

Appeal Tribune

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2021 | SILVERTONAPPEAL.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Schools starting with bus driver shortage

Pandemic has made long-time problem worse

Keira Wingate
USA TODAY NETWORK

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the nationwide school bus driver shortage.

The long-standing lack of bus drivers – with at least 55,000 fewer than just two years ago because of retirements and some choosing just not to come back to work – poses a problem with in-person classes fully returning in the fall, said Joanna McFarland, co-founder and CEO of

HopSkipDrive.

Throughout the country, schools are struggling to find drivers.

Salem-Keizer Public Schools still needs 37 drivers to fully cover its routes, spokesperson Aaron Harada said, not counting four individuals currently in training and a handful in the application process.

In Pittsburgh, public schools delayed the first day of school by two weeks, due to being short 420 bus drivers.

“We had to get really creative during the pandemic with food delivery,” McFarland said. “We’re gonna have to do the same thing with transportation. Mobility is access to opportunity, and if you can’t get somewhere, it doesn’t matter how great the program or school is.”

Concerns about getting sick

When schools shut down at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, thousands of school bus drivers were out of a job. Many drivers lost health insurance benefits and many relied upon unemployment benefits.

Michael Cordiello, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 in New York City, says for five months his members were out of work with no benefits and no pay, resulting in many quitting or retiring.

Cordiello, who represents some 8,000 school bus workers in New York City and a few thousand more throughout the state, added that hundreds became sick, and 34 drivers died from COVID-19. This has made many drivers leery about returning to their



Bus driver trainer Frank Butler in a bus yard in Oregon. Butler has been a bus driver for 14 years in the McMinnville area. PHOTO COURTESY OF FRANK BUTLER

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RESIDENTS REBUILD



An aerial view shows burned hillsides and homes being rebuilt along the Little North Santiam River in Elkhorn. DAVID DAVIS AND ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

North Fork is a place in transition a year after the Labor Day fires

Zach Urness and Bill Poehler Salem Statesman Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

For 10 years, Eric Peterson crafted his masterwork in the forest above the Little North Santiam River. • A contractor by trade, Peterson poured a lifetime’s worth of skill into a timber-framed cabin with vaulted ceilings, bay windows and flooring from the reclaimed wood of a barn built in the 1800s. He put the finishing touches on it last August. • “It was absolutely the pinnacle of my career,” Peterson said. • Two weeks later, it was gone, along with most of the rest of the homes in the canyon.

Hurricane-force winds whipped the Beachie Creek Fire into a firestorm that ripped through the North Fork Canyon the night of Sept. 7, killing five people, destroying hundreds of homes and transforming an emerald rainforest into a landscape of matchsticks.

Few places were hit harder by the Labor Day fires than the small communities that dot this canyon, including the small hamlet of Elkhorn, a cluster of homes and cabins on the border of Willamette National Forest.



Don Myron poses for a portrait in front of his future home, on Saturday, July 31, 2021, in Elkhorn, Ore. WESLEY LAPOINTE/ STATESMAN JOURNAL

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How the pandemic has exacerbated staffing issues in health, education

Tracy Loew and Natalie Pate

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Educators and health care workers are among those who largely have had their work lives turned upside down during the pandemic.

In a flash, their daily responsibilities changed, and it feels to many like the goalpost keeps moving. They are depended on more than ever, and they continue to battle burnout and fatigue.

But these occupations also share something else — staffing issues that existed long before COVID-19.

Across Oregon, hospital systems are facing a critical shortage of employees, only further exacerbated as the pandemic surges.

And while local employment data from Chemeketa Community College and Salem-Keizer Public Schools show steady employment through the global crisis, that is the result of intentional efforts to combat a decade-long national teacher shortage.

‘The pandemic has exacerbated the problem’

Oregon has always had tight health care staffing, according to the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems.

But the pandemic has amplified the problem, said Becky Hultberg, president and CEO of the association.

“We have staff who have been through a year and a

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Redistricting underway as lawmakers seek public input

Connor Radnovich Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

With U.S. Census numbers released publicly late last week, members of the Oregon Legislature have started the once-per-decade process of redrawing the state’s congressional and legislative district boundaries.

The maps they will draw and attempt to pass through the Legislature over the next several weeks will determine which state and federal candidates the people of Oregon will be able to vote for in upcoming elections, and could impact the balance of power at the state and federal levels.

Redistricting also presents an opportunity for districts to better reflect the growing diversity of the state.

This time around, the public will have access to all the same data and map-drawing technology lawmakers will use for the official maps through ESRI, a mapping software. Moreover, the redistricting committees are encouraging substantial public input and have pledged to consider maps the public submits.

“It will be easier and obvious for people to see what has been done,” said Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, vice-chair of the Senate Redistricting Committee. “It’s going to bring an openness and fairness to the process that we haven’t seen in the history of redistricting.”

Wrangling over political power

Lawmakers on the Senate and House redistricting committees have the responsibility of adjusting Oregon’s districts to account for population change, including creating a sixth congressional district the state earned due to its population growth over the past decade.

This new seat has raised the stakes of Oregon’s redistricting and has attracted national attention because of the closely split U.S. House of Representatives.

Democrats are the majority party, but new congressional seats are being added in Republican strongholds like Texas, and Republicans control more state legislatures nationally, making many Democrats nervous that Republicans could redistrict themselves into a majority.

“There is this national pressure to add Democratic seats,” said Jim Moore, political science professor at Pacific University.

During the legislative session, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, struck a deal with House Republicans to end a legislative slowdown, in return giving them equal numbers on the redistricting committee. This effectively handed the minority party veto power over the maps.

The move angered Oregon congressmen.

To Politico, Rep. Kurt Schrader said: “That was like shooting yourself in the head.” Rep. Peter DeFazio called it “an abysmally stupid move on her part.”

House Republicans said the even split gives the parties a chance to work as partners.

“To have a gavel held by a Republican and a Democrat, we really have a chance again to work together on this effort and we look forward to doing that,” House Republican Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby, said.

Based on the number of Republicans in the state, Moore said the GOP “ought to” have more representation in Congress. Currently only one of Oregon’s five House members is a Republican — Cliff Bentz, representing the 2nd District in eastern Oregon.

Having two of six seats held by Republicans would more closely match voter registration numbers, Moore said. As of July, Republicans made up 25% of registered voters, while Democrats constituted 35%. Nonaffiliated voters are 33%.

At the least, Republicans should be competitive for the sixth seat, Moore said, calling it an ethical issue. However, this could come into conflict with Democrat’s fears of losing the House majority in D.C., especially as the redistricting process moves forward in other states.

“It’s a fascinating dynamic that I’m sure will play out as we get closer,” Moore said.

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Vol. 140, No. 38

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