



Staying busy

Melanie Aschenbrenner, a construction worker, staples housewrap to a house/office on Wallowa Avenue in Joseph on Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. The building is being built by Charlie Kissinger Construction.

Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Despite hurdles, builders keep building in Wallowa County

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The construction business is making progress in Wallowa County, despite difficulties in various aspects of it, contractors say.

Labor and materials seem to be the top areas of concern to those interviewed.

“Our biggest issue is labor. It’s really hard to find, especially young people who want to work or anybody with experience,” said Charlie Kissinger, the semi-retired owner of Charlie Kissinger Construction. “Around here, there’s a lot of construction going on so the guys we have are spread pretty thin. I know it’s a problem everywhere.”

“It’s pretty tough (finding workers),” son Josh Kissinger said.

The younger Kissinger manages the day-to-day operations.

“I got pretty lucky,” Josh Kissinger said. “I’ve got some pretty good people now.”

Amy Wellens, co-owner with husband, Keith, of Wellens General Contractor, agreed labor can be a problem.



What will become medical offices on the ground floor with a residence above is under construction Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021, by Charlie Kissinger Construction on Wallowa Avenue in Joseph. The construction business is doing well in Wallowa County, despite troubles obtaining materials.

Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

“That is true. It’s unfortunate, even with the young kids coming out of school, there are so many opportunities for subcontractors,” she said, adding that there seems to be a shortage of training of young people in construction-related skills. “There’s tons of money to be made. Those skill sets are going to be lost.”

Wellens said her company,

although based in the county and employing people here, doesn’t do a lot of work in Wallowa County. Their jobs are mostly in La Grande, Pendleton, Lewiston and Moscow, Idaho, and Pullman, Washington. She said the company prefers to work in the county, but most of their work takes them outside.

She did say about 90% of her employees are in the

county.

Everyone agreed that the cost of materials and their availability really puts a hitch in things.

Kathy Bohms, office manager for the Joseph-based Chris Borgerding Contracting, said workers haven’t really been a problem for them.

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Students eat more fresh produce after farm visits, survey finds

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

SALEM — Recent Oregon studies indicate that students who visit farms or meet local producers through farm-to-school educational programs are more likely to eat fresh fruits and vegetables.

Statewide data are not yet available, but recent studies in some Oregon districts show that participation in farm-to-school programs influences students’ nutritional choices.



Barker

“I’ve seen firsthand how much of an impact it has had on students’ willingness to try new foods,” said Melina Barker, director of the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network.

Barker said students who visit farms, work in school gardens or have farmers visit their classrooms all appear more willing to eat fresh produce than they were before having those experiences.

One example comes from Rogue Valley Farm 2 School, or RVF2S, in Southern Oregon.

RVF2S recently partnered with Project Impact to track student behavior after participation in a program that involved lessons, farm visits and tasting tables.

The soon-to-be-published data show a 70% increase in the number of teachers reporting that their students requested more fresh vegetables after the program — not just students eating more fresh produce, but asking for it.

Sheila Foster, executive director of RVF2S, said she believes the positive experiences students have at farms or in gardens makes them more likely to want fresh food.

“What we’re doing is tapping into creating a culture around healthy food and lots of positive experiences around that,” said Foster.

Pre-COVID, Foster said, farm visits typically took place twice a year — once in the spring, and once in the fall. During a 3- to 4-hour farm visit, students would help with harvest, meet farm owners and farmworkers and then prepare a meal together on-site, such as pizza and salad.

During COVID, farm visits have been more limited, but Foster said students have still eaten more fresh produce afterward.

Other districts have seen similar results.

Mindy Bell, executive director of the School Garden Project of Lane County, said students in her program work in a school garden, take field trips and sometimes interact with local producers.

Bell said teachers and students were surveyed after participating in the program. About 68% of students said they tried a fruit or vegetable they’d never tried before and 66% said they now like a larger number of fruits and vegetables than previously.

Bell said students love the program, and for some, it’s where they bloom.

