



Photo: Lara Pettigrew-Stokes

News from the Trail

November 2016

THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Rolling with the Big Kids By Lisa Jacoby

Members share their adventures commuting throughout OTEC's Eastern Oregon Service Territory



Two deer changed Cherie Ward's mind about commuting from Baker City to La Grande.

It was winter when the deer ran out in front of her, totaling the front end of her car.

"That was the end of that," she said.

But Ward still had a job in medical records at Grande Ronde Hospital, and she still lived in Baker City.

Then a friend suggested she check out the then-new Community Connection inter-city transit option, a shuttle that runs between Baker City and La Grande.

Ward started riding the bus in November 2008, and she continues to ride it five days most weeks.

She's gone through 13 drivers.

"A couple are like family to me," she said.

Community Connection provides transit from Baker City to La Grande, leaving promptly at 7 a.m. and

delivers riders to their destinations — mainly Grande Ronde Hospital and Eastern Oregon University. They then catch the bus home to arrive back in Baker City about 6:15 p.m.



Easy Riders (L to R) Marlette, Sedell and longtime shuttleite Ward enjoy the shared comradery and commute watching the changing of the seasons, catching up on sleep or reading a favorite book.

"We're gone 12 hours a day, but it's worth it," Ward said. "It's been a lifesaver for me and others — we don't have to drive in the snow."

Kaz Marlette began teaching

math at EOU in 1999, and drove into La Grande from her home in Union. In 2005, she moved to Wisconsin and continued to teach EOU online courses. She moved back to Baker City in 2008, and two years later she was offered an on-campus position.

"That's when I learned there was this shuttle," she said.

She didn't want to move to La Grande for work, so was open to this transportation option.

"I had more friends here. I like living in Baker," she said. "I'm thankful for the shuttle — I can work in La Grande and still live in Baker City."

From September to June, Marlette catches a ride on the Community Connection bus four days a week, unless she wants to stay late to attend a symphony concert or play, then she drives

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Shuttle driver, Bob Soto, has many years of safe driving under his belt. The Baker-La Grande shuttle route is about 107 miles round trip, so in an average week the Community Connection drivers are logging more than 1,000 miles.



her own car. She fills the 45-minute commute by listening to audio books or podcasts, or catching a few extra minutes of sleep.

"It's forced personal time," she said. "It's nice to slowly get into work mode going there, and coming home I think about what happened that day."

Her work schedule is arranged with the shuttle in mind.

"It's nice to slowly get into work mode going there, and coming home I think about what happened that day." — Kaz Marlette

"My department knows I get there at 8, so they don't schedule an 8 a.m. class," she said.

Ward also catches up on her sleep during the ride.

"I mostly sleep," she said. "We're so comfortable with our drivers."

Her work schedule also takes the shuttle time into consideration.

"My department allows me the liberty to come and go by the bus time," she said.

Ted Sedell began riding the bus four years ago.

"One of the key reasons we moved (to Baker City) was because of the shuttle. It's one of the things that sealed the deal," said

Sedell, who works for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife fish research department on the EOU campus.

With a 2-year-old at home, he uses the shuttle time to catch a few extra winks.

"It's how I get my sleep," he said with a laugh. "I'm renowned for getting on the bus and instantly falling asleep."

Not having a car in La Grande isn't an issue for him — if he has errands to do, he simply walks downtown.

Mary Jo Carpenter, who manages Community Connection of Baker County, said people who ride the shuttle can also take advantage of the trolley system in La Grande.

"They can get around all over town," Carpenter said.

The trolley hub is at 2204 Penn St. in La Grande. Rides cost \$1 each.

In addition to those who take the shuttle for work reasons, Carpenter emphasizes that the service can be used for other reasons as well, such as shopping trips. The route includes stops at the Haines store and North Powder Cafe both going and coming, so there are several opportunities to catch a ride.

"It was really about trying to serve the communities, especially Haines and North Powder. They don't have any public transportation at all," Carpenter said.

Plus, using the shuttle saves drivers on gas and general wear-and-tear to their vehicle.

"You're going to go through tires faster, go through oil changes faster, replace the car more often," she said of those who commute.

Plus, she said, it keeps more cars off the freeway, which reduces the environmental impact.

"When our bus is busy, that's 10 cars that aren't driving down the freeway," she said.

For the first 18 months the shuttle was in operation, Ward was the only passenger, and Bob Soto was the driver.

"We'd swap recipes, all kinds of stories," Ward said.

"It's been a lifesaver for me and others — we don't have to drive in the snow."

— Cherie Ward

Soto arrived at the hub at 6:30 a.m. to make sure everything is ready for departure at 7 a.m.

