

Where are the workers?

Worker Shortage



FIRST IN A 5-PART SERIES

Workers in short supply amid of explosive job growth

Editor's Note

Today is part one of a series of articles by EO Media Group to publish over the next five weeks, looking at the issue of the lack of workers for jobs in Central and Eastern Oregon; why workers are not returning to previous-held jobs; and how businesses functioning without being fully staffed.

By SUZANNE ROIG
THE BULLETIN

With record job growth in Oregon, Whitney Keatman never imagined she would have problems finding workers for her Scott Street location of Sparrow Bakery in Bend.

And she didn't. It was getting them to stay that has plagued her long time Bend business.

In the past year Keatman, a co-owner, made 117 job offers and most were accepted. But after just three months, only

about 42 workers remained. The bakery needed a minimum of 20 workers at the Scott Street location and by the end of this summer there were six.

So last week, she made a hard decision: She will close the bakery at the Old Iron Works Arts District.

"We've been struggling for seven years with moments of success," Keatman said. "Over the years we've had on again and off again good managers. When you don't have the right management, you have a hard time retaining workers."

"It's common for people to come and begin training and then get another job offer that competes with wages," Keatman said. "There's no allegiance. It's a competitive market for employers."

Hard time

During a year of record job growth in Oregon, employers like Keatman have had the hardest time finding workers to fill positions. Companies, particularly in the leisure and hospitality industries, across the state are scrambling to find workers.

The hospitality, hotel, restaurant and tourism-related industries added 6% more jobs this year, economists say. Hiring is more competitive than ever as employers raise wages, offer signing bonuses, referral bonuses, improved benefits, even subsidies for housing. But those incentives also have to compete against federal unemployment benefits, an increase in household income from federal stimulus funds and retirements.

Just ask Robin Clement, co-owner of Monkless Belgian Ales in Bend. Clement and her husband opened their pub just four months before the pandemic shut it down to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Fast forward to July when tourism season in Central Oregon hits a high note and the state is reopening as COVID-19 cases wane, the Clements are scrambling to get enough workers to keep the brew pub open six days a week.

In an interview with an out-of-town worker recently seeking a lead prep cook position, Clement said she made an offer on the spot to the worker. The applicant dined with his family for dinner that night.

But the next day, he told her Clement he took another position, because it The job he took offered slightly more money and a leadership role, something the small pub couldn't offer, Clement she said.

"It was really disappointing, but par for the course. He was one of the few interviews that I set up who actually showed," Clement said. "2020 was a cake walk compared to 2021."

"Customers have little grace. Their patience is thin. It's been hard dealing with expectations."

Tough spot

Only 32,500 eligible workers statewide are sitting out the labor market waiting for the pandemic to lift, who may have health concerns or child care issues, said Gail Krumenauer, Oregon Employment Department economist.

And another 12,000 workers statewide, who had been in the leisure and hospitality industry, now are working in the transportation/warehousing and delivery sector because of higher wages and benefits, Krumenauer said. The average wage for leisure and hospitality in Oregon is about \$14 an hour but in transportation/warehousing it's \$18 to \$20 an hour.

"That's a tough spot to be in. The hiring is 1-1/2 times greater than we've ever seen," Krumenauer said. "This spring we had 98,000 job vacancies, that's a lot of what is fueling the worker shortage."

"That's a perfect storm: a lot of things happening all at once and it makes it hard for employers. Everyone's hiring."

Layer these events on top of one another and mix in pent up demand for buying and traveling and the demand on goods and services increases, which in turn increases demand on the need for more workers, Krumenauer said.

"Expanded benefits helped families in Central Oregon and nationwide keep food on the table and a roof over their heads when workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own during this public health pandemic," U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, said in an email. "Research has repeatedly debunked the baloney that benefits discouraged work."

"What's clear in my conversations with Oregonians all over our state is that the lack of child care, housing costs, the unique challenges of ser-



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Robin Clement and her husband, co-owners of Monkless Belgian Ales in Bend, opened the pub just four months before the pandemic shut it down to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

vice industry work and other factors are what's really keeping many people from returning to the workplace."

Going down

The unemployment rate in July was 5.6% in Deschutes County, lower than the double-digit rates at the height of pandemic-related closures, but still above February 2020 when it was 3.3%, according to the Oregon Employment Department monthly unemployment figures. Crook and Jefferson counties too have seen their unemployment levels return to near normal levels in the months following the business closures imposed to slow the spread of the virus.

Crook County's unemployment rate was 7% in July, compared to 4.4% in February 2020. And Jefferson County's unemployment rate was 6.5% in July, compared to 4.1% in February 2020.

In Eastern Oregon, Baker County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July 2021, com-

pared to 8.7% the prior July. Union County's unemployment rate was 5.8% in July 2021, down from 9.4% the prior July. Wallowa County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July, compared to 8.3% the previous year and Umatilla County was 5.5% in July 2021, down from 7.3% in July 2020.

Statewide the unemployment rate was 5.2% in July, just slightly below the national unemployment rate of 5.4%.

"There's no doubt that (the federal boost of the unemployment insurance) is constraining the supply of labor," said Damon Runberg, Oregon Employment Department regional economist. "But I don't think it is a significant degree."

"The labor market will likely ease some as we move into the fall, but that will be more a reflection of a reduction in job vacancies rather than a massive influx of workers who lost their federal unemployment insurance benefits."

