



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Wes Brooks during a tour Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021, of his Adair Homes built house indicates where he has used tape to seal gaps in windows that will not properly close.

Home:

Continued from Page A1

In the original complaint, Adair alleged that through social media “Brooks has intentionally interfered with Adair’s prospective business relationship with new or potential customers.” But, Brooks is not alone in his complaints about the company’s business practices.

While there are legitimate questions and several positive reviews of Adair Homes on Brooks’ nearly 2,500 member Facebook group, the majority of posts paint the company in a negative light — with users complaining of a long list of issues by the company. Some problems range from the company being six months overdue on construction to flooding.

Brooks also recently started a TikTok account showing problems with his house. The account has garnered more than 4 million views.

Joshua Biggs, the senior vice president of strategic growth for Adair Homes, said the company could not comment on an active court case.

Regardless, the family continues to live in a home with flooring ripped out, bending walls, exposed outlets and improperly installed windows that allows dust to spread throughout the house when wind blows.

“The electrical is really what scares me the most,” Brooks said.

Close to bankruptcy and without a lawyer due to legal costs over the last two years, Brooks said he reached out to every government agency he could think of that could help, including the Oregon Attor-



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A large gap is visible in the trim work near a door Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021, in Wes Brooks’ home in Umatilla County. This and a multitude of other defects has Brooks in a legal case over the home’s builder, Adair Homes Inc.



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Wes Brooks during tour of his Adair Homes built house on Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021, indicates where an unplanned heat pump and air handler unit were installed in his home in rural Umatilla County.

ney General’s Office and the FBI, but so far nothing has been done.

“I feel like there’s no one doing

anything to protect the consumers,” Brooks said. “I feel like the government is failing us.”

Crisis:

Continued from Page A1

“It’s going to have a massive impact on the system,” said Hitzman, a vocal vaccine proponent who is opposed to the mandate. “We’re already all stretched thin. If you happen to get into an automobile accident, you have to hope that they have a bed for you in the hospital. If I have a heart attack, are they going to have a bed for me in the hospital? Are they going to have a nursing staff to care for me?”

Hospitals mum on contingency plans

CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton reported 30% of its health-care workers remain unvaccinated. Harold Geller, the president of CHI St. Anthony, said the hospital is working on contingency plans for the mid-October deadline.

“As is true for most hospitals, we are concerned about the number of staff electing not to become vaccinated,” Geller said. “Our entire staff is committed to providing high quality care as safely as possible. They’ve done a terrific job throughout the past year and a half. Each staff member is putting serious thought into this matter and it is our hope that we retain all staff.”

Caitlin Cozad, a spokesperson for Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, said the hospital has “contingency plans in place to remain fully operational” and is “ensuring we have adequate staffing to meet the needs of our community.” She added the hospital is “on track to be fully compliant with the state mandate.”

Neither Ford nor Cozad would disclose how many of their health care workers are vaccinated.

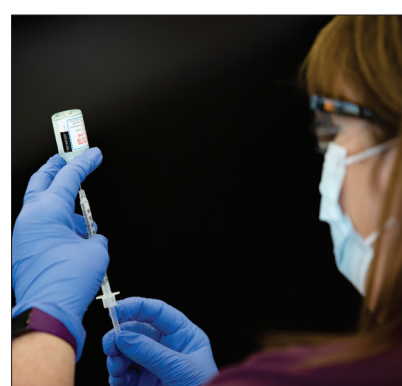
But state data show in Umatilla County, 36% of health care workers remain unvaccinated. In Union County, that number is 26%. In Morrow County, it’s 28%.

Kevin Mealy, a spokesperson for the Oregon Nurses Association, said in a written statement the union is calling upon “all nurses and health care workers to get vaccinated before the Oct. 18 deadline or to fill out the necessary paperwork for a medical or deeply held religious belief exception.”

If they don’t, they could be fired. “Losing even one nurse from a patient’s bedside will deepen Oregon’s nurse staffing crisis and endanger community health,” Mealy said. “ONA expects hospital and health care system CEOs to follow federal labor law and sit down with nurses to bargain the impact of workplace vaccination policies and find ways at-risk health care workers can continue contributing during the surge.”

Cases increase among hospital staff

Good Shepherd from July 21 to



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Tracy Wart, an infection prevention nurse at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, draws up a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during the hospital’s first round of staff vaccinations on Dec. 28, 2020.

Sept. 15 reported 54 COVID-19 cases among staff, according to state data. Grande Ronde’s staff from July 15 to Sept. 1 had 35 cases. And staff at CHI St. Anthony from Aug. 19 and Sept. 3 had 10 cases.

Several hospitals say they have seen an increase in vaccinations among health care workers since the mandate was announced.

The vaccine mandate came in response to the rapidly rising number of COVID-19 cases statewide as the delta variant surge filled Oregon’s hospitals almost entirely with unvaccinated people. To curb the spread, Brown announced the mandate for health care workers and teachers in August, when infection was at its peak.

But Hitzman said he believes the state is pushing the region’s health care system into a lose-lose situation. He said health care workers should get vaccinated because they work around sick patients, but added those who have built their careers in the field may have little to fall back on.

