

Familiar face returns to East Oregonian

Pendleton native Phil Wright to return as news editor

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The *East Oregonian* will welcome back a familiar face to its newsroom.

Phil Wright returns to Pendleton as news editor, beginning on Monday, May 24. Wright replaces Wyatt Haupt Jr., who left to become editor of *The Daily World* in Aberdeen, Washington.

"I was not expecting this opportunity, so when it came my way I was surprised, sure," Wright said. "But then I gave it careful scrutiny over a couple weeks. While I'm returning to the *EO*, the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped the newsroom I left. This really is a new challenge for me."

Wright returns to Pendleton after 18 months as editor of *The Observer* in La Grande. Prior to La Grande, Wright had been a reporter for the *East Oregonian* for nearly 15 years, covering

Umatilla County government, public safety and courts.

Wright is a 1986 graduate of Pendleton High School and a 1993 graduate of then-Western Oregon State College. He later earned a master's degree in English from Portland State University.

"We are excited to have Phil back in Pendleton," said Andrew Cutler, the publisher/editor of the *East Oregonian*. "He's a valuable asset who will work well with our reporting staff and help us continue to provide valuable, credible content for our readers."

Wright said he's looking forward to bringing what he learned in Union County back to Pendleton.

"To paraphrase a certain action movie, I have a particular set of skills, and I honed those to a greater degree at *The Observer*," he said. "The newspaper and the crew in La Grande mean a great deal to me, not just because of the work or the experience I gained there, but really because of the people and what we were building together. Now I get to put all this to the test again. Yeah, I'm down for that."



Wright

Utilities customers in M-F will pay more

By SHEILA HAGAR
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

MILTON-FREEWATER — City officials this month voted to add one and increase other surcharges to utility customer accounts.

Added up, the surcharge will cost each utility customer an additional \$6.50 per month, which won't fluctuate with use rates, City Manager Linda Hall said.

The increase goes into effect July 1.

Since July 2007, the city has tacked on an extra fee to water and sewer bills, which was extended to electricity use the next year.

The original charge of \$2.50 per month has stayed the same over the past 14 years, and it was never applied to all utilities, Hall said at last week's Milton-Freewater City Council meeting.

With cost of repairs leaping and customer base increasing, more money is needed to maintain a consistent fund for matching grants or paying down loans for major repairs or improvements, Hall told the council.

A \$1 fee added to the costs to utility users, also newly applied to solid waste management, offers a more consistent source of that funding than a rate increase, she said.

The vote passed 4-1, with council member John Lyon opposing the raise. Councilor Brad Humbert was absent.

Lyon said he found the request incongruent with other needs of the city for now.

"We're asking people to give us \$7 million for a new police station," he said. "This doesn't seem like the time to ask for this."

Six apartments damaged by fire, residents displaced

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — About 40 firefighters from four departments responded to a fire at Country Club Apartments in Umatilla on Monday, May 17, according to Steven Potts, fire chief of the Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District.

Firefighters with the Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District were first notified of alarms going off at the complex at 8:13 p.m., followed by reports of smoke coming from a third floor apartment, Potts said. Crews arrived on the scene in seven minutes, and by then, the fire had spread to the apartment on the fourth floor.

Because of windy conditions, there was concern the blaze would spread even further, but firefighters contained the blaze using portable water extinguishers while establishing a water supply on the third floor, Potts said.

With the help of fire officials from Umatilla County Fire District 1, Echo, Boardman and Irrigon, the fire was declared under control a little more than an hour after the first alarms had gone off. Potts said the cause of the fire has yet to be determined, but added "it appears to be failure of an electrical component."

The total cost of damage to the two apartments, as well as water damage to the floors below, amounted to approximately \$200,000, Potts said, adding he expected people living in six units to have "long-term displacement."

Officials with the Umatilla Police Department and the Umatilla School District helped people who had been displaced when the Red Cross was unable to provide assistance, Potts said.

