

# A changing demographic

## Worker Shortage



FOURTH IN A 5-PART SERIES

By **BILL BRADSHAW** and **ALEX WITTWER**  
EO Media Group

### Editor's Note

This is the fourth 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.

**WALLOWA COUNTY** — It's no secret that employers across the state are struggling to find workers. Business owners collectively furrow their brow at the trickle of job applications as more and more businesses open and the share of workers seems to be vanishing into thin air.

For some, that means closing restaurants entirely — but far more often the effects of a tightening labor market mean that expansion of operations becomes difficult.

"It's pretty much across all industries," said Stacy Beckman, general manager of Wallowa County Grain Growers in Enterprise. "Managers I've talked to are having difficulty trying to get help."

He said the business he runs didn't actually lose any workers to the pandemic, but expanding his workforce has been a challenge.

"Trying to add (workers) is tough," he said. "It's even tougher in a smaller community like we are."

Cindy Ellis, who owns and operates Heavenly's Restaurant in Enterprise, switched to takeout only when the pandemic first struck, but was able to resume indoor seating as businesses were allowed to reopen. But then reliable employees became scarce.

"We had to cut our indoor seating because someone we hired didn't show," she said.

Ellis said Heavenly's Restaurant was open for indoor seating when interviewed Thursday, Sept. 16.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

A customer prepares to enter Wallowa County Grain Growers/True Value in Enterprise on Sept. 15, 2021. A lack of employees has not hurt the business, the manager said, but it is having a difficulty expanding its workforce.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Cindy Ellis, co-owner of Heavenly's Restaurant in Enterprise, greets customers through the takeout window Sept. 15, 2021. At times, takeout has been the only way Heavenly's Restaurant could serve, partially due to the lack of employees to man the inside seating.

"We got a lot of folks from Elgin," she said, and despite a small workforce, "we were swamped."

### Boomers retiring at a faster rate

Eastern Oregon saw only negligible gains in population over the the past decade, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And looming within the numbers is a certainty that has taken the back seat to pandemic woes and commentary: The boomers are retiring.

In Eastern Oregon, the working population is aging out much quicker than in previous years. The Oregon Employment Department reported in May 2021 that the working population in Eastern Oregon had grown significantly older from 2010 to 2020. That increased share means the number of workers age 55 and over makes up 26% of the overall workforce. That's up nearly 4% from its 2010 numbers.

As well, the population of older workers has started

declining since 2017, when it reached its peak, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The rate at which the baby boomer generation has been retiring is accelerating, according to Pew Research Center. From 2019 to 2020, approximately 28.6 million baby boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — retired; a 3.2 million uptick from 2019. On average, that number had previously been increasing by around two million retirees per year.

### The impact

"One of the other factors is that boomers are retiring at an enormous rate, which is, in a way, sucking everybody up the the corporate ladder or corporate world," said Matt Scarfo, a Union County commissioner and owner of Long Branch and Benchwarmer's Pub & Grill in La Grande. "Everyone's up to those higher positions, if they did have them, and so it's causing a vacuum down to the X, Y, Z generation."

On the ground, restaurants and service industries reported having to hire much younger staff than in normal years, though the restaurant industry has historically been staffed by younger workers and those looking for part-time work, and the data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Oregon Employment Department indicate there hasn't been any significant changes in the employment level for those under the age of 18.

Angelica Zurita, who with her husband, Jose Lopez, owns the La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurants in Enterprise and Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, said they employ about 15 people at the three establishments.

During the summer tourist season, they were fortunate to find college students who were eager to work. But now, as the students return to campus, finding reliable help is a problem.

"They really don't want a job," Zurita said of some of



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

A "now hiring" sign greets customers coming into Heavenly's Restaurant in Enterprise. The restaurant has had a tough time getting and keeping employees, co-owner Cindy Ellis said.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

A customer enjoys the outside seating Sept. 15, 2021, at La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurant in Enterprise. The restaurant, along with a similar one in Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, got by through the summer largely with college students as employees.

the locals who have applied. "They show up drunk, call in sick, don't show up at all or they show up late."

Still, as the tourist season ends, she's optimistic the restaurants and saloon will manage.

"It's slowing down to where I think we've got it covered," she said.

The trades, too, are having a tough time finding workers. Jared Hillock, manager and co-owner of Hillock Electric, said the biggest problem is a lack of qualified electricians around.

"There are just not enough people in the trades right now," he said. "I think it's important we get kids in trades and not preach so much college."