“What are they going to do, just change professions?” he said, adding, “For most of us, we’ve been deeply ingrained in our professions. It’s not like we can just go do something else ... It’s going to create financial hardship for those individuals.”

In addition, he said the deadline falls at an especially critical time for Umatilla County. Last week, tens of thousands of people flooded into the county for the Pendleton Round-Up, an event where most people were maskless and there was no proof of vaccination or negative COVID-19 test required.

Health care workers for months have voiced concerns about the potential for infection to increase after this event. Hitzman noted if a surge were to occur, it would be within two to three weeks of the event — right around when the mid-October vaccine deadline occurs.

“We’ll see what the numbers are over the next two to three weeks,” Hitzman said. “But if we see a major spike, I’m not going to be surprised. I’m going to breathe a sigh of relief if we don’t.”

Workers:

Continued from Page A1

Boomers retiring at a faster rate

Eastern Oregon saw only negligible gains in population over the past decade, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And looming within the numbers is a certainty that has taken the back seat to pandemic woes and commentary: The boomers are retiring.

In Eastern Oregon, the working population is aging out much quicker than in previous years. The Oregon Employment Department reported in May 2021 that the working population in Eastern Oregon had grown significantly older from 2010 to 2020. That increased share means the number of workers age 55 and over makes up 26% of the overall workforce. That’s up nearly 4% from its 2010 numbers.

As well, the population of older workers has started declining since 2017, when it reached its peak, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The rate at which the baby boomer generation has been retiring is accelerating, according to Pew Research Center. From 2019 to 2020, approximately 28.6 million baby boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — retired; a 3.2 million uptick from 2019. On average, that number had previously been increasing by around two million retirees per year.

The impact

“One of the other factors is that boomers are retiring at an enormous rate, which is, in a way, sucking every-



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

A customer enjoys the outside seating Sept. 15, 2021, at La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurant in Enterprise. The restaurant, along with a similar one in Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, got by through the summer largely with college students as employees.

body up the the corporate ladder or corporate world,” said Matt Scarfo, a Union County commissioner and owner of Long Branch and Benchwarmer’s Pub & Grill in La Grande. “Everyone’s getting the bump up to those higher positions, if they did have them, and so it’s causing a vacuum down to the X, Y, Z generation.”

On the ground, restaurants and service industries reported having to hire much younger staff than in normal years, though the restaurant industry has historically been staffed by younger workers and those looking for part-time work, and the data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Oregon Employment Department indicate there hasn’t been any significant changes in the employment level for those under the age of 18.

Angelica Zurita, who with her husband, Jose Lopez, owns the La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurants in Enterprise and Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, said they employ about 15 people at the three establishments.

During the summer tourist season, they were fortunate to find college students who were eager to work. But now, as the students return to campus, finding reliable help is a problem.

“They really don’t want a job,” Zurita said of some of the locals who have applied. “They show up drunk, call in sick, don’t show up at all or they show up late.”

Still, as the tourist season ends, she’s optimistic the restaurants and saloon will manage.

“It’s slowing down to where I think we’ve got it

having a tough time finding workers. Jared Hillock, manager and co-owner of Hillock Electric, said the biggest problem is a lack of qualified electricians around.

“There are just not enough people in the trades right now,” he said. “I think it’s important we get kids in trades and not preach so much college.”

He said a starting electrician right out of high school — after a four-year apprenticeship — can make \$32 an hour, with benefits.

“We’re trying to push more kids think about trades,” he said. “You can make a good family wage right out of high school.”

He does have an opening for a counter person, which he’s not gotten many adequate applications for.

“We get a lot of random resumes dropped off, which

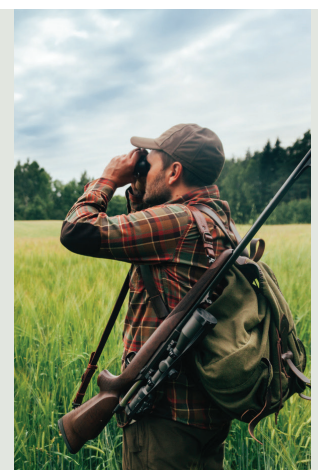
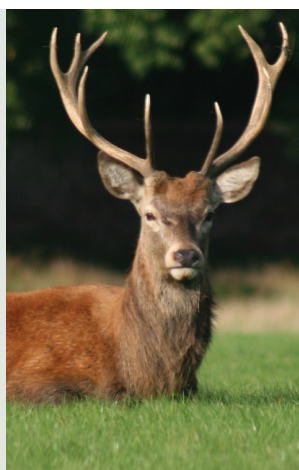
guess is people trying satisfy job-search requirements,” Hillock said.

Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating opened in May in Joseph, has had numerous well-paying positions available but that still are not filled, owner Rick LaFave said.

“I’m still trying to hire three or four more welders,” LaFave said. “People don’t want to work, I guess. ... I’ve talked to several people who’ve put feelers out, but I’m not getting people who want to go to work.”

Though he doesn’t have concrete evidence, he has his opinion on the cause.

“My opinion is because the (unemployment) money hasn’t run out,” he said. “Hopefully, we’ll get people wanting to go back to work once that runs out.”



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