



SUZANNAH MOORE-HEMAN
CHAMBER CHAT

A light at the end of the tunnel

Have you ever heard “these unprecedented times” or “what a year” so many times before?

Looking back, I can’t believe it’s been more than a year since the COVID-19 pandemic forced our businesses to shut their doors. I remember standing at the doorway in the chamber office, looking outside, while myself and my team watched. Watching what, I am not sure, just waiting for some “sign” things were suddenly closed.

Never, in my wildest dreams, would I have imagined chamber life would be filled with meetings on public health and supporting local businesses whose doors were closed to their customers.

But we also watched with admiration as our businesses persevered. We watched as our community adapted and evolved. If the COVID-19 pandemic showed us anything, it was a true test — and testament — to the never-ending innovation and resiliency of businesses and communities of Union County and Northeastern Oregon.

Make-your-own-pizza to go? Check. Thanks to Local Harvest.

Curbside delivery of all your outdoor gear for the next socially distanced hike at MERA? Check. Thanks to Blue Mountain Outfitters.

Virtual showings and galleries? Check. Thanks to Art Center East.

Things might not have looked like they “normally” do, but there was plenty of creativity to keep us motivated.

Now, we’re starting to see a few more open signs. We’re starting to see a few more people. We’re starting to feel like there’s light at the end of the tunnel.

What’s felt the weirdest is not having the opportunity for the in-person outreach to our members. Not holding our banquets to celebrate and honor community members and our strong ties to agriculture. Not having the ribbon cuttings or the Business After Hours to meet and catch up with ambassadors and community members. But we never stopped working on our end — it might have just been a little quieter. The chamber is rested up and revving to go, and our plans and projects have certainly done nothing but grow.

Get ready, because 2021 is going to be our boom year. Not only do we have new events and programming up our sleeves, but we’ve also recharged and revamped our vision and plans so we are prepped and ready to best serve our community and elevate our business environment. What’s our theme? Who knows? All we know is we’re getting after it — maybe that’s our theme. Walks, runs, hops, learning, growing and sharing — nothing but action.

I’m looking forward to sharing what we have planned. And I’m really looking forward to launching new things and watching the chamber blossom and thrive. We have a strong, dedicated board of directors, wonderful and enthusiastic ambassadors and a great team at the office.

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

An American flag reflects in the window of Benchwarmers Pub & Grill on Tuesday, May 25, 2021. The historic La Grande pub — one that contends to be the second longest running bar in the Pacific Northwest — has been put up for sale by owner Matt Scarfo.

UP FOR SALE

Popular La Grande restaurant and tavern Benchwarmers on the market

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — An iconic La Grande business now is for sale.

Benchwarmers Pub and Grill, 210 Depot St., has been put up for sale by its owner, Matt Scarfo, who is chairman of the Union County Board of Commissioners.

Scarfo, who also owns Longbranch Bar and Eats, said that he is putting Benchwarmers on the market because he wanted to have more time to focus on his work as county commissioner and owner of the Longbranch.

“I can’t focus all of my time on all three. It was time for me to lighten my load,” he said.

Scarfo said parting with Benchwarmers will be hard because of his longtime ties to it.

“I’m very sad. I have loved operating it,” he said.

Scarfo purchased Benchwarmers in 2005 after working there for seven years after graduating from Eastern Oregon University in 1998.

He said operating it has been enjoyable because of all the interesting people he has met in the process, including its employees and customers.

“Everyone has a good Benchwarmers story,” Scarfo said.

He hopes that whoever purchases the business will continue operating it as the same business.

“I want to be able to go in there after I sell it and enjoy it as



Contributed Photo

This is how the interior of Benchwarmers Pub & Grill appeared about 100 years ago when it was named Herman’s Tavern.

Benchwarmers,” Scarfo said.

The building Benchwarmers is in has a long history as a restaurant and tavern. Scarfo has photos of it as a restaurant and tavern dating back to 1904.

La Grande historian Bob Bull said the building at 210 Depot St. housed a business named State Saloon and Billiard Parlor in 1912. Bull said from 1920 through the early 1950s the business operated there had many names including Herman’s Quick Lunch, Herman’s Tavern, Herman’s Rail School

Center, Herman’s Lunch and Herman’s Place.

