Josh Rindfleisch/Wallowa County Chieftain

The rental shop at Ferguson Ridge in 2022 has a new owner. The shop had been owned and operated by Charlie Kissinger since 2006. Now Adrianne Gass, a professional ski patroller, has secured the bindings.

Ferguson Ridge to pass the ski wax to new shop owner

Ski patroller takes over shop from longtime operator Kissinger

BY JOSH RINDFLEISCH
Wallowa County Chieftain

FERGUSON RIDGE — The ski area Ferguson Ridge, referred to locally as "Fergi," has a new owner in the rental shop.

The shop had been owned and operated by Charlie Kissinger since 2006. Now Adrianne Gass, a professional ski patroller, has secured the bindings.

"I just want to keep the low-key, family-friendly vibe of Fergi and have the shop continue to support this community. I want to have quality, affordable equipment and work toward having a shop that can take care of most, if not all, of their ski and boarding needs," she explained.

Josh Rindfleisch/Wallowa County Chieftain

With assistance, Adrianne Gass lights a fire to make it comfortable for customers the first day of business.

Gass and her family moved to the area about six years ago. Gass and her husband, Perry, are both skiers and previously worked at a resort in Tahoe, where they first met. She was in ski patrol there and he did lift maintenance. Perry grew up in Wallowa County and ended up returning when a job opened in Joseph at the the Wallowa Lake Tramway, where he had worked in his youth.

Gass first heard about Kissinger when she was at a party telling someone she wanted to tune skis. Someone said she should talk to Kissinger.

"I called him up, and I was like, 'Hey, I want to work for you.'" Kissinger was noncommittal at first, so she decided to "just show up and hang out and help him. I sort of just pushed my way in there, I guess. For a while I didn't know if he wanted me to hang around, but eventually he didn't seem to mind too much."

Kissinger has spent many years operating the shop and said it was bittersweet to let it go.

Josh Rindfleisch/Wallowa County Chieftain

The snow has arrived in Novemer 2022 and the slopes are open at Ferguson Ridge ski area in Wallowa County.

"The ski shop has changed a lot since I bought it," he said. "For whatever reason we have a lot of young families who chose to rent their skis instead of buy them, partly because there's no one around here to buy them from, I think. It's become a popular way to go for a lot of families, just to rent skis. As the kids grow up they can just change skis instead of having to buy new ones. It's an economical thing for families to do."

Running the shop has been "kind of a lifestyle thing for me," he said, "but it's every weekend from Thanksgiving until the first of April, so it will be nice not to have to be tied down to it."

Kissinger said he has always enjoyed Fergi and liked watching the kids grow up from season to season.

"It's been a lot of fun, and I enjoyed it a lot," he said. "The previous owner was trying to sell his business and there wasn't anyone to do the ski shop there, so I told him I'd do it at least until we found someone else that wanted to do it, and I ended up doing it quite a while."

Kissinger said that even though he won't be running the shop, he'll continue to help out and do other things on the hill as usual. He is confident that Gass and her family will be able to build on the shop's success.

Gass said she wants to do more in terms of binding testing, getting equipment tuned and waxed more regularly, sending it out in better condition and generally upgrading the fleet.

"It's a process," she said. "Get rid of some of the old stuff, and get a few new things and continue that."

She believes that will require some capital. She hopes to earn a little profit this season and use it to pay for improvements next season.

"I'm trying to be incremental," she said. "It's not quite how I envisioned it this year, but I will take it one step at a time and keep the upgrades going, as Charlie was, to keep the inventory current but not enough so we have to raise prices."

Oregon climbing but still lag national average

BY MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

Oregonians have historically earned less than people in other parts of the country, but over the past decade the state has narrowed the gap considerably.

Oregon's per capita personal income was $61,596 last year, according to a new study by Molly Hendrickson, an economist with the Oregon Employment Department. That's 96% of the national average. Oregonians made only 88% of the national average in 2011.

Personal income consists of earnings — the wages and salaries from employment — plus investment income and government payments. It recently has included the pandemic stimulus checks that continued into last year.

Oregon's personal income grew by 8.2% last year, according to Hendrickson, tied with Washington for the 10th fastest growth in the nation. The state ranked 21st overall in per capita personal income.

Oregon incomes have been rising sharply for several years, though economists aren't exactly clear on why.

An influx of professional workers moving here from other states is surely one factor, as is the state's growing tech sector. The poverty rate has dropped steadily in the populous Portland area, reflecting low unemployment and rising wages — especially at the lower ends of the wage scale. (Poverty rates, however, are set at a national scale and have little bearing on affordability in a high-cost market like Portland.)

Stimulus payments inflated personal incomes last year, as did wealthy people selling stock to lock in gains on Wall Street and to avoid prospective federal tax hikes on the rich (tax increases that Congress did not ultimately pass).

Oregon's outlook for income growth isn't as rosy over the next few years, according to a new forecast from state economists. They expect a mild recession beginning next summer, costing the state 24,000 jobs and pushing unemployment up to 5.4%. (Oregon's jobless rate is currently around 4.1%.)

