Business & AgLife

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Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Jennifer Piper, the new executive director for the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce, is a local native who has returned to Enterprise for the position. She took over as executive director Monday, Dec. 7, 2020.

'Excited to be back home'

Wallow County Chamber director Jennifer Piper brings experience to role

By Bill Bradshaw
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Enterprise native Jennifer Piper started last week as the new executive director of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce and is "excited to be back home," she said in an interview Friday, Dec. 4.

"Now I'm back home in the best place in the world," said Piper, who was born in Enterprise and spent her childhood there.

Piper, who began Monday, Dec. 7, and replaces the now-retired Vicki Searles, is eager to get to know local business owners and help them make it through the coronavirus pandemic that has plagued so many. Until Friday, she had been unaware of the more than a half-million dollars the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners is doling out in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act funds, but she's eager to jump right in and help local businesses apply to claim their share.

> *"I think that businesses being flexible and adaptable and open to learning to do things different than they have before is going to make all the difference in how they make it out the other side."*
>
> **— Enterprise native Jennifer Piper**, new executive director of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce

"That's certainly something we can do in getting the word out, particularly this time of the year for businesses that rely a bit more on seasonality," she said.

She has experience in such efforts. At her previous position, where she worked in resort property management in Lincoln City on the Oregon Coast, she helped local businesses deal with the shutdowns that occurred this spring during the first phases of the pandemic.

In addition to Lincoln City, Piper worked in the Portland area for about 10 years after receiving a degree in psychology from the University of Portland with a fine arts minor.

"I've always had a passion for the arts," she said.

Piper does some painting, mostly in acrylics.

"But I have an appreciation for many different media," she said.

That appreciation runs in the family. Her dad, Paul Piper, owns Classic Marble Design in Joseph, where he's worked with local bronze foundries to create the pedestals for bronze statues in the area. Her mom, Gretchen Piper, gets creative with textiles in her business, Enterprise Sewing and Embroidery.

Prior to college, she attended secondary school at Upper Columbia Academy near Spangle, Washington, west of Spokane, except for one year at Joseph High School.

She is married to Damian Huff, a high school and college math teacher who hopes to find a position in the area when he joins her in February. In the meantime, Jennifer said, he'll substitute and continue with his online math tutoring business.

She said they are avid outdoors people, enjoying what the area has to offer, such as hiking, snow skiing and summer activities on the water. She said although she hasn't done much fishing or hunting since childhood, those are definitely on the list of things she and Huff plan to do.

Piper is just getting her feet wet with the chamber, but she has one characteristic critical for a chamber

See, **Piper**/*Page 6B*

Union, Baker counties lose hospitality jobs

Oregon adds 4,200 jobs in November, but figures don't reflect the 'freeze'

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Baker and Union counties shed more than 200 leisure and hospitality jobs from October 2019 to October 2020, the state's employment department reported Tuesday, Dec. 15. And the unemployment rate throughout Northeast Oregon remains higher than last year.

Baker County's nonfarm payroll employment fell by 200 since October 2019, with 130 job losses in the private sector and 70 in the public sector, according to the report from the Oregon Employment Department, and leisure and hospitality took the largest hit in the private sector, losing 70 jobs. But local government cut 90 jobs, making for the largest losses overall in Baker County, primarily in education.

During the month of October, however, employment decreased by 70 jobs with losses in a few industries. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate decreased 0.9 percentage points in October to 6.6%. The raw rate dropped 0.5 percentage points to 5.7% in October.

That was the largest over-the-year increase in Northeast Oregon, according to the report.

Union County's total nonfarm payroll employment decreased by 500 over the year. The private sector dropped by 320 while the public sector dropped by 180. Local government led losses, down 160, and leisure and hospitality fell by 140 jobs.

Construction and financial activities were the only two industries to see gains in Union County, up 50 jobs and 20 jobs, respectively.

Total employment in the county, though, rose by 140 over the month as local government tacked on 200 jobs, primarily in education. The private sector was virtually unchanged in October with small losses canceling small gains throughout. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate dropped 0.7 percentage points to 6.2% in October. The raw rate decreased 0.4 percentage points in October to 5.5%.

Baker County's unemployment rate of 5.7% was the largest over-the-year increase in Northeast Oregon, according to the report, while Union County's 5.5% was No. 2.

Statewide, however, Oregon's unemployment rate dropped to 6.0% in November from 6.8%, as revised, in October. The decrease put Oregon's rate below the U.S. unemployment rate, which decreased to 6.7% in November from 6.9% in October.

The figures reflect Oregon's employment situation just before Gov. Kate Brown ordered the "freeze" on certain social activities, including in-person dining, to combat the rise of COVID-19 in the state, according to Gail Krumenauer, state employment economist with the Oregon Employment Department.

Oregon's total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 4,200 jobs in November, following a revised gain of 9,800 jobs in October. Oregon employers added jobs in each of the past seven months, and the state has recovered 46% of the jobs cut in March and April.