The business became known as Herman’s Lunch and Tavern in the mid-1950s, a name it held through at least 1968, Bull said. The business by 1971 was listed as Herman’s Tavern, which it was known as through the mid-1990s before it became Benchwarmers.

The individual for whom the business was long named is believed to have been Herman Roesch, who was listed as its proprietor in the 1920s, Bull said.

New business in Enterprise will offer fresh seafood

Pier 303 is set to open this summer

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Wallowa County soon will have its own pier from which fresh seafood can be shipped to local seafood lovers, as Pier 303 Seafood Market gets ready to open.

“We called it Pier 303 because we’re trying to connect the ocean to the mountains, so that’s where the idea of the pier came in, and 303 is the address,” said Mac Freeborn, who owns the business with his wife, Zuly Freeborn.

Pier 303, set to open in mid- to late-summer adjacent to their home on Garfield Street in Enterprise, will provide both fresh — for home cooking — and prepared seafood to customers, as well as beer and wine to either consume on-premises or to take out, he said. Freeborn recently received approval for a liquor license from the Enterprise City Council.

Mac is the manager of Wallowa Lake State Park



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Zuly and Mac Freeborn stand with their dog, Coda, outside what will become Pier 303 Seafood Market on Garfield Street in Enterprise on Thursday, May 20, 2021. They hope to open by mid- to late-summer and bring fresh seafood to Wallowa County from the coast.

and Zuly works from home for Edward Jones Investments. They’re still considering whether to step away from those jobs as Pier 303 takes shape.

As for getting freshly harvested seafood to Wallowa County, it’s not as simple as casting a net or reeling in a line. It will

have to be shipped.

“We have several different vendors,” Mac said. “One of our oyster vendors ships within 24 hours (of harvest), which is a really good thing. ... Those come out of Washington (state). We’re working on some other vendors to try to do things. One of our goals is

to make trips to Newport and pick up the fish on our days off, and then it’ll be fresh.”

He also mentioned a place in Portland that serves as a storage drop-off for fishermen.

“We would just drive to Portland and pick it up,” he said. “We’re still working

Concerns mount over wildfires in Oregon

By **MICHAEL KOHN**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — As wildfires grow in number and severity each year, Oregonians are expressing greater concern for how wildfire affects their own lives.

A recent survey conducted by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center found a strong majority of Oregonians see wildfires as “a somewhat or very serious threat” to residents of the state.

Respondents described challenges with managing the forests, as well as climate change that is drying out forest areas and making them more susceptible to wildfires.

The survey was conducted May 4-10, with 918 Oregonians responding. The survey has a margin of error of 2-3%.

Here are some of the hard numbers: Nine out of 10 (93%) Oregonians see wildfires as a somewhat or very serious threat to life and property. Most people expressed concern about wildfires affecting the people of Oregon rather than their own community (68%) or their family (58%).

Most Oregonians are also convinced that the number of serious wildfires will continue to rise. More than half said wildfires in the state will increase in both frequency (55%) and severity (53%).

Beliefs that wildfires will grow in frequency and intensity are not tied to political beliefs, the survey found.

Even though liberals and conservatives have diverging viewpoints on the existence and causes of climate change, more than 85% of Oregonians of all social and economic ideologies agree that fires are likely to become more frequent and more severe.

Two-thirds of young adults (aged 18 to 29) in Oregon said wildfires are a serious threat to their family (66%) and nearly three-quarters said they are a serious threat to their community (73%). This is a significant increase (19 and

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out those details, but we’re trying to figure out the way to make it the freshest we can.”

They anticipate a variety of seafood will be on hand.

“As much as we can,” Mac said of their potential offerings. “Oysters, razor clams, stinger clams, rockfish, tuna, salmon, lobster, if we can get our hands on an abalone, Dungeness crab, blue crab — we’re still trying to figure out everything.”

Zuly said all species will not always be available.

“The ones that are ‘best practices’ for catching in season,” she said. “A lot of fish are not always in season, so they’re not always going to be fresh. So (we’ll be) using ‘best practices’ when it comes to catching fish that are in season.”

The Freeborns had hoped to open in early summer, but Mac had shoulder surgery, which delayed work on the place. They have done much of the work themselves.

In addition to seafood,

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