

## Supper time



Amber Compher/Contributed Photo  
A young whitetail deer still in spots nurses while Mom keeps watch Thursday, July 22, 2021, along Green Valley Road south of Enterprise.

## Gas prices lingering around \$4, but not quite at all-time highs

Chieftain staff

ENTERPRISE — Gas prices in Wallowa County have moved near \$4 per gallon — a mark that, if hit, would be reached for the first time in about a decade.

But prices have backed off briefly — at least the county average has — as all-time records are in sight.

An update from AAA last week listed Oregon's average price for a gallon of unleaded fuel at \$3.754, which was 56 cents above the national average of \$3.19 on Thursday, Aug. 5.

Oregon, in fact, has among the highest prices in the nation. Three states, California, Nevada and Hawaii, are above \$4 per

gallon, and Washington, Idaho and Utah are the only other states with higher prices than the Beaver State.

Fourteen states, almost all of them in the Southeast, had an average price below \$3 per gallon at the time. Mississippi, at \$2.792, is the lowest.

Oregon's price has increased 21 cents per gallon in the past month, and is up more than \$1 per gallon since this time last year.

Wallowa County briefly had the highest rate on average in Oregon, reaching \$3.966 in mid July. That was more than six cents higher than Lake County, which was second at the time.

Wallowa County's price

has since dropped slightly to \$3.864, putting it tied with Harney County as the 10th-highest in Oregon. Marion County, at \$3.569, has the state's cheapest fuel as of late last week.

According to Chieftain archives, the last time prices were above \$4 in Wallowa County was in 2011. It also broke through that threshold in 2008.

According to OPIS research, the record reached in the county was \$4.409 on July 15, 2008.

Prices for regular unleaded reached \$3.999 in Enterprise in July, but have held there since, not yet inching past \$4. They are \$3.799 in both Joseph and Wallowa.

## Joseph council tries to resolve employee dispute

No discipline; remands actions to administrator

By BILL BRADSHAW  
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The Joseph City Council concluded months of disputes between employees and council members Thursday, Aug. 5, by delegating actions in complaints between two employees to Pro-Tem Administrator Brock Eckstein.

On May 27, Parks Department Lead Dennis Welch made complaints against Public Works Lead Levi Tickner in an executive session, which precluded those complaints from being made public. Procedure required that Tickner be given a chance to respond either in executive session or open session, at his discretion. Tickner chose open session, which after delays, occurred last week.

After hearing Tickner's response to Welch's complaints and each given 5 minutes to rebut, the council recessed to executive session to deliberate. Upon returning to open session, the council heard a motion read by Council Stephen Barlow that was approved unanimously.

### Motion approved

"I make a motion that the council recognizes the value of both Mr. Tickner and Mr. Welch to the city. The council takes their charges and counter-charges seriously, especially those regarding the safety of our employees and citizens and recognizes that some of these issues have been made worse by the lack of proper supervision by the former administrator/HR for the city. The council further recognizes that because their respective departments have been separated that some of the issues have been alleviated," Barlow read. "The council rules that the remaining conflicts must be resolved on a professional basis by the city administrator, whose decisions will be respected and implemented in a timely manner. The council approves the city administrator to provide further counseling and training to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the respective departments. And finally, the council remands these complaints and all further issues to the city administrator for final resolution."

During his response to Welch's complaints, Tickner cited what he believed to be the most serious issue, that of Welch's "insubordination" when changing chlorine bottles used to disinfect in the water and sewer plants.

### Chlorine danger

Tickner said that when he first came to work for



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain  
Levi Tickner, left, public works lead for the city of Joseph, responds Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021, to complaints made against him earlier by Parks Lead Dennis Welch, center, during a City Council meeting. The council decided to not discipline either employee and deferred the issues to Pro-Tem Administrator Brock Eckstein.

the city, Welch — who now works for the separate Parks Department — also worked for Public Works. Tickner said he had Welch show him how to change the chlorine bottles.

"Gas chlorine's the most deadly and the most-dangerous aspect of this job," Tickner told the council. "A breath of this gas could easily kill a person. When the first chance to change out a bottle came up, I asked Mr. Dennis Welch to show me how we properly did this. We went to the wastewater plant where there was an empty bottle to change. He got a paper mask from his truck, strapped it over his beard. He proceeded then to shutting off the cylinder and refastening the regulator. He did not shut off the regulator and started coughing as the gas fed from the other bottle back. This proves that the paper mask he was wearing was not sealed properly. A paper mask will not comply with OSHA standards for gaseous chlorine. I held my breath, turned off the regulator and pulled Mr. Welch out of the room for fresh air. Per OSHA standards, a full-face respirator is required anytime there is a possibility of a leak and a second person must be present in case of emergency. Full-face respirators were ordered that day. I spoke to Mr. Dennis Welch about not changing a bottle without a second person and wearing a full-face respirator. In order for a respirator to seal around his face, he must shave his beard. Mr. Welch replied to me, 'I will quit before I shave.' Insubordination: You cannot safely do your job when you refuse to. At this, I advised him to no longer change bottles."

That appeared to spark hostility between the two. At one point since that incident, parks and public works employees were separated in a unilateral move by former Administrator/Recorder Larry Braden. The council noted that the move was not

approved by them.

### Witnesses

Additional complaints by both Welch and Tickner often came back to a lack of supervision and action by Braden.

In his response, Tickner also invited several people to speak on his behalf. Speaking highly of his professionalism and efficiency were Brad Baird, of Anderson Perry Engineers — the city's engineering firm — and former city employee Jake Thompson, now of the Wallowa Lake County Service District. One other person who spoke on Tickner's behalf, former city employee Corey Roberts read a number of comments by Welch after his return from sick leave in May. But much of what she read didn't directly address complaints against Tickner and Mayor Belinda Buswell directed her to restrict her comments to those complaints.

Welch had no witnesses speak on his behalf, though he reiterated some of his complaints from May, such as "gaslighting," alleged violations of employee privacy, harassment, finding things in his office having been disrupted and saying that many of these actions were witnessed by city employees, although he didn't say who.

He said he took his complaints to Braden, such as Tickner's complaint about wearing a mask.

"Everything I did I discussed with the administrator," Welch said of Braden, but the latter appeared to not be concerned.

He did recall that Buswell, when she worked as city recorder and safety officer, had issued a direction in the matter.

"Belinda saying I couldn't change chlorine, that never happened," Welch said.

Buswell corrected Welch. "I don't believe that was the statement; it was without a respirator," she said.

After the meeting, both Tickner and Welch declined to comment on the council's decision.

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