

## Access:

Continued from Page A1

“I choose to live off the grid because of my tinnitus,” Larkin said. “It’s as close to the wilderness as I can get without fully being in the wilderness.”

Larkin spent his professional years as a locomotive engineer, before leaving that job because of the tinnitus. He now tends to his horses and works on his new two-story house and shop as he copes with his hearing issues and seeks to live a peaceful life alongside his dogs — his father owns an adjacent plot of land.

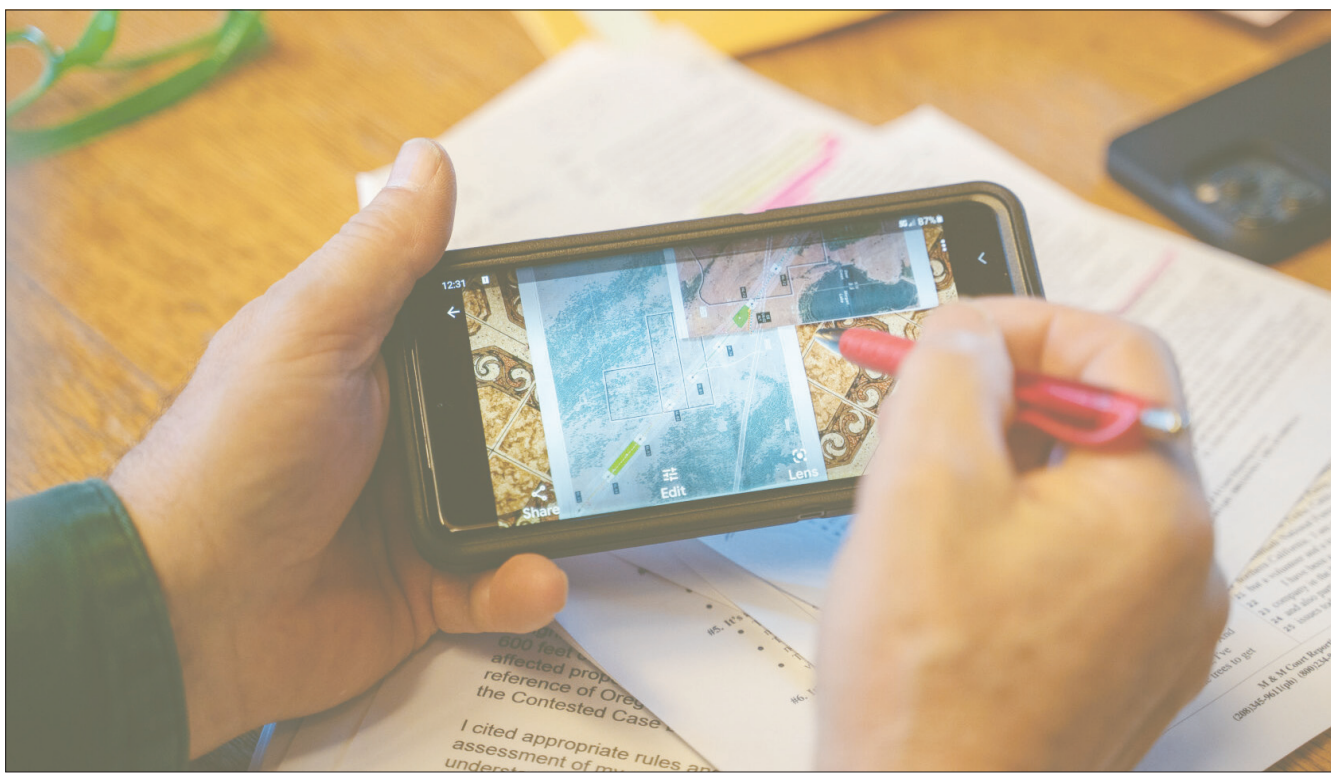
If the B2H plans were to go through, Larkin would have no choice but to leave the property he has spent so many years working on.

“If this transmission line were to go through at this location, I would no longer be able to reside or fulfill my lifetime dreams and goal of living here,” Larkin said at a public hearing in June 2019. “And I don’t have the time nor the resources or anything else to seek the relief I’ve sought of the little bit of tranquility to deal with this issue.”

### B2H not yet approved

Throughout the end of 2021 and the start of 2022, Idaho Power filed a slew of petitions to gain access to private property across Eastern Oregon via court orders. More than 10 petitions were placed in Union County, including against Larkin and his property.

Each petition is worded



Greg Larkin, owner of a parcel of land off Morgan Lake Road, La Grande, on Saturday, Feb. 12, 2022, points out a map where the Boardman to Hemingway power line project would cross his property.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

similarly, requesting access to the land in order to perform a number of surveys and examinations ahead of the project’s potential approval. Most of the work would be done throughout the early spring and into the start of summer — crew size varies from two people to upward of 20 workers on site per day.

