

OUR VIEW

Let's help local businesses get past this crisis

Running a small business can be a challenge in the most normal of times.

The times in which we are living, it hardly needs to be said, bear little resemblance to normal.

The unprecedented upheavals resulting from our reasonable, albeit unfortunate, efforts to curb the spread of coronavirus have affected most of us.

Parents have to juggle schedules to care for kids during an extended, and unplanned, school closure.

Health care workers struggle with uncertainty while continuing to care for their patients.

Government officials seek to give residents accurate, timely information in a situation that seems to change, sometimes in significant ways, by the hour.

Most of these effects almost certainly will be temporary. But for some business owners the damage could be permanent.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on Monday banned restaurants and bars from on-site serving of food and drinks for at least four weeks. This precaution is sensible, and it follows the advice of doctors who say "social distancing" is key to slowing the spread of the coronavirus. But the potential harm to affected businesses is obvious even to people who have never had to balance a ledger or make a payroll.

Fortunately, the governor's order allows restaurants to serve takeout meals, and many local establishments are already offering that service. Local residents have always been a crucial clientele for our restaurants and other businesses, and there's no reason for that to change during these trying and anxious days.

Even if you're more comfortable staying home — again, social distancing is the mantra of March 2020 — you're not elevating your risk in any meaningful way by driving to a local restaurant and bringing home a hot meal.

Think of it as dining out — a favorite occasion for many of us — but still staying in.

The effects of the governor's executive orders are not limited to restaurants and bars, however. The limit on gatherings of no more than 25 people affects other businesses, such as theaters.

There has been much talk over the past week about how we need to work together to endure this crisis. This is true. We should be making sure our friends and family, and in particular older residents or those in poor health who are most vulnerable to the virus, have what they need.

But we also need to support the local businesses that depend on us. And we depend on them — something we might not think about often because we're so accustomed to their products and services being available when we need them.

Nor is this strictly an economic issue.

These business owners, besides being our friends, relatives and neighbors, also in many cases are generous supporters of a variety of causes. They sponsor kids who raise animals for 4-H. They donate to a variety of fundraisers that support our schools and other institutions. They are strong threads in the fabric of our community.

They've been put in peril through no fault of their own. If we can help them get through these troubled times, it will be to the benefit of all.



MY VOICE

Preparing for coronavirus in Union County

In response to the coronavirus crisis, city councilors and county commissioners in Union County must make the difficult decision to require all persons except those providing essential public services to shelter at home immediately. Why is this drastic action necessary?

As of March 19, the Oregon Health Authority confirmed a total of 88 people in Oregon infected with COVID-19, the novel coronavirus. Cases have now been documented in 15 counties. Union County so far has one diagnosed case of COVID-19, which is spreading throughout Oregon at an exponential speed.

Cases are typically discovered only when someone gets sick enough to seek medical attention. This is important as it typically takes approximately five days to start showing symptoms. Here's the math: For every known case there are approximately 50 unknown cases. This is because if I become sick, I infect several people today, and they infect a few people each tomorrow (as do I), and the total count of infected people doubles every three days until I get so sick I get hospitalized or get tested and become a "known case." But in the time it takes me to figure out I am sick 50 others now have the virus.

With the virus now in Union County, our health care system is likely to be overwhelmed. Exhausted health care workers may break down. They will have to decide which patient gets the oxygen and which one dies.

COVID-19 is a pandemic. It can't be eliminated now. But we can reduce

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Whitaker lives in La Grande and is a member of the Union County Progressives/Democrats. My Voice columns should be 50-700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photograph of the authors. Authors also should include their full name, age, occupation and relevant organizational memberships. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. Send columns to The Observer, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850, or email them to news@lagrandeobserver.com.



its impact. The only way to prevent this disaster is social distancing today. Not tomorrow. Today. That means keeping as many people home as possible.

Some people cannot, or will not, practice social distancing for a variety of reasons and will continue to spread the virus. So everyone else must start today. Social distancing isn't easy. But we must do it. It's not optional. Social distancing is the only way to stop the spread of the virus.

Let's look at how this could play out in Union County. Assume there are four unrecognized COVID-19 cases here (there is very probably more). Since virus infections double approximately every three days, the

four unrecognized cases in 15 days (five doublings) would be $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 4,096$ cases in Union County unless social distancing succeeds in flattening the infection curve.

About 15% of cases of COVID-19 infections require hospitalization. This means 614 hospital beds ($4,096 \times 15\%$) would be required in Union County.

Grande Ronde Hospital is a critical access hospital with 19 beds in its medical/surgical unit and six beds in its critical care unit. During a time of emergency, the 25 bed limit is lifted. The hospital is preparing to try to take patients who present. Even the expanded capacity will likely fall far short of meeting medical need.

Social distancing actions have been implemented in Oregon and Union County. These actions are reducing the spread of the virus and its impact on our health care system. But voluntary social distancing will not flatten the curve of exponential virus infections enough. All Union County residents except those providing essential services must shelter at home immediately.

If we reduce the infections as much as possible, our health care system will be able to handle cases much better, driving down the fatality rate. If we spread this over time, we will reach a point where the rest of society can be vaccinated, minimizing the risk.

Our goal is not to eliminate coronavirus contagions. It's to postpone them. Each day we delay makes it more difficult to flatten the curve of new infections in the pandemic and will increase the number of deaths in Union County.

Your views

Rasmussen has proven track record of success

We support Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen for re-election as Union County Sheriff. His 26 years of law enforcement experience make him the best candidate for this position. However, it is not just the important experience that motivates our endorsement. Having known Boyd and his family for much longer than 26 years and being familiar with the progress and professionalism he has brought to the office, it is the record of his achievements as sheriff, combined with the integrity of his character, that motivates our endorsement.

He has improved the capacity of the sheriff's office to complete and conduct criminal investigations and thereby hold offenders accountable.

He raised the bar on investigating the increasing number of burglaries. He has built trust with the community and with his staff. He facilitated the upgrading of equipment and technology of the sheriff's office in fiscally responsible ways to make the difficult and dangerous job of his deputies as safe and efficient as possible. He knows his constituents expect their tax dollars to be spent wisely to ensure the safety and protection of Union County citizens. He does not take this responsibility lightly.

He listens to and advocates for all citizens. He is approachable and engaged and genuinely committed to governing well. He grew up in Imbler, where family members have been involved in farming. He graduated

from Eastern Oregon University with a degree in business and economics. He is totally invested in the protection and welfare of Union County. He has the respect of the community and is visibly engaged in serving the community in many other capacities including service clubs and youth sports as a coach and mentor.

Please vote to re-elect Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen for Union County. He has a proven track record of success and professionalism in his years as Union County Sheriff. We believe Boyd Rasmussen deserves to serve again as our sheriff, and we will be best served by electing him.

Hardworking. Professional. Capable. Respected.

*James and Rita McMahan
La Grande*

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Phone: **541-963-3161**

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214
Fax: 541-963-7804

Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com
Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com
Street address: 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande

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