



SUZANNAH MOORE-HEMANN
CHAMBER CHAT

Caring community welcomes EOU students

Do you ever have so much on your mind at once you have a moment when you sort of just freeze up — like having the “spinning wheel of death” on your computer and you just have to give your motherboard a minute to digest piles of information? That’s how I’ve felt lately, especially as we’re to the end of September.

Another month behind us and I keep asking myself where has the time gone? It’s almost the end of 2021? Another year, already? Only days ago, I was in a meeting about holiday events and promotions. Holidays? Holiday Decorating Competition? Holiday bazaars? The New Year’s Eve Ball Drop? At this rate, it will be summer before we know it — hold my holiday cookies, I’ve got to get in swimsuit shape.

While it is a bit too early to get into the end-of-year reflections (and, yes, I definitely plan to partake in a holiday cookie swap — or two), the morning air feels brisker and the night skies flood the valley earlier. There are still flowers in bloom, but some trees have been kissed with the highlights of fall. Weekend golfing is slowly replaced with football games and shorts are traded in for sweaters. It’s a truly breathtaking time of year when greens are replaced with golds, but shorter days always invite an increased desire for hibernation.

Now, let me tell you — this job is tiring. So tiring. Sometimes I’ll wake up in the mornings and it feels like I have tiredness in my joints and all I want to do is hibernate. But, working for the Chamber is also so, so inspiring. We recently partnered with Eastern Oregon University’s Residence Life for the upcoming Week of Welcome to help engage incoming students with the community as they settle in for the school year, but, with safety in mind, there will be no Block Party, no Downtown Scavenger Hunt — it just wasn’t in the cards.

So, we called for “goodie bags” and storefront windows. And our businesses did not disappoint. How do you welcome students to the community without getting to talk to them? Shower them with information, invites and goodies — their first exposure to the community is going to be robust and fun.

Not only do we have businesses, including American Family Insurance, Sub Shop, Real Deals, Peak Lifestyle Studios, Country Financial, PIF Credit Union, The Local, Goss Motors and Market Place Fresh Foods “adopting” students, but also we had an outpouring of support for creating welcome pack goodie bags for students during move-in day — from the Grande Ronde Symphony and Side A Brewing to the Union Merc and Le Bebe Cakes Bakery, from Zippy Fiber, Veteran’s Memorial Pool and Tap That Growlers to Northeast Oregon Network, Papa Murphy’s, Buffalo Peak Golf Course and Horizon Credit Union. Local Harvest, Brother Bear Cafe, Mountain Works, WorkSource Oregon, Grocery Outlet, Shelter From the Storm, Elgin Opera House, Art Center East and the city of Union Chamber all provided goodies and treats to help wel-

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Antlers Espresso owner Jenna Russell, right, along with her husband, Justin, and daughter, Paisley, 5, pause for a photo in their original coffee stand on Monday, Sept. 20, 2021. The Antlers Espresso location along Adams Avenue is their first stand, which was built with the help of the Russell family in 2011.

One cup at a time

Antlers Espresso celebrates 10 years in business

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The sightings are rare, but mule deer are sometimes spotted near the Antlers Espresso drive-thru at 1701 Washington Ave.

This is fitting, for Antlers Espresso was started by co-owners Justin and Jenna Russell with the help of big game animals like mule deer.

The Russells, who are husband and wife, are shed hunters, individuals who collect antlers in forests.

The couple sold some of their antlers to raise startup funds for Antlers Espresso in 2011. Selling the valued antlers appears to have been a wise move. The couple’s business, which also has a drive-thru at 2102 Island Ave., is percolating with double espresso energy. Business at both locations is regularly brisk starting around 7 a.m. and running until closing time in the early evening. On many mornings, traffic gets heavy at Antlers Espresso stands well before 7 a.m.

“Sometimes we will have five cars lined up when we open at 5 a.m.,” said Jenna Russell, speaking of the Washington Avenue drive-thru.

A happy anniversary

Antlers Espresso marks its 10th year of operation in 2021. The Washington Avenue stand opened in September 2011, and the stand on Island Avenue opened in 2016.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Josie Higgins, 18, pours a drink at Antlers Espresso on Monday, Sept. 20, 2021.

Russell, when reflecting on the past 10 years, praises the help she and her husband received from family members in getting both sites operational.

“We could not have done it without them,” she said.

Russell said operating the business is a labor of love because of her passion for people, and for coffee.

“I love coffee so much,” she said. “I could not live without it.”