He said a starting electrician right out of high school — after a four-year apprenticeship — can make \$32 an hour, with benefits.

"We're trying to push more kids (to) think about trades," he said. "You can make a good family wage right out of high school."

He does have an opening for a counter person, which he's not gotten many adequate applications for.

"We get a lot of random resumes dropped off, which (I) guess is people trying (to) satisfy job-search requirements," Hillock said.

Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating opened in May in Joseph, has had numerous well-paying positions available but that still are not filled, owner Rick LaFave said.

"I'm still trying to hire three or four more welders," LaFave said. "People don't want to work, I guess. ... I've talked to several people who've put feelers out, but I'm not getting people who want to go to work."

Though he doesn't have concrete evidence, he has his opinion on the cause.

"My opinion is because the (unemployment) money hasn't run out," he said. "Hopefully, we'll get people wanting to go back to work once that runs out."

# Hermiston City Council OK new lease at airport

By **PHIL WRIGHT**  
Hermiston Herald

The Hermiston City Council at its meeting Monday night, Sept. 27, voted 7-0 in favor of a new 20-year ground lease at the Hermiston Municipal Airport.

K2 Aerial Application LLC has been operating from the airport for at least five years and is looking to build a hangar covering 8,352 square feet. City Manager Byron Smith explained to the council the lease facilitates that project.

Under the terms of the lease, according to meeting documents, the city receives \$1,420 per year through 2028 for the ground the hangar will stand on, and the rent increases to \$1,587 per year for 2035-38. The total for the 20 years comes to \$29,482.

Smith told the council the length and price per square foot of the lease are consistent with other ground leases at the airport.

Smith also gave an update on filling the key city department heads. He said the city has received 10 applications for the parks and recreation director and court administrator. The closing date for applications looks to be the end of the week, but that could extend 15 days beyond to allow for more candidates.

At last count, Smith said, the city received four applicants for the court administrator and 10 for the parks director.

The council also brought in cupcakes to celebrate the retirement of Gary Luisi as city attorney. His successor, Richard Tovey, starts this week.

There were some sparks early in the meeting, when the council took in a presentation on the Restaurant Assistance Program, a partnership between the city and the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, to encourage dining at local restaurants.

The city early in 2021 gave the chamber \$50,000 for an assistance program to benefit local restaurants struggling because of the pandemic. The chamber created three programs: Dining Dollars, in which restaurants honor a \$10 gift certificate and submit that to the chamber of reimbursement; a direct \$10 gift certificate diners can use at a restaurant; and a third option in which chamber directors use \$10 in cash to cover a diner's meal at an event.

Chamber President Kris Bennett walked the coun-

cil through the details of the programs, including examples of the coupons and gift cards and English and Spanish promotional flyers. Some of the Spanish language drew criticism from Councilor Roy Barron.

"Some of the wording ... It's wrong," Barron told Bennett, "and it might convey a swear word."

Bennett defended the wording, explaining the chamber relied on the work

of a certified Spanish translator. But Barron suggested the chamber needs to take a second look at some of the language.

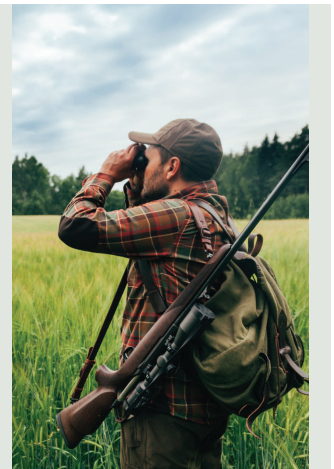
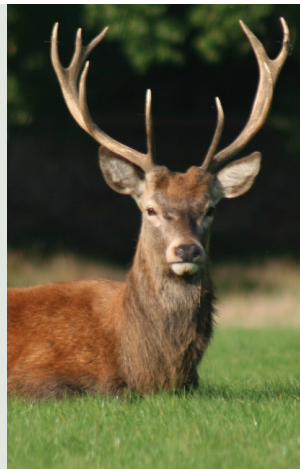
Bennett replied the chamber will "run it by" the translator, and if Barron wanted he could come to the chamber to go through the wording with him.

"That's kind of what I'm doing now," Barron replied.

Mayor Dave Drozmann moved on, and said he was

excited for the program and hoped the community recognizes the importance of supporting local businesses.

Barron then came back to his point with a suggestion for the language he found problematic. Bennett said he was welcome to give those to the chamber office. And Councilor Phillip Spicerkuhn, who serves on the chamber board, said he would take Barron's suggestions to the chamber.



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