There were no injuries reported, according to Potts.

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LOCAL BRIEFING

Suspicious device behind Highway 730 closure

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A fisherman's discovery of a strange device this weekend led to the brief closure of U.S. Highway 730 in Walla Walla and Umatilla counties.

Law enforcement closed the highway near milepost 196 along the Columbia River on Saturday, May 15.

Washington and Oregon transportation departments reported Highway 730 closed in both directions at the junction of U.S. Highway 12 due to "law enforcement activity."

Initially, the call to the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office was for drug activity, with possible drug paraphernalia. When the deputy arrived on the scene at 9:08 a.m. and observed the device, it was described as bottles wrapped with electrical tape and wires coming from them, UCSO Lt. Sterrin Ward said.

There also was a strong smell of either ammonia or some type of accelerant, Ward said.

At 9:58 a.m., the sheriff's office contacted Oregon State Police bomb technicians. That team arrived at 2:03 p.m., and the Oregon Department of Transportation closed the highway shortly after.

The nature of the device was inconclusive, Ward said, but at around 4:45 p.m., the device was destroyed and the highway reopened.

Heppner chamber announces new executive director

HEPPNER — The Heppner Chamber of Commerce has a new executive director, according to a press release.

JoAnna Lamb will start her new position in mid-June.

Lamb and her family moved to Heppner in August 2019. Lamb has prior experience as an educational assistant for the Lone Community Charter School and co-taught art appreciation, independent study and daily living classes. Lamb currently serves as a member of the Heppner City Council.

Goats return to clean up river levee

PENDLETON — An annual spring tradition is set to return to the Pendleton levee system and river parkway.

For the 10th year, as many as 700 goats will be herded throughout the riparian area by the Umatilla River to graze on riverside vegetation, clearing away potentially flammable brush in the process, according to a press release from the public works department.

According to the press release, the goats are in town on another city-owned property and will be moved to the levee either this week or next week.

The goats will start at

the upriver end of the levee at the end of Southeast Byers Avenue near the Ken Melton Little League Park. They will work their way from the east end of the levee through town and make a second pass before leaving town, the release said. The goats are typically on the levee for four to six weeks.

The goats will be penned in by an electric fence and guided by trained dogs or goatherds. Pedestrians with dogs are urged to keep their pets leashed and under control.

City to hold grand opening for vehicle charging station

PENDLETON — The city of Pendleton is hosting a grand opening for its new electric car charging station, a first of its kind for the city.

The 102 S.W. Frazer Ave. station, in the same parking lot as the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce and the Heritage Station Museum, will feature a 15-20 minute presentation during the 5 p.m. ceremony on Friday, May 21.

The charging station has been in operation since April and joins the charging station at the Wildhorse Resort & Casino on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, which only services Tesla vehicles.

The station cost \$77,000 and was mostly paid for with a grant from Pacific Power, with the rest of the cost supplemented by the city's urban renewal district.

Umatilla chamber director leaving

UMATILLA — The Umatilla Chamber of Commerce is searching for a new executive director after its current director, Salud Campos, announced she was leaving for another job.

"It's been an honor to serve the businesses and members of the city of Umatilla," Campos wrote in an email announcing her resignation to the community. "I have come to know many of you as valued colleagues and more importantly friends."

Campos began at the chamber in 2019. Her last day is on May 21. In a letter to members, the board of directors described her as a "driving force in maintaining the Chamber's operations throughout a very difficult 2020."

"In fact, under her leadership we saw our membership grow, and welcomed several new businesses to Umatilla," the letter stated. "Her efforts to gather information on all things COVID-19, and share that with us, was incredible to say the least."

According to the board, the chamber offices' hours of operation may be different in the interim while the board searches for a new director, and members are encouraged to reach out by calling 541-922-4825 or emailing info@umatillaorchamber.org.

—EO Media Grop and Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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