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TwispWorks' economic study shows sharp disparities in valley incomes, attitudes

BY ANN MCCREARY

An in-depth study of the Methow Valley's economy reveals striking disparities in income and attitudes among residents who live and work here full-time, and people who are part-time residents and/or remote workers.

The economic disparity is

clearly evident in a comparison of average incomes for locally employed residents and people who derive their income from outside the Methow Valley.

The median household income for families who live and work in the Methow Valley is \$57,779, with nearly 60% of working families earning less than \$55,000 a year.

By contrast, the median income reported by remote workers was \$202,000 – almost four times the income of most locally employed residents.

That stark difference was one of the most surprising findings of the study for Julie Tate-Libby, who conducted the economic research for TwispWorks over an 18-month period.

"I knew that remote workers were going to make more money than local people. I had a theory about what it was going to be. The actual results blew me away. I didn't know that it would be \$200,000 compared to \$55,000," said Tate-Libby, TwispWorks director of programming. "For people who have lived in the Methow Valley for a very long

time, who live and work and depend on the Methow Valley for wages, the gap is getting bigger and bigger."

Called "A Comprehensive Economic Study of the Methow Valley," the report was commissioned by the TwispWorks board of directors to identify how the

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Building permits resume as county lifts ban

Court ruling stops new residential lots in valley

BY MARCY STAMPER

Property owners in the Methow Valley can apply for building permits again, now that the Okanogan County commissioners have repealed the moratorium put in place almost a year ago while they sought a court ruling over water availability in a case against the state Department of Ecology.

But there can be no new residential lots created by subdivision unless the house gets water from a source other than the Methow River. Development on existing lots can proceed, as long as there's enough water left in the reserve set aside from the river. A separate moratorium that stopped subdivisions will be allowed to expire on Jan. 26. The commissioners took action on the moratoriums on Jan. 10.

The building-permit moratorium affected about 230 parcels with wells that would have drawn on the Methow River. The commissioners adopted the moratorium to avoid entangling property owners and the county in litigation.

The ruling in Okanogan County Superior Court clears up two years of uncertainty over residential development in the Methow Valley. The appeal period has expired without an appeal by Ecology, Okanogan County Chief Civil Deputy Prosecuting Attorney David Gecas said.

Okanogan County Superior Court Judge Henry Rawson issued two rulings in the complex case. In August, Rawson ruled that the county can't allow people with an existing house and well to create a new lot for

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A matter of biology

John Rohrer's lifelong devotion to wildlife management came naturally

BY ASHLEY LODATO

John Rohrer was destined for a career in wildlife management. When the career education van visited his elementary school in Willow Beach, Arizona, every year, it was all he was interested in.

"I never wanted to be anything other than a wildlife biologist," Rohrer said. "I always knew it's what I'd always do."

It is, indeed, what he's always done. When Rohrer spent his last day as a full-time employee of the U.S. Forest Service on Dec. 30, 2021, it capped a 30-year career as a biologist and program manager in the Methow Valley Ranger District.

A self-professed "desert rat" who was raised along the Colorado River, Rohrer earned an undergraduate degree in wildlife management and worked four seasons as a wildlife technician in the Kaibab National Forest. After a North Rim Grand Canyon wedding to Kelly, a young timber marker he met on the job, Rohrer moved to California to attend graduate school at Humboldt State University. The Rohrers' oldest child, Rebekah,



John Rohrer is retiring from his lengthy career in the U.S. Forest Service in the Methow Valley.

Photo courtesy of Mike Liu

was born in Arcata, California.

The Rohrers always intended to move back to Arizona, but they couldn't resist the appeal of a job with the Washington

Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) in Tonasket. "We'll move to Washington for a little while," Rohrer told himself, "and then we'll go back to Arizona."

The Rohrers' son, Remington, was born during the Tonasket years. The return to the Southwest never came. Two years in Tonasket with WDFW turned

into three years as a wildlife biologist in the Twisp Ranger District, which became 27 more

See **BIOLOGY**, B4

COVID surge threatens adequate health care coverage, providers say

BY MARCY STAMPER

With the rate of new COVID infections in Okanogan County nearly tripling in the past week, county health officials are bracing for a debilitating impact on health care services over the next month.

"Everything is just really stressful, with the numbers we're seeing," Okanogan County Health Officer James Wallace told the Methow Valley News last week.

County public health officials and health care providers are preparing for many more cases than in the summer of 2020, when the rate reached about 1,000 per 100,000 population, then the highest in the state,

Wallace said.