Russell said she feels like she could conquer the world after a good cup of coffee in the morning. She wants others to feel the same way.

“I want to spread the positivity,” she said.

Russell enjoys the atmosphere at her coffee stands because it gives her the chance to get to know a wide variety of people, the vast majority of whom are regulars.

“We get to meet people of all ages and backgrounds,” she said.

Russell, who has a degree in elementary education from Western Washington University,

became interested in opening a coffee shop while working for Jitterbug Espresso in Burlington, Washington, for seven years in the early 2000s.

“That is where I learned the tricks of the trade,” she said.

One of the reasons the Russells selected the Washington Avenue site was the proximity to the intersection of Adams Avenue and Island Avenue.

“It is the heart of La Grande. It is one of the busiest intersections in La Grande,” she said.

The location on Island Avenue is good because it offers additional space for motorists since it is in a large parking lot, plus it is not far from Interstate 84.

“We have a lot of regulars there but we also draw a lot of traffic off the freeway,” she said.

Antlers is doing well despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic is not impacting how many customers Antlers serves, but it is harder to get supplies of

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Community Bank set to consolidate La Grande locations

Downtown bank branch will close in December

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande will be losing one of its Community Bank branches.

The downtown location at 904 Adams Avenue is set to close Friday, Dec. 10, 2021. In an announcement on Sept. 14, the bank stated the location will be consolidated with the La Grande Valley branch at 2313 Adams Avenue.

“The last 18 months or so, banking has undergone a significant change where a lot of our customers have been introduced to other



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

The sign at the 904 Adams Ave. Community Bank, shown here on Tuesday, Sept. 21, 2021, will go dim in December when the branch consolidates with the bank’s other location in La Grande.

forms of banking during COVID-19,” Community Bank President and CEO Tom Moran said. “That allows them to bank without entering a bank branch in order to adhere to social distancing.”

According to Moran, the reduced flow of in-person traffic led to the decision to combine into one branch. He noted that a large number of Community Bank customers have embraced digital banking

methods during the pandemic. The Joseph-based bank has locations across Northeastern Oregon and Southeastern Washington.

All the in-person services offered at the downtown branch will still be available to patrons at the La Grande Valley branch. Moran does not expect any major disruption in operations with the transition.

Customers of the bank will not be required to make any adjustments during the branch closure, unless they have a safe deposit box at the downtown location. Account numbers will not be changed and the use of debit and credit cards will not be interrupted, as well as online banking, the bank’s mobile app and handwritten checks.

The decision comes just weeks after Umpqua Bank announced it will close its downtown branch on Adams Avenue and consolidate it into the Island Avenue location. Umpqua Bank stated similar reasoning, noting that online banking has lessened the need for in-person services.

According to Moran, it remains to be determined how the Community Bank staff will be impacted by the transition.

“Any time we have things like this we do have spots that we’re looking to fill,” he said. “We hope to retain as many employees as we can in the transition.”

The branch will officially close at 5 p.m. on Dec. 10.

Chamber cancels banquet — again

COVID-19 cases force cancellation of 2021 Farmer-Merchant Banquet

The Observer

LA GRANDE — For the second year in a row, the Union County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors has canceled the annual Farmer-Merchant Banquet.

The chamber in a press release stated the board made the difficult decision at its meeting in September.

“In light of the increased COVID-19 cases reported and out of an abundance of caution, which could make hosting a banquet highly infeasible, the board agreed it was the best decision to cancel — and hopefully return in 2022 with the best banquet and program to date,” the release said.

The board made a similar decision in 2020.

The board weighed many alternative options to recognize and honor the achievements of the agricultural community, including video interviews with the award presenters and recipients. However, according to the press release, the board decided other options would not “adequately highlight and do justice to the important sense of community the banquet affords.”

Caleb Sampson, vice chair of the board and Outreach/Events Committee co-chair, commented in the release that alternative formats and virtual options “do not adequately convey the sense of community and accomplishment the banquet, as a platform, creates and provides.”

The primary goal of the banquet is to honor the ag community, said Shawn Risteen, chair of the chamber board, in the release.

“Honoring and respecting the sense of community the banquet provides really resonates with us,” he said. “It has been and always will be our primary goal to honor the contributions of the ag community.”

The chamber board said it will explore creative ideas for hosting next year’s award banquet — in whatever shape or format it will be — and is planning new ways to express gratitude for the hardworking members of the agricultural community in the interim.