

Murderer could be released

PORTLAND (AP) — The Oregon parole board on Thursday signaled support for the eventual release of one of the men convicted in the notorious double murder of a central Oregon couple during a home invasion robbery over three decades ago.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports the Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision concluded Mark Wilson, 50, is “likely to be rehabilitated” and scheduled an April hearing to determine his projected

parole date.

The final step involves a separate exit interview when the board will determine whether Wilson will be released.

In its rehabilitation finding, the board noted Wilson’s efforts to take part in prison programs, his work record and effort to stay out of trouble.

Wilson was 18 when he shot Rod Houser, 53, 20 times with a rifle on the porch of the couple’s Terrebonne house.

Co-defendant Randy Guzek shot Lois Houser, 49, with a revolver in the head, heart and stomach after finding her inside the home screaming.

Wilson and Guzek then looted the house and made efforts to make it look like a cult killing before fleeing.

Wilson confessed to the killing and pleaded guilty to aggravated murder and murder. He was sentenced in 1988 to two consecutive life terms with the possibility of parole.

SUMMIT

Continued from Page 1A

“For the potential outcome, I think it’s a really good investment,” he said.

Witty said about 1,200 people, including state and national legislators, are expected to attend.

The Oregon Legislature’s approval of \$2 billion in additional funding for schools in the next biennium has brought business interests and schools together at the table.

“Business is supportive and recognizes the value of a quality workforce in order to be competitive in a global market,” Witty said.

Baker Technical Institute is an example of how schools can provide students with the skills they need to provide industry with a high quality workforce, he said.

The superintendent will be a presenter on a morning panel that will consider the topic: “How Do We Make Our Economy Inclusive.” Other panel members will be Rukaiyah Adams, the Meyer Memorial Trust’s chief investment officer; Anne Kubisch, The Ford Family Foundation president; and Carmen Rubio, Latino Network executive director. Ron Saxton, executive vice president and general counsel for PeaceHealth, a nonprofit healthcare system that serves Oregon, Washington and Alaska, will be the moderator.

Witty also is scheduled to lead a discussion about how different partners in a region can work together to improve outcomes in their communities. Members

of the Baker City group joining Witty for the trip will be introduced.

School District representatives attending include Doug Dalton, Baker Technical Institute president; and Baker School Board directors Julie Huntington, Andrew Bryan and Kevin Cassidy, who also is the incoming president of the Oregon School Boards Association.

Others include Richard Chaves of Chaves Consulting; Jeff Nelson, Baker County business adviser for Blue Mountain Community College’s Small Business Development Center; Bryan Tweit, director of Launch Pad Baker; Chris Knoll, manager of the Baker City branch of Umpqua Bank; Les Penning, Lea Gettle, Wayne Overton and Charlene Chase of OTEC; Clint Morrison, plant manager at Behlen Manufacturing; Martin Arritola, owner of Oregon Trail Livestock Supply; Robin Nudd, Baker City Human Resources and Community Development director; Shelly Cutler, Baker County Chamber of Commerce director; and Courtney Warner Crowell, Gov. Kate Brown’s Greater Eastern Regional Solutions Team coordinator. State Rep. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, whose district includes Baker County, also will join the discussion.

Baker County expects to be designated as one of three pilot projects, with the others being established in the Portland Metro area and in the Willamette Valley, Witty said.

Regional meetings will be scheduled in the coming year to consider ways to “advance economic mobility,” he said.



The (La Grande) Observer file photo

A quiet zone for freight train whistles is slated to take effect Dec. 27 in La Grande.

La Grande’s quiet zone for trains takes effect Dec. 27

By Sabrina Thompson
The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — Life in La Grande is about to get a bit quieter. The city announced the train whistle Quiet Zone will take effect Dec. 27 at 12:01 a.m.

“I am ecstatic,” Mayor Steve Clements said after the Dec. 5 city council meeting when he announced the approval for the whistle ban. “It shows the commitment of the city, and how when we had something we needed in place, we followed the rules and it got done.”

Conversation about the ban on most train whistles goes back to the early 1990s, and the city officially began discussions on the matter in the early 2000s, according to Father Hank Albrecht, former pastor of the Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church. Strides toward the installation of safety devices and measures required began in 2017, with the completion early this fall.