COVID infections in Okanogan County typically lag behind neighboring counties and the rest of the state, where cases have been skyrocketing. "We're still very early in the Omicron experience in Okanogan County. Just this week [of Jan. 10], we're seeing a significant rise and we'll see a sharp increase in the next three weeks," Wallace said. He expects it will be four to five weeks before cases start to drop again.

Omicron has proven to be much more contagious than earlier COVID variants, but people generally have less severe illness and recover more quickly. Still,

See **COVID**, A3

Winthrop library aiming for June 4 grand opening

Construction remains on track at multi-use building

BY DON NELSON

Absent any unforeseen delays, the new Winthrop library is on schedule for a June 4 grand opening, the Winthrop Town Council was told at its Jan. 5 meeting.

Jill Sheley, executive director of Friends of the Winthrop Library (FOWL), told the council that construction is expected to be substantially completed by April, and that NCW Libraries will begin moving books, equipment and furniture into the new space in May, when an occupancy permit is also expected.

FOWL is the nonprofit organization that raised funds for and is building the new library. The building will be turned over to



Photo courtesy of FOWL

Workers are on schedule inside the new Winthrop library.

the Town of Winthrop when completed, and its programs will be funded and operated by NCW Libraries, the regional library system that oversees 30 branches including those in Winthrop and Twisp.

Groundbreaking for the new library was in early June 2021. The project is supported by FOWL's private fundraising over the past several years, and a \$2 million state grant. The library is being built on a .81-acre parcel

property purchased by the Town of Winthrop at the intersection of White Avenue and Norfolk Road. FOWL subsequently acquired private funds to purchase an adjacent .92-acre parcel to expand the area available for the building, parking, and landscaping.

The building was designed by Johnston Associates and PBW Architects. Impel Construction is the general contractor.

No additional taxes will be required to build or operate the new library. Town residents currently pay a library district assessment which goes to the NCW Libraries system. NCW Libraries will provide all the furnishings and equipment for the new building, as well as maintenance.

Community resource

The 7,300-square-foot building, which will be more than six times

See **LIBRARY**, A2

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Jan. 20	Jan. 21	Jan. 22	Jan. 23	Jan. 24	Jan. 18
40°	38°	39°	35°	33°	35°
26°	25°	29°	27°	19°	20°
Cloudy, showers	Sunny	Partly cloudy	Cloudy	Partly cloudy	Sunny

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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Sands gains experience at U.S. Biathlon Youth trials

Aidan Sands of Mazama traveled to Soldier Hollow Nordic center in Midway, Utah, at the end of 2021 to compete in the U.S. Biathlon Youth/Junior World Cup Trials.

Sands, 13, competed over several days in late December, along with more than 70 other athletes in the 16- to 19-year-old age group. Sands was one of two younger biathletes invited to compete against the older field to gain experience, while not eligible for qualification until age 16.

The event consisted of an official training day followed by a 10K Sprint race in which Sands placed 14th overall in the Youth Category. Next, in the 10K Modified Pursuit Race, Sands placed 16th in the Youth category with splits in the top six after the first two passes on the course that was host to the 2002 Winter Olympic Games.

Sands completed the race week, and the year, on Dec. 31 with a 16th-place finish in the Sprint and wrapping up the trials in 16th in the point standings.

“It was a great opportunity for Aidan provided by U.S. Biathlon. He has worked hard since the snow melted last April preparing for this race,” said Colin Sands, Aidan’s coach and father. “He was asked to race 27.5 Kilometers over a four-day period while carrying an 8-pound gun on his back. During the Nordic racing season, a U14 athlete will typically hit 5K total on a race weekend so this was certainly an endurance test.”

“He had process goals in place that he hit, he got a good taste of where his ski speed and endurance needs to be, and he has a clear understanding of where he needs to be in three years when he is eligible, I am certain he will be back next year with more fire in his eyes,” Colin Sands added.

Aidan Sands will wrap up the 2022 biathlon season in Lake Placid, New York, in March for the U.S. Biathlon National Championships, joined by younger sister Maren (age 11) who will make her first appearance in the National

Championships in the U15 category.

Dickinson vies for Olympics

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Winthrop native and Liberty Bell High School graduate Kelsey Dickinson recently competed for the U.S. National Team in Arber, Germany, vying for one of the last two spots on the U.S. Olympic team slated to head to Beijing in February.

Dickinson headed to Europe before the holidays after coming off back-to-back strong performances at the U.S. Olympic team trials in Craftsbury, Vermont, among a handful of her current national team members.

Dickinson performed well in Arber with solid shooting scores both days but did not make the final cut for the women’s four-member team.