According to Jim Kreider, one of the founders of the Stop B2H Coalition, the Oregon Department of Energy has a set of procedures for conducting “over-the-fence” surveys for landowners who choose not to allow access to their property. However, Idaho Power is seeking access to the properties through Oregon Revised Statute 772.210, in order “to acquire real prop-

erty necessary and convenient for constructing and maintaining power lines.”

The surveys vary per location, but consist of largely the same tests. According to the petition, Idaho Power wants to conduct the following surveys at the Larkin location in 2022 or 2023:

- Three-toed woodpecker and northern goshawk.
- Rare plant inspection.
- Wetlands inspection.
- Terrestrial visual encounter survey.
- Raptor survey.
- Noxious weed survey.
- Cultural, archaeological, and historic properties management plan inspection.
- Land survey.
- Appraisal field visit.

“It’s kind of a bully tactic,” said JoAnn Harris Rode, Larkin’s partner.

Harris Rode has worked fire watches in Eastern Oregon for 34 years, which led to her having additional concerns related to the potential power lines. The lines will affect ground tactics as well as access by air in the case of a wildfire — she noted that the ridge is prone to lightning and that a tree on Larkin’s property was struck by lightning last September. Larkin has plans to build a small fire tower on his property, but the potential B2H tower would be constructed at the same spot on the plot of land.

“A lot of this is coming down to cost,” Kreider said.

“With these individual landowners, we’re talking through the processes. For those that want to fight it, we’re working with them to find attorneys.”

Kreider stated that the bigger picture needs to be considered in the B2H proposal, noting the value of the scenery to landowners in Eastern Oregon.

“For the Grande Ronde Valley, one of the routes is putting (the transmission towers) right in the views. What is the loss of tourism value? They don’t really look at that,” he said. “They look at the utilities point of view and the public convenience of having this additional energy or resiliency in the transmission system.”

### Long-term effects

Those opposed to B2H voice numerous concerns about the long-term impacts of the lines. Idaho Power and its partner, PacifiCorp, would make a one-time payment to landowners in order to provide compensation. For Larkin, this money would be used fully in finding a new residence after having no other option but to abandon the land he has worked on for years.

Larkin and other B2H opposers also are concerned about the loss of tourism at Morgan Lake. Living just a stone’s throw away from the lake, Larkin witnesses a plethora of visitors on a daily basis walking dogs, watching the sunset and enjoying the views.

“Even if I take myself out of the equation up there, the amount of people that just come up to pass the lake and watch the sunsets is substantial,” Larkin said.

Kreider expressed opposition to Idaho Power moving forward with land surveys before the project is officially approved and underway. In the current pre-condemnation process, the Stop B2H Coalition is looking to work toward legal representation for local landowners impacted by the lines.

As Idaho Power heads to court in order to move forward with its plans, local landowners like Larkin are left looking for answers to protect their properties and their way of life.

“Everything you read from Idaho Power is that it’s all ice cream and cake for everybody,” Larkin said. “It’s not.”

## Warfare:

Continued from Page A1

The vote sent the bill for a pit-stop in the House Revenue Committee, after which it could advance to the floor of the House for a final vote.

House Minority Leader Vikki Breese-Iverson, R-Prineville, has singled out the farm labor overtime bill as a possible trip-wire for the use of tactics that could slow or stall the remaining 20 days of the 35-day session.

Democratic leaders still hope to move ahead with an ambitious agenda on housing, health, environment and criminal justice legislation.

“It’s not a big deal, we’ve been here before and we showed we can pass our bills,” said Stephen Watson, spokesman for the Senate Democratic caucus. “We are going to do what we need to do to get the work of the people done this session.”

But Republicans said the communication and compromise they are seeking with Democrats has not been sufficient.

“House Republicans are still pushing for an Oregon solution to HB 4002,” said Andrew Fromm, spokesman for the House Republican caucus.

The “Oregon way” or “Oregon solution” is a catchphrase for taking the best ideas from both sides of the political aisle. It was popularized in the 1970s during the governorships of politically moderate governors such as Republican Tom McCall and Democrat Bob Straub.

Fromm noted the committee vote on Feb. 14 along a 7-4 party line vote despite comments by some Democrats that the farmworker overtime exemption was “the original sin” of state labor law, but House Bill 4002 could make the situation worse.

Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, said given the choice between failing to change the exemption and any economic fallout from the bill, he would “bite the bullet” to begin a possibly painful reform.

“Sometimes our job is to right the wrongs of the past,” Evans said.

Fromm said Democrats who voted for the bill despite reservations called into question “the ability for Democrats to consider any sort of compromise because of pressure they’re getting from advocates.”

Republicans from both chambers caucused Tuesday morning to discuss their next moves. The meetings delayed the start of the day’s legislative sessions, much to the consternation of Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem.

“I’m working on self-control,” he said. “I am sorry about this, I did not anticipate this,” he said.

Democrats hold a 37-22 majority in the House and 18-12 in the Senate. But two quirks in the Oregon Constitution leaves Republicans with ways to control or kill the pace of legislation.

Oregon is one of the few states requiring more than a majority to make a quorum to do any business. Though 17 members of the Senate were on the floor, Courtney could not start because the constitution requires two-thirds — or 20 of the 30-member Senate — answer the roll call.

