

Shortage of employees leads to altered business models

Worker Shortage



SECOND IN A 5-PART SERIES

Editor's Note

This is the second in a five-part series by EO Media Group looking at the issue of the lack of workers for jobs in Central and Eastern Oregon — why workers are not returning to previously held jobs and how businesses are pivoting to function without being fully staffed.

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH AND ALEX WITTWER**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Enterprise isn't the largest town in Eastern Oregon, with a population of 2,052. But it's just a few miles from the ever-popular town of Joseph and its vistas across Wallowa Lake to the peaks of the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

In a normal summer, Terminal Gravity Brewing in Enterprise would be busy all days of the week serving local, handcrafted beers to patrons and traditional brewpub fare. But due to a labor shortage this summer the company had to cut hours during its lunch rush, and close altogether on Tuesdays.

Natalie Millar, chief executive officer of the Wallowa County brewery, said it's an inevitability that they'll have to close for even more days as their skeleton crew of cooks, servers and hostesses return

to school — high school, to be exact.

"Heading into fall it is looking like we're going to have to cut an additional day and probably cut lunches," Millar said. "It is pretty brutal."

Demand for restaurant meals soared over the summer as restrictions lifted across Oregon. Nearly all restaurants saw a huge uptick in customers. But where demand reached new heights, a new challenge appeared — staffing the restaurants that have balanced narrow margins and threats of closure since the pandemic hit.

In order to keep employees from burning out, Millar cut operating hours and closed down the brewery on Tuesdays to keep what employees she has from becoming overwhelmed in



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Alonso Mendoza, a server at Terminal Gravity Brewery and Pub, Enterprise, clears a table and returns empty glasses during pre-dinner rush on Sept. 2, 2021.

an industry well known for its high turnover rate and low wages.

"I think we've reached the mindset of 'we have what we have,'" she said. "We'll keep hiring as much as possible, but we need to understand that we've got to adjust with what the situation is instead of waiting for the situation to adjust itself."

No chance for profit

Millar is not alone. Several restaurants across the region have reported challenges with hiring workers over the summer. Some blamed expanded federal unemployment benefits as the culprit for lower workforce participation, even though the region has seen lower unemployment benefits claims now than it had before the pandemic started. Others recognized the high cost of living, taxes and low supply of housing that has made rents and home prices balloon.

Millar explained that while business picked up considerably over the summer, the lack of staffing and overburdened industry has a cascading effect with other restaurants, causing a feedback loop of demand and short supply. As one busi-

ness cuts its hours, patrons look elsewhere for a meal.

Sports Bar and Eatery was experiencing severe worker burnout in June due to staffing shortages, which led to closing the restaurant on Tuesdays. The situation there has changed little. While the sports bar is open seven days a week, it's had to cut evening hours, close earlier and open later throughout the week. "On Sundays and Mondays we're one of the only restaurants open on Main Street, so we're extremely busy, but extremely short staffed," said Jessica Eastland, manager at Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery. "If we had an adequate staff, it would be a very profitable time for us but that's the thing — we've got people who are working overtime hours when we could have had other employees working those hours, so that we weren't paying more in wages. Our wages right now are through the roof because we have so many employees that are working overtime every single week because we are so short staffed."

Rolling with the punches

For Bruce Rogers, COVID-19 has presented the challenge of keeping two businesses profitable. He and his daughter, Harvest Rogers, own both Timber's Feederly in Elgin and Local Harvest in La Grande.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unimaginable challenges in staffing for both restaurants. With the shortage of workers and revolving mandates for public dining, the owners have adjusted to rolling with the punches.

"This far into it and with what we've seen, the rules have changed and the rules are different and will change again," Bruce Rogers said.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Head manager Caitlyn Foley plates up dishes in the kitchen at Terminal Gravity Brewery and Pub, Enterprise, on Sept. 2, 2021. In a normal summer, Terminal Gravity Brewing would be busy all days of the week serving up local, handcrafted beers to patrons and serving up traditional brewpub fare, but due to the labor shortage the company had to cut hours during its lunch rush and close down on Tuesdays.

over to to-go and delivery only," Bruce Rogers said. "We had to start up a delivery service to remain competitive at that point, but when we opened back up again we shut the delivery off."

Both Timber's Feederly and Local Harvest changed hours from seven days a week to five days a week, and both close an hour earlier than they used to. One advantage to owning two restaurants is the ability to rotate staff from one location to another if one restaurant is short.

"We have several employees that are able to work at both places, mostly our top three people are very versatile for us," Bruce Rogers said. "They fill in everywhere for us."

Filling the gap

With pandemic-related federal unemployment programs ending, Bruce Rogers is expecting an increase in prospective employees. In addition, students returning to attend Eastern Oregon University in the fall are promising for filling positions.

To cope with employment challenges, the owners have adjusted the scope of employees compared to who they would typically hire in the past.

"The demographics have changed," Bruce Rogers said. "We've started hiring younger people and we've started hiring older people. When we find people that are qualified, we try to snatch them up."

They hired, for example, two 16-year-olds in the summer and had a family friend who is a retired teacher come work for the restaurants.

"We've leaned on friends and family to help us through this time as well," Rogers said.

Hermiston artist raps about latest paintings

By **ERICK PETERSON**
Editor/Senior Reporter

As an artist with a social media following, Hermiston resident Amy Fuentes is used to attention. Now, though, a new venue is housing her work.

The Hermiston Public Library chose Fuentes as its artist of the month. Her paintings will be on display in the library throughout September.

The 22-year-old artist said she is figuring out her future. Currently a personal banker at Washington Federal in Hermiston, she has been living in town since the seventh grade. She graduated from Hermiston High School, and she took art classes for three of her four years there.

But it was back in elementary school where she "discovered" herself as an



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

The work of Hermiston artist Amy Fuentes is on display at the Hermiston Library during the month of September.

artist. Her uncle Gerardo Zamora, an artist, introduced art to her.

"I'd watch him draw, and it intrigued me," she said. He showed both her and her sister how to draw. He is a pencil artist, but also does pen and graffiti-style work. She keeps in close contact with him by

sending him her work. He responds by telling her how proud he is of her.

Meanwhile, Fuentes' sister also continued her drawing but began work in fashion, drawing dresses.

Fuentes draws subjects that interest her. Music is a topic to which she frequently returns. She has

drawn JayCool, Kendrick Lamar and Drake.

She likes the messages of these rap artists. JayCool, for instance, speaks to the meaning of life — life is more than money and fame. Little things matter. Family matters.

When she started painting at age 19 she was merely trying to decorate her room. She viewed decor on social media and she would use it for inspiration. This was a good way to save money.

Painting on canvas, moving away from pencil,

she developed as an artist. She continued painting, and she shared her work on her own social media. Then, one day, the library called.

"I was really surprised," she said. "I was just posting for myself and maybe to get my work out there, but you never know who is watching."

She is excited to have five paintings on display. They are of the rappers she likes, people who influenced her. One work, in particular, features Kendrick Lamar and JayCool. Fuentes painted this image from a concept she saw online. The image brings Lamar and JayCool together. She hopes that this collaboration can happen in real life.

She also is doing non-rap-related work. She is working on a mural in DailyFix Nutrition, a Hermiston store she frequents.

She said working on a larger canvas, as she is now with the mural, is daunting. Still, a person needs to try new things, she said. The painting will be something simple involving flowers.

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