Photo courtesy of Tasha Thrasher

Aidan Sands charged to the finish in Tuesday’s Sprint Race.



CASES

From Page B1

Officer James Wallace, who said the decision was timely and prudent, Venable said.

Jones and Wallace have been consulting with all school districts and school nurses in the county about the recent rise in COVID cases, Wallace said by email.

“MVSD [the Methow Valley School District] has been impressive in their response to the pandemic from the beginning and has consistently made decisions with the priority of protecting students and staff and doing all that they can to preserve in-person learning,” Wallace said. “They saw significant [COVID] increases in athletic participants (students and staff) this week that surpassed anything they experienced with Delta.”

Although Venable couldn’t

provide an exact number of COVID cases or exposures, the school has identified more positive cases since the return from winter break than throughout the entire fall term. They’re concerned that there could be other cases in the community that the district isn’t aware of, he said.

Many of the COVID cases have been among students involved in basketball and wrestling. School officials suspect that these cases have spread to other students and staff, Venable said.

There are 29 students involved in basketball and wrestling. In addition, there are 33 girls in girls’ basketball, which started after winter break.

Teams are allowed to practice, although high school wrestling put workouts on hold out of an abundance of caution, Wilbur said.

School attendance has dropped from an average of 86% to 75%, because of illness,

exposures requiring quarantine, and decisions by some families to keep students out of school until they believe it’s safe, Venable said.

Schools make own decisions

Rather than impose uniform standards, Public Health supports school districts to monitor their individual situations and make decisions accordingly.

“While I’ve supported school districts in their decisions to close classrooms, close in-person instruction and pause

extracurricular events or participation, we’ve not applied specific standards because each and every case has been different. When schools tell us that they are able to hold class, events and sports safely without risking a great increase in transmission, we trust and support them in doing so and contribute our experience and knowledge to that end,” Wallace said.

If a district determines that it’s unsafe to hold events, and that events could threaten in-person instruction, Public Health recommends ways to mitigate risk until safety can be restored, Wallace said.

By acting quickly, the district hopes to avoid the situation faced by other local districts. The Omak School District recently had to temporarily close their middle and high schools to in-person instruction because of inadequate staffing, Venable said.

Okanogan County has seen the impact of the Omicron surge elsewhere in the state. Omicron very rapidly causes a high number of cases, which threatens the capacity of health care systems and critical infrastructure – including schools, Wallace said.

“I anticipate a continued increase in cases over the next three weeks at least, with individuals who are unvaccinated and not boosted having greater

risk of illness and more severe disease. I am most concerned about vulnerable individuals in our communities, and the capacity of our health care systems to adequately serve them,” he said.

Venable made it clear that their top priority is to protect in-person instruction, but that they are also concerned about impacts on the community at large and the health care system, Wallace said.

Health officers from Okanogan County and the other school districts in North Central Washington from Chelan-Douglas, Grant and Kittitas counties issued new athletic safety guidelines earlier this month. The guidelines mandate masks for all athletes, staff and spectators at indoor events and restrict attendance to 50% of capacity. Anyone with COVID symptoms or who has been advised to isolate or quarantine is prohibited from attending as a participant or spectator.

BIOLOGY

From Page A1

years with the Methow Valley Ranger District (MVRD), which was created in 1994 by merging the Twisp and Winthrop Ranger Districts.

When Rohrer started working for the Twisp Ranger District in 1991, he was in charge of wildlife, fish and botany, including weed management. “That was before bull trout, Chinook salmon and steelhead were on the federally endangered species list,” Rohrer said, “so we didn’t have fish biologists. The wildlife biologists were also in charge of fish.”

Later, once the fish species were listed under the Endangered Species Act and the MVRD was able to hire fish biologists, Rohrer was handed the Range Program, administering livestock grazing permits on the National Forest.

“Range management and permit administration were not my technical specialties, but luckily I always had great people working with me in the Range department,” Rohrer said. “I enjoyed getting to know and work with livestock grazing permit holders. I think all of them have been here longer than I have, so much longer that they probably still consider me a newcomer!”

Instant connection

Rohrer might have been simply another federal employee who did a stint in the valley before transferring to another forest, but the Methow Valley grew on him, beginning with his first sighting of the valley. After interviewing for the WDFW job in Tonasket, Rohrer drove over State Route 20 to the Methow Valley.

“I still remember coming down the highway there by Tice Ranch [now Rockchuck Ranch], where you first get a look at the Methow River, and the valley bottom and thinking, ‘Wow, this place is so nice!’”