Another two-thirds requirement in the constitution has allowed Republicans to enforce an archaic rule that bills be read in their entirety before final passage. In less contentious times, the requirement was routinely waived.

The time-consuming reading — sometimes done by machine — limits the amount of legislation that can be considered within the normal time periods that lawmakers meet. That’s especially problematic in the 35-day session.

Since 2019, Republicans have used a walkout or slowdown to force compromise from Democrats or, in the case of the 2020 session, kill all work until the legal time period ran out.

The parliamentary tactics have been used by both parties in the past and occasional attempts to extract them from the constitution have fallen short. They remain the law of the land.

“These are tools,” House Chief Clerk Timothy Sekerak, said last year. “If a tool is available, someone is going to use it.”



Early morning sunlight May 12, 2021, illuminates a school bus at the Mid Columbia Bus Co. bus barn outside Pendleton. Now the sun is setting on the relation between the bus company and the Pendleton School District, which on Monday, Feb. 14, 2022, approved a bid for an Ohio company to provide school bus service.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

## Midco:

Continued from Page A1

Timothy Wulf, First Student’s director of business development, wrote in bold font that his company was unlikely to be the lowest bidder because of the costs associated with dealing with the bus driver shortage.

But Wulf then pivoted to what First Student could offer the district, including a new bus facility.

“As the District is fully aware of, a bus facility is more than challenging to find in Pendleton,” he wrote. “However, we did! We found an excellent facility and would like to offer it to the District to control the lease. This alone, is worth making a change.”

Wulf went on to summarize First Student’s bid: 28 new buses plus eight older models, a driver salary range of \$18.71 to \$23.32 per hour with a \$500 signing bonus, an “optimization study” meant to reduce ride times and possibly reduce routes and new technology, including a school bus tracker app for parents.

First Student stated it could provide its services for \$795,831 per year plus rate based fees that vary depending on bus usage.

The Pendleton School District started contracting with Midco in 1982, but the company’s roots in Eastern

Oregon extend further than that. Midco began its life as Flatt’s Trucking Service, a mail and freight transportation business, before expanding into the school bus business when it bid on a contract for the Condon School District in 1956. Midco eventually expanded its operations to include districts all over rural Oregon and Idaho. In 2015, the Flatt family sold Midco to Landmark Student Transportation, a Canadian school bus company.

### Rough patch

But recent years haven’t always gone smoothly for Midco.

Pendleton parents frequently complained of late buses, long routes and unchecked bullying on the buses. Some of those complaints filtered up to the school board level, where Midco representatives attributed the shortcomings to a nationwide bus driver shortage. Last summer, Midco attempted to revamp its recruitment strategy by upping bus driver wages.

Chuck Moore, Midco’s region vice president, leaned on Pendleton and Midco’s shared history in the company’s bid cover letter.

“We are confident that as an Oregon based company with local knowledge, we have the ability to be more efficient, responsive and will swiftly be able to identify and make any changes

or adjustments needed,” he wrote. “Our enthusiastic staff is thrilled to continue to work closely with administration personnel and is committed to continue to build relationships with each Principal, Secretary and Teacher.”

Midco’s bid was \$645,721 per year plus rate based fees.

Several Midco employees and community members used the public comment section of the meeting to defend the company, highlighting how much they enjoyed working with the district and questioning why the district didn’t consult with drivers or parents before making the decision. Midco administrators struck a bittersweet note, thanking the district for working with them and expressing hope that they will work together again in the future.

Ultimately, the public comments didn’t deter the school board from unanimously approving the First Student bid. First Student will take over bus services on July 1, ahead of the 2022-23 school year.

Although First Student’s bid promises the district a bus facility, Fritsch said in an interview after the meeting that the terms of the deal are still being negotiated.

### Another district moves on from Midco

Pendleton isn’t the first district to drop Midco as its school bus provider.

The Stanfield School District transitioned from Mid Columbia Bus Co. to providing its transportation services in-house at the start of the 2021-22 school year. Superintendent Beth Burton said she appreciated Midco’s years of service to Stanfield, but her district felt like internalizing bus operations was the best move for students.

“After penciling it out and looking at the flexibility we would gain to run our own transportation department, it just made more sense and it’s gone really well for us this year,” she said. “We have not had complaints. We’ve been able to schedule things without having to consider Hermiston and Umatilla and other districts and what they’re doing. We’ve been able to focus on our own programs and what makes sense for us and that’s been super refreshing.”

As part of building out its own transportation department, Stanfield acquired two 14-passenger buses, two 77-passenger buses and an 80-passenger bus. To operate the buses, Stanfield hired four drivers and a transportation supervisor who is certified to drive and maintain the buses. The move hasn’t come without tradeoffs — Stanfield no longer transports elementary students who live within one mile of campus or secondary students who live within a mile-and-a-half — but Burton said the district is happy with its decision.

VISIT US ON THE WEB AT:

[www.EastOregonian.com](http://www.EastOregonian.com)