Ranches

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there was push-back from those who previously rented the facility due to price increases.

"We could have done a better job in those early days in communicating the reason for those changes," Blomgren said. "We've evolved quite a bit over the past five years and now have more groups than ever enjoying the conference center."

The Ranches are currently used by over 170 groups each year.

Some of the changes to The Ranches:

*The current Oregon Parks and Recreation reservation system allowed a nine-month booking window with payment required in full in advance.

Reservations will now be taken a year in advance and a deposit of 25 percent and a streamlined process.

*The reservation rates of The Ranches will be more flexible than they have been in the past.

The base rate of the facilities was $200 per night, which covered the first 25 overnight guests.

The new rates will start at a low of $600 for a Sunday to Thursday in the winter at the New Ranch.

The high end of the range is $2,100 for a Friday and Saturday period for the Old Ranch from May 1 to Oct. 1 with an event package and catering minimum.

The Old Ranch at Silver Falls State Park will be under management of Silver Falls Recreation Company. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Blomgren said those packages are aimed at groups desiring to hold weddings at the park.

"What we found was people desiring those Saturdays for their wedding, were booking the ranches a few days in advance so they could have it earlier," Blomgren said.

"It eliminates the need for that. People don't have to book extra days that they're not using the space. And so our hope is to help condense those wedding events to the weekends at the New Ranch."

Blomgren said there will be a special rate for non-profits, which will start at $226 per night.

She said those groups will pay less because the wedding groups are willing to pay more.

"They're actually kind of helping fund and make that space affordable for the non-profit groups," Blomgren said.

*The Silver Falls Recreation Company plans improvements of The Ranches including an initial deep cleaning – guests were previously expected to clean the building – adding lighting inside and outside, repairing and adding lighting, a critical assessment of the wood structures and painting some areas.

Reservations for The Ranches can be made silverfallslodge.com or by phone at (866) 575-8875.

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Driving

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increasing from 305 traffic deaths in 2012 to 497 in 2016.

Safety officials said the most likely reason was an increase in distracted driving, especially from cell phone use.

Now, it's illegal to drive in Oregon while holding or using any electronic device, including cellphones, tablets, GPS or laptops. Hands-free and built-in devices are allowed.

Salem Police issued nearly 6.6 percent more citations or warnings combined to distracted drivers than the previous year, totaling 337 for 2018.

Similarly, Marion County has recorded a 21 percent increase in citations and warnings combined — a total of 649 — between Jan. 1 and Oct. 25, compared with the same period last year.

Deputies will continue to focus on distracted driving, but forecasting future citations is nearly impossible, said Lt. Chris Baldridge with the Marion County Sheriff's Office.

In most cases, law enforcement can only verify cell phone use by asking the driver, making cases difficult to prove if the driver doesn't fess up, he said.

"We continue to see this law being violated and know this behavior is dangerous," Baldridge wrote in an email to the Statesman Journal. "Our Traffic Safety Team is very focused on curbing this behavior and conducts regular enforcement to do so."

Oregon fatalities unusual this year

As of Nov. 14, fatal crashes statewide declined 3 percent compared with 2017. But the number of deaths rose 9 percent, according to Oregon State Police statistics.

That's because there have been an unusual number of severe crashes with three to eight fatalities each, illustrating how one year's data is inadequate for drawing conclusions.

Statewide, fatal crashes decreased from 353 in 2017 to 342 so far this year; fatalities spiked from 371 to 405, according to Oregon Department of Transportation and OSP data.

Capt. Tim Fox cautioned, however- ,that OSP cannot accurately determine if the crash average has decreased before the year is over.

Still, OSP has remained fairly consistent between the number of citations issued this year and last year.

As of Oct. 25, OSP has made contact with 6 percent less distracted drivers in 2018 than 2017, totaling 3,959, Fox said. A contact can result in a citation or warning, and can include crashes.

"The idea is to decrease crashes and the severity of those crashes," Fox said.

Upkes of Salem Police thinks there has been a decrease in crashes related to distracted driving within the city, but said statistics are inaccurate.

Police will not have precise data for minor day-to-day incidents for example, he said.

Many rear-end collisions are likely caused by some form of distracted driving but "it is usually hard to prove unless the driver admits to it or a witness sees them" on an electronic device, said Sgt. Jonathan Hardy with Salem Traffic Unit.