Over the past five months the rate of job growth slowed. Monthly growth averaged 9,600 jobs in September and October, while more rapid gains averaging 17,000 per month occurred in July and August.

Over-the-month job gains in November were largest in transportation, warehousing and utilities (up 3,100 jobs); professional and business services (up 2,600); manufacturing (up 1,700); and health care and social assistance (up 1,500).

Monthly losses were concentrated in construction (down 2,300 jobs); government (down 1,800); and retail trade (down 1,100).

Transportation, warehousing and utilities added the most jobs in November and was the only major industry to add jobs since November 2019.

Online shopping is booming and the industry has hired thousands of workers to keep up with demand in warehouses and as delivery drivers. The industry gained 7,500 jobs, or 10.3%, since November 2019.

Leisure and hospitality added 300 jobs in November, following a revised gain of 3,300 in October. However, these gains recovered only a fraction of the 110,500 jobs cut in March and April. The industry — which includes restaurants, bars and recreation employers — has been the hardest hit industry due to the pandemic. In November, it employed 161,300 in Oregon, nearly 25% fewer than in November 2019 when it employed 214,900.

Governor orders tax breaks for small businesses hit by COVID-19

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Small businesses in Oregon struggling with a drop in income due to the COVID-19 pandemic will receive some tax relief, Gov. Kate Brown announced Monday, Dec. 14. Brown ordered the elimination of penalties and interests on 2019 income taxes.

"Small business owners who play by the rules shouldn't face penalties and fees because COVID-19 has robbed them of their livelihood," Brown said.

Brown may have to issue a flurry of orders on issues ranging from unemployment to an eviction moratorium. Programs for unemployment benefits and other measures are scheduled to end Dec. 31.

If the Legislature and governor cannot agree on other steps, such as a special session, executive orders could be used as a stop-gap until the regular session of the Legislature convenes Jan. 19.

The scope in state action is also wrapped-up in the struggle in Congress to pass COVID-19 relief, which could renew some of the programs.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, said a deal must be struck before the House and Senate adjourn for the year.

"Congress must pass an economic relief package before the end of the year to avert more economic backsliding and financial catastrophe for millions of families," Wyden said.

Brown's order applies to personal income, corporate excise and corporate income taxes. The action would:

- Waive all penalties on 2019 income tax due from businesses that are impacted by COVID-19.
- Waive all interest on 2019 income tax due from small businesses hurt by COVID-19 and have less than $5 million in gross receipts.
- Continue extended payment plans up to 36 months for any taxpayer impacted by COVID-19 in an approved payment plan.

Brown also ordered an extension of the due date of the amusement device tax, which comes from lottery machines, for the second quarter of the 2020 tax year. Brown said the move would help restaurants and bars that have been particularly hard-hit by restrictions on dining, gathering size and other measures.

More information on Monday's order will be available by calling the Oregon Department of Revenue at 503-378-4988 or 800-356-4222, or at www.oregon.gov/dor.

Deadline is Friday for La Grande business assistance grants & loans

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Applications for the city of La Grande's COVID-19 Business Assistance Grants are due Friday, Dec. 18, by 5 p.m.

The city set aside $250,000 in aid for small businesses within the La Grande city limits. The four-part financial assistance package consists of an expansion of the existing Emergency Loan Program, now with two options for terms, including an 18-month/zero interest option.

The program also provides small grants for purchasing equipment to help meet the state's requirements for COVID-19 safety measures and a grant for accounting software complete with training through Training & Employment Consortium, La Grande.

Applications for the city's grants are available in the blog section of www.ignitemybusiness.org.

"We know that our small businesses are really struggling right now," La Grande Mayor Steve Clements said in a press release, "and the city wanted to offer additional assistance with a variety of options to meet the diverse needs of our businesses."

Clements said the applications will be processed quickly. He added the grants bring La Grande's investment in its small businesses to more than $430,000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is a breakdown of the programs:

- Business Software Grant Program ($10,000 available): Provides up to $500 to purchase accounting software for businesses in conjunction with the business receiving training on the software. The city is accepting applications immediately and will award grants on a first-come, first served basis.
- COVID-19 Business Assistance Grant Program: Up to $2,500 to help businesses purchase equipment, make improvements or pay other costs directly related to COVID-19 impacts. The program allocates funding based on the nature of the request coupled with priority to businesses subject to the most restrictive state mandates. The city is accepting applications for this program immediately until the deadline.
- Emergency Loan Program ($200,000 available): A businesses can borrow up to $10,000. The loans require an application and approval using the Emergency Loan Program provisions. The city gives priority to businesses that have not yet received a La Grande emergency loan and are subject to the most restrictive state mandates, such as closure. Under this program businesses would have two options:

1) A four-year, 1% interest long-term loan, no payments for six months, interest only for the following six months, and principle and interest for the following three years, no early pay-off penalty.

2) A new 18-month, 0% interest short-term loan, no payments for six months followed by 12-month payments of principle.