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Economists flummoxed over statistic

By FEDOR ZARKHIN
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregonians’ typical incomes grew more in the last decade than in any other state, and one of the state’s chief economists isn’t sure if there’s a root cause.

“That’s one we don’t fully understand,” said Josh Lehner, an analyst with the state’s Office of Economic Analysis.

Oregon’s median household incomes rose from about \$47,000 to \$67,000, not adjusted for inflation, from 2010, the year after the Great Recession, to 2019, the peak of the recovery.

At 44%, that’s the greatest increase in median household income of any state, followed by Colorado, at 43%, and Washington, with 41%.

Of course, there are the usual suspects — and it starts with the economy.

As Oregon recovered

over the course of the 2010s, more people worked, raising household incomes, and more people who wanted jobs had them. As economies improve, wages rise, Lehner said, and that’s what fuels most Oregonians’ incomes.

“Our wage growth is just phenomenal,” he said.

But as Lehner’s analysis showed Oregon’s 2018 median incomes going past the U.S. median for the first time since the 1960s, he wondered if there was something else that could explain the growth.

But beyond pointing to an improving economy, there’s a chance he won’t know if there’s a specific, root cause behind the growth.

That’s because the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant economic upheaval will likely present entirely different puzzles for Lehner and his colleagues to solve.

“We’ve moved on to dif-

ferent things in the last two years,” he said.

For Lehner, understanding what’s been driving Oregon’s median income growth isn’t a case of idle curiosity. The state uses his office’s forecasts to set the two-year budget and, if the state raises more than expected from personal income taxes, the surplus goes back to taxpayers.

Since 2016, the state has had multiple record surplus “kickers” refunded to taxpayers. With accurate forecasts, policymakers have more money to conduct the state’s business.

“Our goal is to not have a kicker,” Lehner said.

The 2020 rebate paid out to taxpayers was a record \$1.6 billion at the time, and the one to be paid out next year will be about \$1.9 billion, another record.

Experts stumped

Lehner isn’t the only one without clear answers about Oregon’s rising income,

which includes a household’s wages, salaries and tips for anyone 15 and older in the household.

Gail Krumenauer of the Oregon Employment Department said she doesn’t know exactly why Oregon has fared so well.

As a general rule, Oregon does worse when there’s a recession and then does better when there’s a recovery, she said. And, also as a rule, recoveries last longer than recessions, potentially putting Oregon ahead of the rest of the country.

One possible reason Oregon does better during recoveries, Krumenauer said, is because unlike many other states, people keep moving to Oregon, providing a consistent labor pool when jobs become available again.

Another key reason Oregon’s economy overall has fared well post-Great Recession could boil down to industry diversity and

quality of life, said University of Oregon economics academic expert Tim Duy.

The state has a lot of different industries, including forestry, technology, agriculture, wine and marijuana, Duy said, making its recovery stronger.

“Anything you want done, you can probably find a firm in Oregon that does it,” Duy said. “If you have a broad-based recovery, that’s going to lift a lot of boats.”

Then, there’s the fact that Oregon has a steady stream of migrants that Duy said could be attracted by Oregon’s quality of life. People move in from expensive states like California, he said, and there’s a national trend of people moving to coastal areas.

But when asked why wages and incomes have been growing more in Oregon than elsewhere, Duy and Krumenauer suggested asking Lehner, the state economist.

“I don’t have a good

answer for what, specifically, was happening,” Duy said.

Minimum wage

Lehner also looked at the impact of the minimum wage, which was raised incrementally starting in 2016. But that doesn’t explain the statewide trend, he said, because employers were often offering higher pay than even increased minimum wage rates. Moreover, incomes grew across income brackets, not just for the lowest-paid workers.

Neither was the increase due to an influx of high-paying tech jobs in the Portland area. Those account for some tens of thousands of jobs, he said, but “don’t move the statewide needle that much.”

“They matter, but that does not explain very much the statewide movement,” Lehner said.

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