Similarly, Marion County's Baldridge said it's unknown if the new law is leading to less accidents overall but, "like many behaviors, it will take both education and enforcement over a period of time to change driving behavior."

Polk County on track for decrease

By year's end, Polk County Sheriff Mark Garton estimates traffic crashes will decrease by 35 percent from last year's 555 accidents in the county.

Garton also noted the root cause of most crashes is a distracted driver. When speed is added to the mix, the odds of a crash are even higher.

So far, Polk County sheriff's deputies have issued 3.5 percent more traffic citations than in 2017, but not all citations were related to distracted driving. Eleven of the citations were issued specifically for using a mobile device this year compared to sixin 2017.

Other citations were issued for following too close, speeding, racing, driving uninsured, driving while suspended and citations after crashes.

Deputies issued more that 1,900 citations as of Sept. 30, but Garton estimates that deputies will issue more than 2,500 by the end of the year.

Repeat offender data limited

Salem Police officers have to check driving records before issuing citations to determine if its a first, second or third offense.

Upkes said they haven't found many second or third distracted-driving offenders yet. Other agencies did not have the data for repeat offenders readily available.

Since July 1, offenses under the state's distracted driving law began counting toward elevated sanctions. This is how the penalties stack up:

First offense, not contributing to a crash: Class B violation, with a fine of up to $1,000.

Second offense, or first offense if it contributed to a crash: Class A violation, with a fine of up to $2,500.

Third offense within 10 years: Class B misdemeanor, with a fine of up to $2,500 and a potential sentence of 6 months in jail.

Reporter Whitney Woodworth contributed to this story.

Priorities

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posal, said Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, co-vice chair of the Carbon Reduction committee.

"The presentation next week will show very clearly where we're headed," Dembrow said.

Brown's Nov. 28 budget announcement touted her plan for creating a new agency called the Oregon Climate Authority. The agency would oversee the carbon market that is expected to be a central component of the greenhouse gas bill.

The governor also called for dismantling the Department of Energy and reassigning its responsibilities, but she said the Legislature should decide the exact delineation.

While not a complete surprise to lawmakers who have been working on this bill, Brown's proposal introduced some "additional complications," said Sen. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, co-vice chair of the Carbon Reduction committee.

Bentz said the committee knew of several possible changes to the governance structure overseeing climate change policy, but the idea of a brand new department had only been mentioned once in passing.

"That had not really been factored into the bill, so that needs a lot of work," he said.

Several years ago, a similar proposal was debated among a small group of lawmakers that included Bentz. But a consensus on what a new agency should or shouldn't be responsible for couldn't be reached, he said.

A study on the different economic impacts of policy choices also won't be finished for a few weeks. So, instead of lawmakers presenting a half-baked bill next week, Dembrow said, they will begin with a more complete proposal in January.

The Carbon Reduction committee is scheduled to meet Thursday. In addition to a run-through of the bill, lawmakers will hear a report on "emissions-intensive, trade exposed" industries, which a carbon market would cover.

Education reform bill still months off

As for education reform, members of the Joint Interim Committee on Student Success still don't expect to have a solid proposal until midway through the 2019 session.

The committee spent 2018 traveling the state meeting with students, parents, administrators and community members to identify potential changes to improve Oregon's public education system.

Changes are going to cost money, and in her budget, Brown tasked the Legislature with finding an additional $1.9 billion to put toward education solutions.

Student Success committee co-chair Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, said about half of the committee members were on board with the figure, while others believe increasing revenue needs to be paired with reducing spending.

"It was certainly in line with what we were talking about," Roblan said. "We know we need new revenue, and we're not shy about those numbers."

During their meeting next week, the committee will get a report from the Legislative Fiscal Office on what each of a slew of proposals might cost the state.

Roblan said the report will probably show that funding every change would cost "a lot more" than the governor's $1.9 billion. There also are still conversations that need to happen surrounding accountability, governance structure and savings for health insurance and the pension system, he said.

Noteworthy committee hearings

Among other committees scheduled to meet next week, some of the more significant include:

- The House and Senate committees on health care will receive updates from Oregon Health Authority director Pat Allen on several issues. Policy advisor to the governor Jeff Rhoades will talk about the state's continued response to the opioid crisis.
- The House Interim Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources will hear from several speakers about the 2018 fire season.
- The Joint Committee on Legislative Administration is scheduled to receive an update Thursday from the Oregon Law Commission Oregon State Capitol Workplace Harassment Work Group.

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