In La Grande, he'd deliver riders to their jobs, then pick up anyone waiting at the La Grande hub and head back to Baker City. In town, he does "para transit" — taking people to lunch appointments, the grocery store or doctor's appointments — for three hours, then takes a break until he heads back to La Grande at 4 p.m.

"To me, it's a pleasant trip," Soto said. "You always see new things."

The weather can be particularly interesting during the winter months, but he only remembers a few instances where the road closure affected the shuttle.

"As many years as I've been doing it, most of the time they aren't too bad," he said of the road conditions.

Ward remembers one time when she was the only passenger,

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and Interstate 84 was closed due to hazardous conditions. So the bus came through Pyles Canyon to bring her home.

There was one time, Soto remembers, when all routes home were closed after he picked everyone up in La Grande.

"So we all had dinner together," he said.

The freeway opened 10 minutes after they finished their meal, and they made it home in good time.

The shuttle's route is just about 107 miles round trip, so in an average week the Community Connection drivers are logging more than 1,000 miles.

"I do have a lot of miles under my belt," Soto said.

The drivers are required to have a CDL with a passenger endorsement.

Soto has recently changed his schedule, and now only drives the inter-city shuttle as a substitute. Most of his days are spent driving the bus around Baker City.

As the first rider since its debut, Ward has seen the number of passengers change throughout the years.

"It ebbs and flows," she said. "At one point there were 14 riders. The long-time riders, there's only a few of us left."

The bus has space for 14, and also a rack on the front with room to haul two bicycles.

Regular riders, Soto said, makes his job a little more interesting.

"You know you won't drive over there and back with nobody. That makes for a boring day," he said.

In addition to people traveling for work, Ward said the shuttle is a good option for college students attending EOU.



The bus has space for 14, and also a rack on the front with room to haul two bicycles.

And it's easier on the pocketbook, compared to using her own car.

Community Connection offers a monthly pass for \$110 for unlimited rides. Ward said she'd spend at least \$300 per month commuting in her own vehicle.

More detailed information on Community Connection's public transit schedule and rates can be found at the hubs in Baker City and La Grande, or by visiting Northeast Oregon Public Transit online at www.neotransit.org.

Other rural counties also offer public transportation options for

residents. In Grant County, People Movers provides rides to Baker City, Pendleton and Walla Walla, Burns and Bend, as well as "demand response" in the John Day area.

"A large, large area," said transit manager Angie Jones. "We take people where they need to go."

In addition to shopping trips, riders utilize People Movers to catch flights from the Redmond or Pendleton airports, or as transportation if they are in the area as bicycle tourists or hunters.

People Movers has a fleet of eight vehicles, and logs about 200,000 miles a year.

"Our buses are pretty darn safe and our drivers are awesome," Jones said.

For information, visit grantcountypeoplemover.com.

Harney County's public transit is called Dial-A-Ride, and it provides transportation within a 10-mile radius of Burns/Hines, plus scheduled trips to John Day, Bend and Ontario. This service is available to all ages.

Once-a-week trips to Bend rotate between Tuesdays and Thursdays. Once in the city, riders keep in contact with the driver to coordinate multiple stops.

Dial-A-Ride operates seven days a week, except on holidays. For information about scheduling a ride, call Darlene Needham, transportation manager, at 541-573-3030. More details can also be found online at www.co.harney.or.us/seniorcenterdialaride.html. ●

COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

Cooperative Principle

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COOPERATION AMONG COOPERATIVES

Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

CONVENIENT PAYMENT SYSTEM FOR MEMBERS

OTEC's Self-service Payment Stations Make Their District Debut

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative is at it again, offering yet another convenient way to save members' time and steps. You may want to stop by the La Grande or Baker District offices to check out the new self-service payment stations. They are easy to operate and conveniently located in the office lobbies.

"The new self-service payment terminals were installed in our two busiest offices in order to streamline processes, reduce wait times, and improve the quality of service offered to our members," said OTEC's Director of Member and Program Services Sandra Ghormley. "These new self-service stations accept credit/debit cards, e-checks, and print a receipt immediately. It's a quick, easy way to check a balance on an account and avoid standing in line.

"Of course, cash payments can still be made at the office counters. But, due to contractual limitations with the credit card banker, OTEC could not handle or process debit/credit card payments in our offices," said Ghormley. "Approximately, 350 of the 4,500 members that visit our

offices each month were being asked for another form of payment or had to exit the building and call into the office to give their information over the phone or be turned away. It was a fairly frustrating process for everyone involved."

Now that the self-service payment stations are in place, it's a whole new story. While credit or debit card payments will continue to be limited to \$200 with a convenience fee of \$2.00 charged per transaction, there's no longer any other restrictions in accepting credit card payments in the office.

