

MEALS

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“It is good for kids,” Panike said. The program allows school districts to provide free lunches to youths when school is not in session and then be reimbursed by the federal government. Previously, everyone getting a lunch had to eat the meal on site, but this requirement has been waived because of the coronavirus, Panike said.

Instead children and teenagers can pick up their lunches in paper bags and then leave. The “Grab and Go” sack lunch meals are available for pick up between 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. at the main entrances at the three elementary schools.

Children and teenagers on Monday picked up about 120 lunches at Central Elementary. Each sack lunch had a ham and cheese sandwich and an orange. Youth could then pick up a small carrot stick, a piece of broccoli and get salad in a plastic container.

Those helping provide the lunches at Central included secretary Connie Ingerson.

“It is a fun thing to do. It is always wonderful to see children and their parents,” Ingerson said.



Central Elementary students Nekoda Kearns, left, and Zaia Kearns leave their school Monday after picking up free sack lunches. The twins are with Shileigh Arnold, center.

She was impressed with the appreciation children showed for the meals, noting so many seemed sincerely grateful.

The meals will be served at least through Friday and may be next week. The determining factor will be how many people partic-

ipate in the program this week.

“We want to see how much of a need there is,” Panike said.

Good news on the meal front also extends to the Union County Senior Center. Although the senior center has temporarily

stopped serving lunches at its meal hall under a directive from the state because of coronavirus, it still is making midday meals available to everyone.

“We do not want anyone to go hungry,” said Sydney Gleeson, Union County food service manager for

Staff photo by Dick Mason

Wallowa County schools hand out sack lunches to students

By Bill Bradshaw
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — La Grande students were not the only youth getting free lunches while schools are closed because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Their counterparts in Wallowa County benefited from a similar effort.

On the menu for Enterprise School students Monday was yogurt, string cheese, cereal and milk for breakfast and ham-

and-cheese sandwiches, fruit and chips for lunch, said school Superintendent Erika Pinkerton, who helped hand out the meals.

Pinkerton was assisted by school counselor Mollie Cudmore and her son, Mak Pinkerton, who works in the cafeteria, in handing out the meals.

Only 16 kids came by to get meals Monday. School cook Randy Garnett and Mak Pinkerton had prepared about 120 breakfasts

and lunches. The school usually serves about 200 meals a day, the superintendent said.

After about 20 minutes of waiting outside the cafeteria with little response, some of the Enterprise crew took meals down to the city park, but found only three takers there.

The superintendent said the school plans to continue handing out meals beginning at 11 a.m. at the school and at the park

and will continue to get the word out via social media, which she expects to increase the number of kids coming by for the meals.

In Joseph, the menu consisted of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, string cheese, crackers, milk and a gummy treat, said Christine Eaves, the school food service coordinator.

She said the meals were the first to be served in

the school’s cafeteria since it was closed for refurbishment after a Jan. 19 fire gutted the nearby gymnasium.

The cafeteria, she said, only sustained smoke damage and since then had been cleaned and repainted.

Monday was supposed to be the first day the usually 160 students would eat there.

“At least anyone who wants (a lunch) won’t go

hungry,” Eaves said. Eaves said about 15 youth showed up for meals and Superintendent Lance Homan took several meals to the Enterprise city park because the school has a number of students who live in Enterprise.

Both schools had contacted parents via email and were getting the word out on social media to alert them when and where their children could obtain the meals.

Smith said the Regional Food Bank is continuing to provide food for emergency food boxes to panties or food banks at seven sites in Union County: Neighbors Together, The Salvation Army and Shelter From the Storm in La Grande; the Cove Food Pantry; the Elgin Food Bank; the North Powder Food Bank; and the Union Food Pantry.

Smith said the Regional Food Bank is able to provide the same amount of food to these pantries as it always has. She does not foresee this changing.

“We have plenty of food and I’m confident that we will continue to,” Smith said. She explained the state’s food bank does a good job of keeping regional food banks well stocked. She added nobody from the food banks and pantries the regional food bank serves has indicated they will be making any changes in the services they provide.



Staff photo by Sabrina Thompson

The Taco Bell off Island Avenue in Island City has gone to drive-through only in the effort to combat COVID-19’s spread. People still can order on the app to pick up in the drive through.

OPEN

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“It will have a negative effect,” McConnell said. “But we understand there is a broader community need.”

Diana Ricker owns Lucky’s Pub and Eatery, Island City, and said she plans to keep the establishment open until the health department, county sheriff or another official agency says otherwise.

“I think it is against our constitutional right to tell us to close our business,” Ricker said. “We would just

shut down if ordered to, and that compounds from one issue to the next.”

Ricker said her concern is the negative effect a closure would have on her business because it could make paying rent and providing paychecks for employees difficult.

“If we all stick together, keep ourselves home when sick and stay clean and healthy, it will have a greater impact,” Ricker said.

Other states, including Washington and California, have ordered the closure of eating establishments to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

BENEFITS

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workers “would help families cover the bills during this time of crisis, making it more likely that workers would be able to carry out the quarantine.”

Greg Smith, director of the Small Business Develop Center at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, and state representative for nearby House District 58, said he was reading over the report Monday morning and found it worth considering. Insurance provides protection during times of need, Smith said, and Oregon’s strong economy has set up the state to deal with some changes to unemployment benefits.

“Our coffers are pretty full right now in terms of unemployment insurance,” Smith said, “so Oregon can

absorb the need.”

Smith said providing benefits to workers who have to live in quarantine makes sense, as does the center’s recommendation to waive unemployment insurance tax increases for employer.

A company’s unemployment tax rates are tied to how much its employees use unemployment benefits. Oregon businesses that lay off workers, then are likely to pay higher unemployment taxes. For small business owners, Smith said, every penny counts, and not imposing taxes is a way the state can help them weather the COVID-19 outbreak.

He also said business owners may need technical assistance on their end to implement changes, but that should not be a tall hurdle to cross.

Colleen McLeod also supported changes to unemployment insurance. She

is the owner and operator of Joe Beans, a popular hangout and eatery in downtown La Grande.

“We’ve been waiting here to see if we’re going to be shut down,” she said Monday morning, referring to Gov. Kate Brown considering closing restaurants and bars to help slow the spread of the disease.

Brown had not ordered a curfew on hours of operation or closed establishments at the time McLeod spoke with The Observer, but did later in the day Monday. McLeod said restaurants and bars could feel the economic pinch of less business than usual. She said the state should take a close look at its financial books and find policies that help employers.

“Some of those businesses and jobs for employees will survive if they do,” she said.

The report also urged

the state to promote Oregon’s Work Share program, which can help employers and workers during an economic downturn. Under Work Share, instead of laying off employees, an employer needing to reduce staff cuts the hours for a group of workers, who then receive partial benefits to supplement their earnings.

While some of the changes proposed in the report could be done administratively, according to Bauer, others likely require the Legislature to convene in a special session.

The threat the virus poses, he stated in the news release, requires state action to protect families and businesses. He said the center calls on Brown to “act within her authority” to strengthen Oregon’s unemployment insurance system and even call special session if necessary.

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