Hermiston parks boss retires; city attorney is next

By ERICK PETERSON
EDITOR/SENIOR REPORTER

Latin music and happy chatter filled Hermiston's Harkenrider Senior Activity Center on Sept. 1, as folks gave a joyful send off to Larry Fetter, Hermiston's long-serving parks and recreation director.

Fetter retired last week. People often ask him if his life in the parks and recreation department resembles the zany, antic-fueled TV show, "Parks and Recreation."

"There's some interesting analogies," he said.

During his tenure, people came to him with new ideas. When someone asks for a dodgeball league, for example, he is nonplussed. Sure, he thinks. Why not?

He has seen trends come and go. Right now, family physical fitness activities are popular. He has helped organize obstacle courses, a recent children's triathlon and the bathtub races at the city's Melon Fest.

"Things like that make this job very interesting," he said.

When he started his career in 1984, he began a parks and recreation program in Colville, Washington. Youth soccer and basketball were big. A 100-mile-long ride around the area also was popular. There were brew-making events.

Here in Hermiston, Festival Street activities, tree lightings and firework shows have become mainstays. People expect them, and his department hosts them frequently. One event can draw 5,000 to 6,000 people.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Hermiston Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter talks with guests on Sept. 1, 2021, during a retirement party in his honor at the Harkenrider Senior Activity Center in Hermiston.

Fetter has served as Hermiston's parks and rec director for 10 years. He said he was proud to have been the director during the third iteration of the Funland Playground at the foot of the Hermiston Butte. Fetter said he has heard from people visiting from out of town who will stay for up to three days just for the playground.

He also said the city will need to manage it well. Funland Playground reopened July 4 following a community effort to rebuild the site after a fire burned it down in 2019. A fire in 2001 burned down the original playground, which the city built in 1996.

He called the destruction of the previous playground "heart-wrenching." If the completion of the new playground was a highlight of his tenure, the ruin of the old one was a low. Ruled as arson, the fire pained Fetter and many people in the community.

In anticipation of his retirement, he and his department created a park's plan update, which the city council adopted. This sets the develop-

ment plan for parks in Hermiston for the next 10 years. The plan includes a wellness center with an indoor aquatic area and a trail expansion, making a 10-mile loop.

Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith said Fetter accomplished much in this role and credited him with making "a great vision for the park's department, for recreation programs."

The city is hiring to replace Fetter and in the meantime appointed recreation manager Brandon Artz as the parks interim director.

"I'm very excited about that," Artz said. "I'm taking more of a leadership role and filling in some big shoes now that Larry is leaving."

Artz also has some plans. He said Hermiston is below the national average when it comes to park acreage, so he would like to develop new parks.

The city also is going to say goodbye to its longtime attorney, Gary Luisi.

Luisi has served as Hermiston's city attorney for 23

years, and Sept. 30 marks his last day on the job. He said he is reaching an age that is right for retirement.

"I'm 75," Luisi said. "You're not going to live forever."

Though he will continue to practice law, he is giving

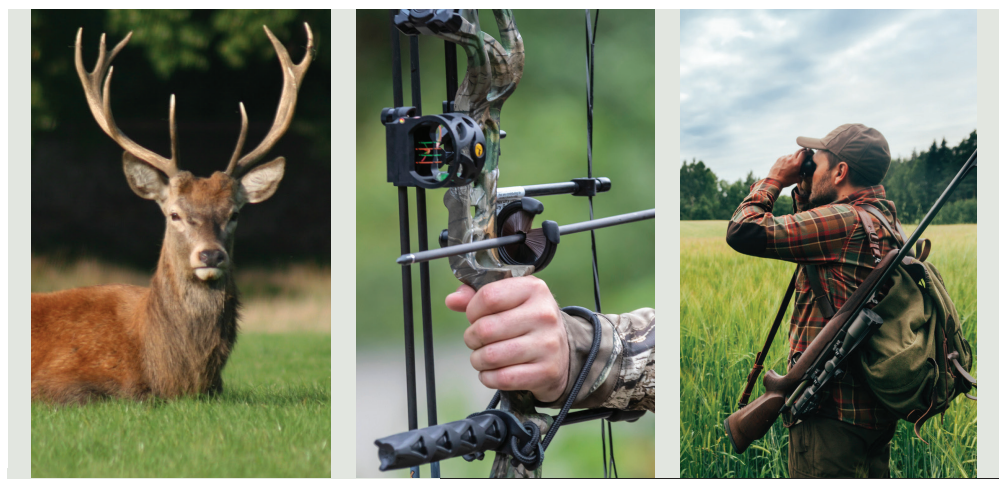
up his city job, which should free him up for other pursuits.

Smith said Luisi has a great amount of institutional knowledge because of his experience and that will be difficult to replace. The city has begun interviewing a candidate for the position, and

the city council has the final say on who gets the job.

Luisi said he has no input into the hiring process, though he hopes the city will hire a person with good experience. The new city attorney, he said, also should care for this town.

The family of
RICHARD BONDURANT
Would like to give a
GREAT BIG THANK YOU
To the following:
Hermiston Police Department
Umatilla County Officials
First Christian Church Family
Guardian Angel Home Staff
Family, friends and all the other volunteers
that helped us locate our husband,
father and uncle.
Again, to all a GREAT BIG
THANK YOU, THANK YOU!



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