And with stimulus payments behind us, and stocks in bear market territory, upper income Oregonians have less incentive to cash out their investments.

Forecasters expect just 2.4% personal income growth in 2023, with growth climbing to around 5% for the few years after that. That's still relatively healthy by historical standards, reflecting optimism that the coming downturn will be short and soft.

"The recession is expected to be mild," forecasters wrote, "and personal income is expected to remain stable despite job losses."

Reviews

Continued from B1

line reviews are fake, according to the World Economic Forum.

That may not sound like much, but the organization estimates that those fake reviews cost $152 billion in online spending annually.

And even if the fake reviews don't cost consumers directly, they can influence purchasers who may choose another product based on a negative review, to the tune of $791 billion in e-commerce spending in the United States alone, the group said.

"It's a real problem for both consumers and business," said Daniel Castro, director of the Center for Data Innovation, which published a report in September on the issue. "It can cause financial losses, bad purchases and physical injury." For example, if a device that is supposed to protect against slippery surfaces fails, it can cause injury, he said.

Castro's study found that 49% of American consumers trust online reviews as much as recommendations from friends and family, and another 28% put just as much value on them as articles written by experts.

"The problem with fake reviews is there's a lot of incentive to cheat," he said, adding that people can use fake reviews to build up their own businesses or to put down a competitor.

Sites that are in the business of "selling trust," such as Yelp or Google, "want to be a trusted source," Castro said. "But there's only so much a platform can do when they are up against people trying to cheat the system. That's where state laws can make a difference."

Few states have laws or regulations specifically targeting online reviews, he said.

Consumer-friendly states, such as California, Colorado, Illinois and Massachusetts, use their broad consumer protection laws to go after miscreants, while many other states are silent on the issue, he said, or have weak laws.

The Federal Trade Commission is considering new rules to address the problem. In the meantime, it is teaming up with states to file lawsuits on behalf of consumers, since the federal agency cannot seek monetary relief on its own.

Tougher rules

In August, half a dozen states, including California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts and New York, and the FTC sued the online apartment and roommate site Roomster and its owners, for allegedly paying for fake reviews to bolster its reviews and listings. The suit alleges the site also charges customers for access to sham apartment listings. The suit is pending in U.S. District Court in New York.

Recently, the FTC announced it is exploring tougher rules to combat fake reviews, the suppression of negative reviews and payments for positive reviews and served notice in the Federal Register that it is soliciting public comments on the proposed rule through January.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta said his state joined the suit against Roomster because it is "facing a housing crisis out of proportion. If there's an app, they (consumers) are going to trust it … especially when they are seeing all these letters of support." But he said it's not just about Roomster or apartment platforms.

"It's a real problem for both consumers and business,. It can cause financial losses, bad purchases and physical injury."

— Daniel Castro, director of the Center for Data Innovation

"We think it's likely to be a problem elsewhere," Bonta said in a phone interview. "I can't comment on other investigations, but I don't think this is a phenomenon isolated to just Roomster."

In a statement to news organizations, Roomster said the allegations are not true and are an example of "overreach" by the FTC.

Bonta said he thinks California's unfair competition laws and regulations are sufficient but said the FTC's decision to seek comment on proposed new, tougher federal regulations has merit. "The more watchdogs on the block the more regulations and laws on this, the better," he said.

Rich Cleland, assistant director of the FTC's Division of Advertising Practices, said the agency was looking at new rules to "shore up our potential to secure civil penalties."

He said the department partnered with the half dozen states in the Roomster case because states are able to obtain monetary damages — a consequence taken away from the feds last year in a U.S. Supreme Court case.

By the numbers

49%
of consumers trust online reviews as much as recommendations from friends and family

28%
value them as much as articles written by experts

700
companies warned last year by the FTC about using false endorsements

Also last year, the FTC put more than 700 companies on notice that if they used false endorsements, the agency was ready to take action. The FTC has been hamstrung, Cleland said, because last year's high court ruling in AMG Capital Management LLC v. FTC stripped the agency of its ability to seek monetary damages in cases in which it sued.

Swift action

Review platforms such as Yelp, Google, Amazon and Trustpilot have mechanisms to try to cut down on fake reviews, representatives of several companies said.

Julianne Rowe, a Yelp spokesperson, one of the most popular review platforms, said in a phone interview that the company uses both technological and human resources to weed out fake reviews. The company works to track down IP addresses, looks for multiple reviews from the same person or group, and takes into account flags from other consumers pointing to possible illicit reviews, she said.

Yelp, she said, prohibits reviews that the company has solicited. "What it looks for are reviews that may be less reliable, users that are less active, unhelpful rants and raves, conflicts of interest and employees, friends or family," she said. Only 70% of submitted reviews are published, she said.

Amazon announced in October that it had filed suit against 10 American companies, as well as firms in Spain and Italy, seeking to stop the sources of fake reviews.

Google said its policies "clearly state reviews must be based on real experiences and information, and we closely monitor 24/7 for fraudulent content, using a combination of people and technology. When we find scammers trying to mislead people, we take swift action ranging from content removal to account suspension and even litigation."