

# Protest that worried business organizations lacks traction

By JADE MCDOWELL  
NEWS EDITOR

A suggested protest that had chambers of commerce across the state worried has not produced the feared impact so far.

Last week the Hermiston, Pendleton, Umatilla, Boardman, Irrigon and Heppner chambers shared a message they had received from the Oregon State Chamber of Commerce, citing a user post on the Open Oregon Facebook page asking people to flood the Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Administration with complaints against businesses in order to overwhelm the agency so that it couldn't take action against businesses flouting COVID-19 restrictions.

"We realize that local businesses are at their breaking point and wanted to make you aware of this effort," the message from the state chamber said. "OR-OSHA anticipates hundreds/thousands of new anonymous complaints against businesses across Oregon, and these complaints could result in compliance letters being sent to your members by OR-OSHA."

In their own joint message on Wednesday, Dec. 9, the local chambers of commerce asked their members to reach out if they appeared to have become the target of fraudulent complaints.

"We will be working with local partners and OSCC counsel on how to protect businesses and move forward should any situations of this nature arise in our region," they said.

On Dec. 11, Oregon OSHA spokesperson Aaron Corvin said OSHA had so far not seen "any evidence of meaningful impact created by false complaints" since the post on Dec. 7,



A sign from the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce along East Main Street in Hermiston advises shoppers that businesses are open on Nov. 20, 2020.

however.

The post urging the protest, made by Facebook user Amanda Vital on the Open Oregon Facebook page and shared more than 60 times over the next few days, stated that if people "flood the system" with anonymous complaints then "they will never know where the real targets are and they will be done enforcing these excessive laws."

The post did not specify whether the complaints should be about real problems.

Larry Skyes, listed as the administrator for the Open Oregon page, said that the protest idea did not come from him, that he did not believe in reporting businesses to OSHA and that he encourages members of the page to support their local businesses. The post later appeared to have been removed from the page.

Kimberly Rill, director of the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, said the email sent out by the Eastern Oregon chambers wasn't

intended as commentary on protests against COVID-19 restrictions, but rather an effort to warn members so they weren't blindsided if they did get contacted by OSHA over what appeared to be false complaints. They wanted members to be prepared just in case, she said.

Open Oregon and similar Facebook groups have recently promoted several in-person demonstrations outside OSHA officials' homes in response to actions taken by the agency against businesses that have flouted state rules regarding COVID-19. *The Oregonian* reported that about 50 protesters showed up at the Silverton home of an OSHA inspector in response to a \$90,000 fine levied against Courthouse Fitness, which refused to close its gyms in the Salem area despite a statewide shutdown of gyms.

On OSHA's end, Corvin said the agency's mission is to protect workers from hazards on the job, including COVID-19, through a range

of tools, including consultation and education for business owners.

"So, an effort to attack our ability to carry out that mission — and that includes fielding any complaints on any workplace safety subject, not just COVID-19 — makes no sense to us," he said. "It is a false narrative to say that physical distancing and facial coverings are part of shutting down the economy, and it's a false narrative to say that the risks presented by COVID-19 are not real. On the contrary, implementing such measures to reduce the spread of this disease and decrease the risk is how we keep the economy open and reopen portions of the economy that have had to close."

He said it is worth remembering that only a small percentage of OSHA complaints result in inspections, and if an effort to flood the system did happen, it seemed unlikely that "any such false complaint will be convincing enough to result in an enforcement activity."

# Governor orders tax breaks for small businesses hit by COVID-19

By GARY A. WARNER  
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Small businesses in Oregon struggling with a drop in income due to the COVID-19 pandemic will receive some tax relief, Gov. Kate Brown announced Monday, Dec. 14. Brown ordered the elimination of penalties and interests on 2019 income taxes.

"Small business owners who play by the rules shouldn't face penalties and fees because COVID-19 has robbed them of their livelihood," Brown said.

Brown may have to issue a flurry of orders on issues ranging from unemployment to an eviction moratorium. Programs for unemployment benefits and other measures are scheduled to end Dec. 31.

If the Oregon Legislature and governor cannot agree on other steps, such as a special session, executive orders could be used as a stop-gap until the regular session of the Legislature convenes Jan. 19.

The scope in state action is also wrapped up in the struggle in Congress to pass COVID-19 relief, which could renew some of the programs.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, said a deal must be struck before the

House and Senate adjourn for the year.

"Congress must pass an economic relief package before the end of the year to avert more economic backsliding and financial catastrophe for millions of families," Wyden said.

Brown's order on Dec. 14 applies to personal income, corporate excise and corporate income taxes. The action would:

Waive all penalties on 2019 income tax due from businesses that are impacted by COVID-19.

Waive all interest on 2019 income tax due from small businesses hurt by COVID-19 and have less than \$5 million in gross receipts.

Continue extended payment plans up to 36 months for any taxpayer impacted by COVID-19 in an approved payment plan.

Brown also ordered an extension of the due date of the amusement device tax, which comes from lottery machines, for the second quarter of the 2020 tax year. Brown said the move would help restaurants and bars that have been particularly hard-hit by restrictions on dining, gathering size and other measures.

More information will be available by calling the Oregon Department of Revenue at 503-378-4988 or 800-356-4222, or at [www.oregon.gov/dor](http://www.oregon.gov/dor).

# Kelly Schwirse joins staff at the Hermiston Herald

HERMISTON HERALD

The *Hermiston Herald* recently welcomed Kelly Schwirse to its staff as the newspaper's new multimedia consultant.

Schwirse will work with advertisers in west Umatilla County and Morrow County to help them advertise their business or event in the *Hermiston Herald* and *East Oregonian*.

She previously worked for the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce for nearly nine years, working on the chamber's newsletters,

events and other services to its members.

Schwirse replaces Jeanne Jewett, who retired on Nov. 30 after working for the *East Oregonian* for 32 years and also working for the *Hermiston Herald* the last 12 of those years.

She can be reached at [kschwirse@hermistonherald.com](mailto:kschwirse@hermistonherald.com) or 541-564-4531.

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