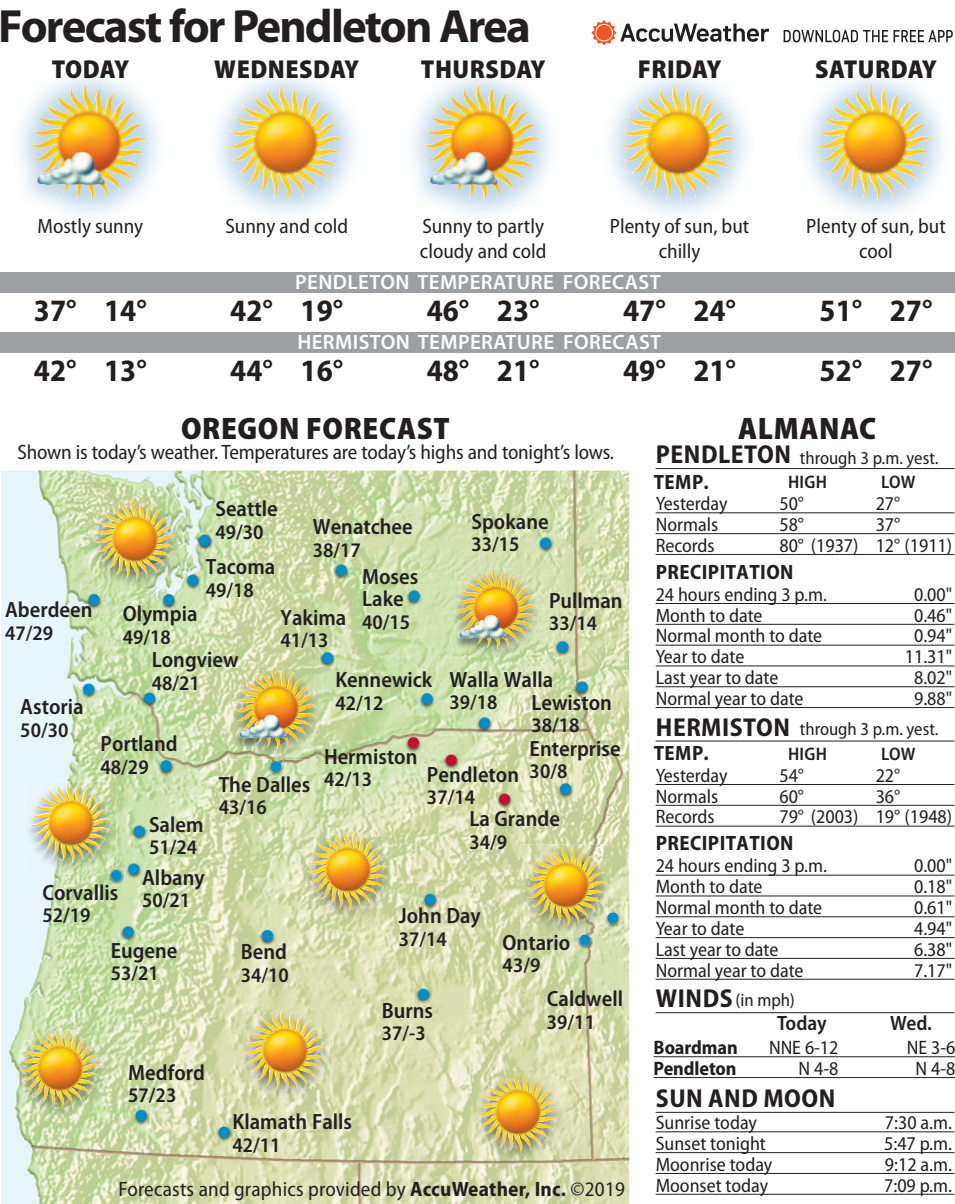
“Your first step should be contacting your legislators,” he said.

He said part of the problem Amtrak faces is it received a weak mandate from the government when it was created in 1971. This makes it difficult to get large sums of money from Congress.

“It is a fight for it to get funding from Congress each year,” Broderick said.

Many of those attending the meeting Saturday talked of how much they miss passenger train service, and the atmosphere in the library’s community room was one of hope and excitement.

“You have priceless enthusiasm,” said Louis Musso, a member of All Aboard Washington.



Dems in Congress demand update on Interior wild horse plans

By SCOTT SONNER
Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — Congressional Democrats are demanding the Interior Department produce an overdue report on plans to manage wild horses roaming federal lands in the West after the head of its public lands agency told reporters it will take \$5 billion and 15 years to get overpopulated herds under control.

William Perry Pendley, acting director of the Bureau of Land Management, said last week he’s increasingly optimistic his agency will eventually be able to reduce the herd sizes through stepped-up round-ups and increased use of fertility control on the range.

The department outlined a series of options in an April 2018 report that included those ideas as well as the possibilities of sterilizing horses, paying private parties to adopt them and again reviewing the controversial idea of euthanizing some animals.

But Colorado Rep. Joe Neguse and six other Democrats say that report provided few details.

They said in a letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt that an update the department promised by July is three months late and they need it to chart the horses’ future.

“Each day, the number of wild horses and burros in the BLM’s care continues to grow both on and off

the range,” Neguse wrote Thursday, noting there are an estimated 88,000 animals on the range in 10 western states and nearly 47,000 in government holding pens and pastures.

“It is clear the BLM’s current practice of rounding up wild horses and burros and warehousing them off-the-range is not addressing the population growth, and we urge BLM to release their plan for congressional review immediately,” he said.

Reps. Deb Haaland of New Mexico, Gerald Connolly of Virginia, Andy Levin of Michigan, James McGovern of Massachusetts and Ro Khanna and Ted Lieu of California co-signed the letter.

BRIEFLY

California wildfires: nearly 300 Oregon firefighters to help

SALEM — Fifteen wildfire strike teams from Oregon fire departments are on the way to help battle the California wildfires.

The *Statesman Journal* reported the strike teams, made up of nearly 300 firefighters who will assist in protecting structures, were sent from Klamath, Douglas, Yamhill, Linn, Columbia, Clatsop, Benton, Multnomah, Marion, Washington, Clackamas, Lincoln, Jackson, Josephine, and Lane counties.

California fire officials requested Oregon assistance through a state-to-state mutual aid system Sunday morning. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has declared a statewide emergency as crews battle blazes in Northern California and Southern California.

Man killed in Oregon helicopter crash; daughter survives

JORDAN VALLEY — Authorities are praising the resilience of a 25-year-old

Idaho woman who survived a frigid night in the high desert of southeastern Oregon following a helicopter crash that killed her father.

Malheur County Undersheriff Travis Johnson said Monday that despite being injured herself, Jordan Valentine managed to crawl around the side of the wreck to get out of the wind after the helicopter went down in a remote area southeast of Succor Creek State Natural Area on Friday afternoon. She was lightly dressed and the temperature was in the 20s.

Authorities were notified of the missing helicopter at 2 a.m. Saturday, and radar showed its last contact as being near the park. Search and rescue crews found it at 8:20 that morning.

Fifty-two-year-old Jim Valentine, of Eagle, Idaho, was dead, and his daughter was flown to a hospital with undisclosed injuries. Johnson said she remained in the hospital Monday and that she was able to speak.

Johnson credited Jordan Valentine, saying it took “a very tough and determined person to be able to survive a crash like that and keep her composure through the night.”

— Associated Press

CORRECTION: In the Page A1 story “Rivoli restoration nears end of first act,” published Thursday, Oct. 24, a photo with the story misidentified the workers who participated in a workday at the Rivoli. The name of the worker is Sally Branson.

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