To qualify for a Quiet Zone — in which trains are not required to blow their whistles at traffic crossings — the intersection of railroad tracks and roadway must be safe enough for vehicles and pedestrians to cross without being warned by a train whistle. To receive Federal Railroad Administration approval, the city installed barriers to prevent cars from going around the arms and made any needed improvements within the Quiet Zone — encompassing the crossings at Fir, Greenwood, Cherry, Willow streets and H Avenue.

The need for a Quiet Zone has been the subject of much debate. Some long-time residents told The Observer previously they did not see a need for a Quiet Zone, stating they got used to the sound and didn’t notice it.

Online, many people posted they would like the whistles to remain, saying the sound doesn’t bother them and they

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— Steve Clements, La Grande mayor

are needed for safety reasons.

“I lived right next to a train station,” Faith Amanda commented in a previous Observer Facebook post about the Quiet Zone. “I’m so used to the horns, I would hear him everyday at 5 in the morning getting ready to leave. They would blow and blow and never stop. It’s important to have the whistle. It’s for safety, to let people know they’re coming. I’ve always loved them. I can still hear them. It may be faint where I live now but I can still hear it and I’ve never stopped loving it.”

Others, however, see train whistles as a disruption and an annoyance.

Landlords have said they have difficulty finding tenants for apartments near the tracks, and visitors have posted online reviews about not being able to sleep with the whistles going off.

Calvary Chapel of La Grande sits right against the tracks at 1433 Jefferson Ave. Rob Collins, pastor of the church, said the whistles overpower his sermons at least twice during morning services.

“It doesn’t interrupt the flow of things,” Collins said. “But we are very excited not to hear it anymore.”

Pendleton established a Quiet Zone in the 1970s. Railroad tracks cross city streets at 11 points. The community turned out for public hearings in the early 2000s to keep the whistle ban in place.

“In Pendleton you have a train that ran through the middle of the town and

Baker City looking into possibility of pursuing quiet zone as well

The Baker City Council voted 6-0 on Nov. 12 to file a notice of intent to apply for a Quiet Zone designation within the city limits. The decision doesn’t obligate the city to actually file an application or to take any other action, but it is a mandatory first step.

A local group, Neighbors for a Safer, Quieter and Healthier Baker City, urged councilors to consider filing the notice of intent.

The group signed a petition signed by more than 230 residents who support a Quiet Zone designation.

you’re in a valley, so it echoed like the train was right next to you,” said Phil Houk, former mayor of the town and former risk manager for Union Pacific Railroad. “Most people were generally happy about the Quiet Zone.”

While reaction has been mixed in La Grande, the city went forward with pursuing the zone.

The initial proposal to put four-quadrant gates at three of the crossings would have cost La Grande a minimum of \$1.5 million. Further review found ways to reduce costs without compromising public safety. In the end, La Grande shelled out more than \$200,000 for the crossing improvements.

Even with safety improvements, Houk said people need to take caution when crossing the tracks.

“Trains can’t swerve around you on the tracks,” he said, “and they can’t stop immediately.”


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Harney County man cited for riding back of mule deer

RILEY (AP) — Police say a young man was arrested after he was caught on video riding on the back of a mule deer buck that was trapped in a fenced area in rural eastern Oregon.

Oregon State Police say 18-year-old Jacob Belcher of Riley, which is about 23 miles west of Burns, was arrested Friday and charged with wildlife harassment and animal abuse. It wasn’t known if he has a lawyer.

Police say someone sent the state police’s Fish and Wildlife division a video of Belcher climbing onto the young mule deer and riding the animal, which appears exhausted.

Troopers said the deer makes grunting or bleating sounds throughout the video. After it escaped Belcher, it jumped into a linked fence repeatedly while trying to escape.

The deer had been trapped in a fenced feeding enclosure,



Photo via Oregon State Police

Scene from a video taken of Jacob Belcher, 18, of Riley, near Burns, riding a mule deer buck.

police said. It was eventually freed, and police don’t know where the deer is now.

Belcher was arrested, and another person who filmed

the alleged incident was also interviewed. That person may be charged with aiding in a wildlife offense, state police said.