Once the Rohrers moved to the valley, Rohrer said “Every time we’d travel, when we came back home I’d think ‘This is such a special place. I’m so glad we stayed. This place has been good to us. It’s a great place for a biologist to work, the recreation is fantastic, the community is wonderful, and it’s a great place to raise kids — they make your roots go out in different directions.”

Rohrer’s career as a biologist spans not just 35-plus years, but also dozens of different projects. “I’ve been lucky enough to be involved in a lot of really great stuff,” Rohrer said. When pressed to name some highlights, Rohrer names the North Cascades Wolverine Study, which ran from 2006 to 2015. “For any wildlife biologist to be able to live-trap wolverines, well, that’s pretty unique,” he said. “When I was doing that I felt like ‘This is what I was made to do.’”

Rohrer also points to his involvement with the Okanogan County Lynx Project, the Methow Beaver Project, and the Chelan Ridge Raptor Migration Project as other career highlights, saying “this is a special place and it attracts special people, many of whom I got to work with on these projects.”

Of the Chelan Ridge Raptor Migration Project, Rohrer noted, “It’s highly unusual in this day and age to be able to collect data in the same place for 25 years. [Retired USFS wildlife biologist] Kent Woodruff started that. It’s pretty incredible that it’s still going on.”

The rattlesnake guy

And then there are the rattlesnakes. To many in the valley, Rohrer’s name is synonymous with “rattlesnake whisperer.” If you find a rattlesnake lounging under your deck, it’s probably Rohrer you’re going to call to deal with it. And his solution involves not a shovel, but a clear plastic tube, which isolates the rattlesnakes’ venomous tongue. Rohrer then relocates the rattle-

snakes.

Of all the changes Rohrer has seen in the valley over the past 30 years, residents’ attitudes toward rattlesnakes registers the biggest shift. “There are not as many people who purposely go out to den sites just to kill rattlesnakes,” he said.

“The rattlesnake is part of the food chain,” Rohrer continued. “They eat rodents, and they’re eaten by raptors. We relocate them so that we don’t disrupt the food chain.” Rohrer plans to continue his volunteer work with rattlesnakes in his retirement.

Rohrer knows that his tolerance of rattlesnakes is somewhat unique. Kelly Barabair, a colleague at the MVRD, said that once she needed to borrow Rohrer’s truck to finish some field work. “He mumbled something about rattlesnakes in the back of the truck and an overwhelming sense of animal scent occupying the cab. From that moment on, if I needed to borrow a vehicle, I either looked for another truck or approached John’s wearing snake gaiters and a face mask.”

Retired MVRD District Ranger Mike Liu waxed poetic on Rohrer’s connection to the wildlife he studied for three decades. “When I think of John I think rattlesnake rustler, beaver believer, lynx learner, Gulo (wolverine) glutton, wolf warrior, salamander savior, moose manager, pica picker, cougar catcher, cow closer, dragonfly dancer, owl orchestrator, forest friend and just plain wacko for wildlife,” Liu said.

Rohrer’s reflections on his tenure all make reference to species health. “When I started in 1991, the peregrine falcon and the bald eagle were both on the endangered species list; they’re not now,” he said. “I’m pretty confident we were documenting the recolonization of wolverine during our 10-year study. We’ve seen the return of gray wolf. It’s really good to see those changes.”

Rohrer attributes some of those changes to human interest.

“The valley has grown in population so much over the years,” he said. “And now there’s a lot more interest in and public comments about what we do. People are more knowledgeable and supportive. They understand more about what species need. We’re all better at living with wildlife rather than trying to conquer it.”

Personal approach

Those who have worked with Rohrer credit increased public awareness in part to his personalized approach. “John has acquired a deep knowledge of the patterns and rhythms of our valley’s wildlife and habitat,” said Carmen Vanbianchi, of Home Range Wildlife Research, who considers Rohrer a mentor and friend. “John knows this landscape better than most people. This specialized connection to the Methow landscape makes John a thoughtful and impactful steward of the land.”

Others point to Rohrer’s skill as a collaborator as his superpower. WDFW Okanogan District Biologist Scott Fitkin said “John’s success stems from his remarkable level-headedness, and the integrity, thoughtfulness, competence and humility he exhibits not only on the job, but in all aspects of his life on and off the clock. This mix of admirable traits engenders trust and makes him eminently likable and approachable for people of all backgrounds, a quality that has become increasingly rare in this era of divisiveness.”

MVRD District Ranger Chris Furr said that Rohrer lead by example. “He’s played a big role in working through some complex resource issues over the years, and he deserves a lot of credit for the district’s successes,” Furr said. “He doesn’t back away from conflict, and his calm and persistent approach kept people at the table and talking through prickly situations.”

