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Pools up and running after lifeguard shortage

By BEN LONERGAN
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Jeff Hamilton has been preparing for a lifeguard shortage for six months.

"I knew in January that I was going to have trouble," he said. "Not only did I have to get certified guards, I had to recertify myself."

Hamilton, a recreation supervisor with the city of Pendleton, said lifeguard certifications last two years, meaning many of the guards he certified in 2019 would need to be recertified this year due to last year's closure.

Hamilton said the facility usually starts the season with about 40 lifeguards, a number that has dropped to 34 this year.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Lifeguard Kyndra Nelson watches over the pool Wednesday, June 16, 2021, during an afternoon swim session at the Pendleton Family Aquatic Center. The aquatic center faced staffing difficulties early in the season.

"I'm kind of close to what I want, but if we're fully ramped up I could probably use a few more," Hamilton said.

The biggest changes this year have come in the age of his staff, he said. The American Red Cross, the entity through which the city certifies lifeguards, requires participants to be over the age of 15 to receive a certification. While 15-year-olds always have been an option, Hamilton said he typically looks to hire youths over the age of 16 to find more mature staff members.

"When you're dealing with 15- and 16-year-old kids you are still having to work around the parents' schedules," he said.

This year Hamilton said he has eight or nine lifeguards who are 15.

"I basically went to our local swim team and pleaded with the coach to really push how important it was," he said.

Hamilton's pleading worked — he said nearly three-quarters of his lifeguards are swim team members, something he said is great but can cause problems when the swim team has meets. On Saturday, June 19, Hamilton said he had to close half the facility and limit capacity to keep an appropriate ratio of lifeguards to swimmers due to a swim meet.

Pendleton Parks and Recreation Department Director Liam Hughes said an increased interest in recreation activities made the staff short-

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Restaurant rebound?

Requests for eatery site plan reviews in Umatilla County have stayed steady since 2019

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The past year has been tough on restaurants, but the industry is showing signs of life in Umatilla County as entrepreneurs take the plunge with new ventures.

A two-story red brick building on Hermiston's Main Street has been silent since the Union Club, a coffee-by-day, bar-by-night establishment, closed partway through 2020. Owners cited the combination of one owner's cancer diagnosis and the COVID-19 shutdowns as insurmountable.

Now, the building is full of activity once again ahead of its reopening as a new location for Pendleton-based OMG! Burgers & Brew.

Rodney Burt, who owns the restaurant with his wife Kimberly Burt, said the new location will look the same as the Pendleton one, featuring a menu of appetizers, salads, hot dogs, chicken sandwiches, alcoholic beverages and "about 20 different types of crazy hamburgers."

"We're excited," he said. "We love the business, love the people, love giving back to the community."

Pandemic restrictions took their toll on OMG! Burgers in Pendleton like everywhere else, Burt said. The couple were planning to open a grilled cheese shop in Pendleton in 2020, but COVID-19 scrapped those plans.

Lately, however, Burt said



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Elizabeth Stuart-Ramirez pours a drink Thursday, June 17, 2021, at the newly opened Daily Fix Nutrition in Hermiston.

OMG! Burgers has had its busiest time ever in the restaurant's three-year history in Pendleton.

The Burts aren't the only ones opening new eateries in Hermiston. In late March, Daily Fix Nutrition opened, offering smoothies, teas and coffee.

Diana Pena, who opened the shop with her husband, Felipe Pena, said they were looking at the 11th Street location they settled in before the pandemic started, but the shutdowns and uncertainty caused them to pull back for a while before finally "taking a leap of faith" this spring.

"It's definitely scary, because you see so many businesses struggling," she said.

Pena graduated from Umatilla and her husband graduated from Stanfield, so they "met in the middle" to live in Hermiston after getting married. She said she has been using Herbalife Nutrition



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Owners Diana and Felipe Pena opened Daily Fix Nutrition this spring on 11th Street in Hermiston.

products for about seven years, and eventually started selling them to other people. Now, Daily Fix Nutrition sells all Herbalife products, including meal replace-

ment shakes. "We wanted to bring something healthy and new to the

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Eastern Oregon faces RV shortage

By CARLOS FUENTES
The Observer

LA GRANDE — In an average year, the Thunder RV parking lot boasts 30 to 45 RVs, ranging from truck campers to fifth wheels to travel trailers.

As of Thursday, June 15, there were four recreational vehicles sitting in the mostly empty lot at Thunder RV — the only RV dealership in La Grande. This shortage has lasted a full year now, with no end in sight.

"The shortage started last summer right after COVID-19 shut everything down," Thunder RV salesman Mike Weinkauff said. "I think it's because people are getting cabin fever and wanting to go out more."

Thompson RV, based in Pendleton, also has seen a large increase in demand over the last year. According to Thompson RV manager Corrin Thompson, part of this is because Thompson RV is the biggest outdoors recreational vehicle dealer in the world.

"We're totally sold out for the year," Thompson said. "We're actually preselling RVs up to 16 months in advance now. Someone might come in today and want to order an RV, and they won't get it until the end of 2022."

The increase in recreational vehicle demand is not just local. According to the RV Industry Association, RV sales in the U.S. have significantly increased during the pandemic, with total 2021 recreational vehicles

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Hermiston residents celebrate Juneteenth

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Tina Thomas remembers the day in the early 2000s when she marched to Hermiston City Hall on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Nearly two decades after President Ronald Reagan signed a bill designating it as a federal holiday, the city still didn't recognize it.

The march closed city hall. From then on, she said, the city recognized the holiday. Reflecting on that day, Thomas said one word comes to mind — change.

"What else can you say but, change," said Thomas, who is Black.

More than two decades later, Thomas had a new reason to celebrate. She joined several dozen community members who flocked Saturday, June 19, to McKenzie Park

for the first federally recognized Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the end of slavery in America.

"We're celebrating a freedom that was years short of what it should have been," said Thomas, a lifelong Hermiston resident. "I just think about that. How our forefathers had to keep working for two years when they really didn't have to. And now we're able to celebrate that every year. And now it's a federal holiday."

Juneteenth, otherwise known as Emancipation Day, Black Independence Day or Jubilee Day, commemorates the day in 1865 when Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas, and told African Americans the Civil War was over and they were free — two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed



Bryce Dole/East Oregonian
Virginia Garcia, left, Dolores Veliz and Bonnie Gracia serve food during a Saturday, June 19, 2021, Juneteenth celebration at McKenzie Park in Hermiston. On June 17, President Joe Biden signed a law to make Juneteenth a federal holiday.

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