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Brightest comet in years soars over Sisters



PHOTO BY RON THORKILDSON

Photo taken July 11 from Dee Wright Observatory on McKenzie Pass.

By Ron Thorkildson
Correspondent

A celestial visitor that hasn't been around these parts in about 6,800 years is currently putting on an impressive display in Sisters' skies. The cosmic traveler is comet NEOWISE C/2020 F3, found on March 27 by the Near-Earth Object Wide-Field Infrared Survey Explorer (NEOWISE) satellite, and it has turned out to be the brightest comet in years.

Early last spring astronomers speculated that newly discovered comets Atlas and

Swan might become easy naked-eye objects as they approached the inner solar system. Unfortunately, neither of them could take the heat from the sun and broke apart. So far, third time seems to be the charm as NEOWISE is holding up much better.

After cruising inside the orbit of Mercury, the comet made its closest approach to the sun on Friday, July 3, at a distance of approximately 27 million miles, when it became bright enough to see without optical aid. Although it is currently receding from the sun, NEOWISE will pass

closest to the earth on July 22, at which time the two bodies will be separated by a perfectly safe 64 million miles.

Earlier in the month the comet was located near the northeastern horizon about an hour and a half before sunrise. But it is slowly tracking westward across the northern sky and, according to NASA, will be best viewed from mid-July on as an evening object above the northwestern horizon. The big question is for how long will NEOWISE remain bright? Even if the comet does drop below naked-eye detection

toward the end of the month, it will still be a fine sight in a pair of binoculars.

Some of the area's amateur astronomers have already captured many striking images of the comet, some of which can be viewed on the Sisters Astronomy Club's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/sistersastronomy/>).

While it's true that NEOWISE does not measure up as one of brightest comets ever to grace our skies, such as Hale-Bopp did in 1997, it's still worthy of a good look.

COVID-19 on the rise in Central Oregon

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Like much of the rest of the country, Central Oregon is in the midst of a surge in COVID-19 cases. On Sunday, Deschutes County reported 16 new cases, after reporting 15 new cases the day before. There were no new cases reported on Monday.

While the numbers are not big in comparison to major surges in other areas, they nevertheless represent a significant increase from the days when Deschutes County added a case or two — at most a handful — in a day. Some of that increase is due to ramped-up testing and contact tracing, but the surge also represents growing community spread.

St. Charles Health System reported peaking at 14 hospitalizations on April 5, in the midst of the initial pandemic shutdown. On Friday morning, the hospital reported 11

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Wilkins re-elected as school board chair

By Charlie Kanzig
Correspondent

The Sisters School Board voted unanimously to keep Jay Wilkins as chair and Don Hedrick as vice-chair for another year at the monthly meeting held at Sisters Middle School Wednesday, July 8 — the first "in-person" meeting conducted since the pandemic shutdown began in March.

After recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, one board member quipped, "That sounded a lot better than when we did that on Zoom and we were all speaking at different speeds."

Designated as an organizational meeting, most of the business of the evening centered around members agreeing to appointments on different committees on which the board has representation, as well as approving other institutional organizational appointments, though Curt Scholl did share a superintendent's report that included some updates related to reopening of schools in the fall.

The board enthusiastically endorsed Wilkins to take on a second year at the helm.

David Thorsett said, "It

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Local businesses on road to recovery

By Jodi Schneider
Correspondent

The road to recovery kicked off for local businesses in Sisters when they unlocked their doors on Friday, May 15, the day Deschutes County moved into Phase 1 of the state's reopening.

On June 6, Deschutes County was approved to enter Phase 2 of the State's reopening plan for Oregon. A the pandemic intensified, Governor Kate Brown has mandated that Oregonians are now required to wear face masks while in all indoor public spaces and outdoors if they cannot maintain six feet of separation.

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PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER

Kent and Marla Stevens, owners of Painted Lady Antiques were in the process of expanding when closures hit. They are feeling pretty good about the way things have gone since reopening, seeing locals shopping local.

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