Rohrer’s biggest impact, Furr said, comes from being “such a consistently good person for so long here.”

Paying it forward

Rohrer’s legacy in wildlife also extends to ensuring that the next generation of biologists is ready to pick up the mantle of wildlife management in the Methow Valley. In the wake of his retirement, Rohrer leaves scores of young biologists who he has mentored, trained, influenced and befriended over the years.

Lauren Satterfield, a PhD student at the University of Washington who studies wolves, cougars and deer, said that she is “enormously grateful” to Rohrer for the support he gave her and other early-career scientists.

“John went well out of his way countless times to help us secure housing in USFS bunkhouses, providing volunteer opportunities to us so we could participate in USFS snowmobile and avalanche training, getting us connected with other USFS biologists and employees when needed, joining us in the field when his job would allow it, and saving our butts when we got hopelessly stuck or were missing a critical piece of equipment,” Satterfield said. “Through him, many of us met non-wildlife people in other USFS branches too, including from fire, law enforcement, range, soils and more. Through him, we learned more about how the lands on which we work are managed and maintained.”

Satterfield emphasized Rohrer’s willingness to leave his own lane to support other research projects, saying that Rohrer is “a true biologist who always wears his researcher hat” and who is always interested to learn something new.

Rohrer cultivated relationships within the community of wildlife professionals, Satterfield said, and as a result “botanists, fish biologists, marine ecologists and forest biologists often swapped stories,” using social interactions as a means of learning, growing and collaborating. Rohrer’s inclusivity, Satterfield said, meant that

WINTER

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on top. Davis Lake and Leader Lake have been seeing some good ice fishing action as well. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife recommends waiting until ice is 4 inches thick before venturing onto lakes for ice fishing. Drill holes to be safe. Check these websites for more information about locations, safety, conditions and license requirements: <https://okanogancountry.com/fishing-hunting-winter>; <https://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/basics/ice-fishing>.

Fat biking

Methow Fatbike groomers worked long hours to reestablish firm trail bases, just in time for the well-attended Methow Valley Fatbike Meetup, which featured group rides, fires and even a night ride in the fog. Please respect trail signs indicating what types of use is permitted. Weekly rides and fireside socials take place on Wednesday evenings; visit www.facebook.com/methowfatbike for more information.

Methow Cycle & Sport provides the most comprehensive list of fat biking trails and conditions in the Methow Valley. Visit <https://www.methowcyclesport.com/articles/fat-bike-trails-conditions-pg187.htm> for more information and trail suggestions. Parking passes are required.

Sleigh rides

Private and group sleigh rides are available at Sun Mountain Lodge. Jingle bells, an open sleigh, cocoa in a miner’s tent, views of the valley floor — it’s the whole package. Visit www.sunmountainlodge.com/sun-mountain-sleigh-rides for more information.

Passes

Enjoying the meticulous trail grooming and maintenance? Equipment, fuel and personnel all cost money, which trail pass revenues help offset. Purchase your parking and trail use passes, and help support winter recreation in the Methow Valley.

“new perspectives were brought to traditional research ideals.”

Bob Naney, who was the wildlife program manager on the forest for the first 20 years of Rohrer’s career with the MVRD, called Rohrer “a person and a biologist that can be counted on to make things happen.” Naney said that Rohrer was “good at coming up with projects that helped advance the information the forest could use to make informed decisions, mostly surveying and documenting distribution of uncommon wildlife species.”

Staying active

In his retirement, Rohrer plans to — in Fitkin’s words — “spend more time in the wilderness with the wild critters he cherishes.” The Rohrers love to recreate outdoors. “Canoes, kayaks, fishing poles, backpacks — I am going to try to wear them all out,” Rohrer said. “I can’t wait to explore the Pasayten on multi-day trips, and there are a lot of national parks we haven’t seen yet.”

Although he has been advised by Naney and others not to overcommit, Rohrer already talks about volunteering on the projects he’s passionate about, as well as continuing to coach young biologists.

“I already told Scott [Fitkin] I’ll volunteer for him, and I’ll volunteer for the forest here if my replacement is comfortable with that,” he said. Rohrer’s duties with the MVRD will be fulfilled by a 120-day detail replacement until a full-time employee can be hired.

Despite the long winters that Rohrer says he has never grown accustomed to, despite his desert roots and Kelly’s ties to upstate New York, despite his new freedom to travel, Rohrer said he and Kelly will continue to live in the Methow Valley, the place he identified as special at first glance more than three decades ago.

“We’re here now,” Rohrer said. “This is home.”