"The new self-payment stations are just fantastic and are another way OTEC is working to fulfill our commitment to offer quality service, at the lowest possible rates," said Ghormley. "We know that our members lead busy lives, and the traditional ways of conducting business are not always convenient. That's why we continue to look for and adopt new technologies that will meet our members' personal needs."

The new lobby self-service payment stations join OTEC's online web



portal and community kiosks located at the Sinclair Station in La Grande, the Truck Stop in Baker City, Leathers' Shell Fuel in Hines and Chester's Thriftway in John Day in helping its members conveniently pay their bills.

For questions or additional information, call OTEC's Director of Member and Program Services Sandra Ghormley at 541-524-2822 or email sghormley@otecc.com.



FEEDBACK FROM OUR MEMBERS

OTEC's Membership Survey

Coming this fall

Beginning in late November you may get a call from DHM Research, a public polling firm OTEC has contracted with to complete our bi-annual member survey. The survey will last approximately 15 minutes and your responses will help your elected Board of Directors set the direction for your electric cooperative.

This hybrid survey will include two options for our members to choose from — a traditional phone survey and an on-line survey that members can complete at their own pace, on their own time. A survey link will be made available to our membership beginning the end of November. ●



OTEC SCHOLARSHIPS 2017

AVAILABLE FOR FIRST TIME COLLEGE STUDENTS, RETURNING STUDENTS AND THOSE STUDENTS WHO WOULD LIKE TO PURSUE A CAREER IN THE ELECTRICAL ENERGY INDUSTRY BY ENROLLING IN LINE SCHOOL



PUTTING OUR ENERGY TO WORK FOR YOU!

**VISIT WWW.OTECC.COM
UNDER THE "COMMUNITY" TAB**

**OVER TWENTY
\$5,000
SCHOLARSHIPS
ARE AVAILABLE**

**STARTING
NOVEMBER 1ST
APPLICATIONS
AVAILABLE**

FROM:

**YOUR GUIDANCE
COUNSELOR**

**YOUR LOCAL
OTEC OFFICE**

**ONLINE AT
OTECC.COM**

**APPLICATIONS
ARE DUE BY:
5:00 P.M.
JANUARY 13TH**

Have a question for the board?

Email: BoardSupport@otecc.com

*Upcoming Board Meetings:
November 15 December 20 January 24*

MANAGER'S MESSAGE

Werner Buehler has left the building.

After 46-years in the electrical utility industry starting out as a janitor at my hometown electric cooperative, Douglas Electric, my retirement announcement pretty much says it all. It is time for me to hang up my hooks, hard hat and pressed business shirts in exchange for hiking boots, a sea kayak and a fly fishing rod.

I am looking forward to the idea of it — most of the time. But, if I am completely honest with myself there is also a small part of me that is going to miss this industry and the people that make it run so resourcefully — year in and year out.

When I began working my way through college as a lineman, building and maintaining power lines, I was just trying to make a living and fund my education. I had no idea that electric utilities were going to be so dynamic, engaging and able to capture my life-long interest — as well as help me to support my beautiful wife and two young sons.

My time as General Manager with OTEC has been all too short. Nine years managing one of the largest electric co-ops in the state of Oregon, working with an extraordinary board of directors and leading a professional team comprised of 83 exemplary employees, serving 23,000 members and operating four district offices across our 194 miles service territory — it's been fun.

There have been some difficult challenges, too. A nearly 20 percent reduction in workforce over the last 10 years, power cost increases from Bonneville Power, Fish and Wildlife conservation taking a third of our wholesale power costs, etc. But, OTEC has managed its expenditures very

less and even won some awards and national kudos in the process. This is something I am very proud of. It has been a fascinating career and very rewarding. I regularly find myself encouraging any young promising upstarts to seriously consider it as a professional option.



When I first started out, I helped run electric power to some local farmers that had never had it before. It was a big deal and all of their rural neighbors joined together and celebrated with a pot luck party, playing guitars and banjos around the glow of a tiny light bulb. It was a wonderful thing to be a part of and witness — a small

piece of history unfolding right before me. Our employees continue to contribute at very high levels with additional workloads while maintaining ever changing regulatory compliances — such as environmental regulations, energy security, energy conservation, renewables and new work safety rules. When you add in historic wildfires, declines in electrical demand, the encroachment of distributed generation and armed take-overs of federal buildings, I can definitively say there has never been a dull moment.

We have been doing so much more, with so much

piece of history unfolding right before me.

As the cooperative industry moves onward and I spend my days paddling around the ocean, catching tasty fish and hiking in National Parks, I will

also look forward to seeing what new bright ideas the next generation of leadership is able to bring to our rural neighborhoods — and to the cooperative electrical party.

Thanks for all of your support. ●



Werner Buehler