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Good day to our valued subscriber Bill Hall of Elgin

COVID-19 explosion hits county

99 new cases identified in Union County, taking total to 123

By Sabrina Thompson and Ronald Bond
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Union County is in the midst of an explosion of COVID-19.

The Center for Human Development on Monday afternoon announced 99 new cases. The spike puts the county at 123 cases — 121 confirmed and two presumptive — and moves Union County to the top of the state in cases per capita.

The center in a press release stated 365 tests were conducted over the weekend, and the 99 new cases are what has been “identified so far.”

“This announcement raises a lot of different feelings,” Carrie Brogoitti, public health administrator at the center, said in the press release. “For me, it raises concern. For others it may raise fear, anxiety, anger, uncertainty and even skepticism. All of those emotions make sense when we have a new disease. I think we all care about our community. I hope that, as a community, we come together to protect each other.”

Union County as of a week ago had just six con-



The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, Island City, is associated with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Union County, according to the Center for Human Development, which Monday confirmed 99 new cases in the county. Staff photo by Ronald Bond

firmed cases of COVID-19, but added single cases Tuesday and Wednesday, then had five more cases Thursday. The county sat at 22 after Sunday.

All but five of the cases are considered active. To date, nobody in Union County has died from COVID-19.

Outbreak involves local church, more

The press release stated several of the cases are associated with Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, Island City, which recently hosted

a testing clinic.

“Local public health officials expressed appreciation to the congregation for hosting testing onsite,” according to the press release, “and underscored that the results confirm the presence of COVID-19 in the community.”

The church held services in April and May, despite Gov. Kate Brown’s executive orders limiting gatherings, and recently held a wedding and a graduation ceremony with more than

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The Center for Human Development on Monday reported many of the new positive cases are not confined to one location and that large gatherings could pose a risk in spreading the virus. Two weeks ago, hundreds of people attended a racial equality protest in La Grande and did not follow social distancing regulations. Observer file photo

Restored jail is new feature of Elgin Museum

Museum opens Thursday

By Dick Mason
The Observer

ELGIN — A small weathered wooden building, which lacks color but sports a colorful past, is set to be thrust into the Union County spotlight.

The structure is one of Elgin’s earliest jails, one recently restored. The old jail will be open to the public for the first time since its renovation when the Elgin Museum’s 2020 season begins Thursday.

“This is a dream come true,” said Gerald Hopkins, president of the Elgin

Museum and Historical Society, which restored the old jail.

Hopkins helped lead the effort to get the jail repaired and moved to the museum. The jail was first located on Seventh Street in Elgin between Division and Alder streets from 1895 to at least 1914. The small building was moved to an Elgin farm sometime after the Elgin Opera House was built in 1912. A jail was put in the opera house following its construction.

The wooden jail building in 2001 was moved to a site about 50 feet east of the Elgin Opera House, where it stood unidentified and overlooked for nearly 20

years. In 2019, it was moved by Countryside Sheds to a spot about 20 feet away from the east side of the Elgin Museum.

Hopkins said it took the Island City company about eight hours to move the old jail, which was in fragile condition.

“It was tough to watch,” he said. “I was sure that it was going to collapse.”

Hopkins credits the excellent and painstaking efforts of Countryside Sheds’ staff with the successful move.

Next, Accelerated Construction of La Grande reinforced the building’s roof and put in a new rafter and floor. Charlie Horn, curator

of the Elgin Museum and a member of its board, then did a significant amount of finishing work to complete the project.

Horn is familiar with the structure, for it had been on a farm where he lived. He raised chickens in the structure after cutting out a bar in its front window to allow roosters and hens to move in and out of it.

The old jail’s two other windows still have their full complement of bars. These windows were for its two cells. One of the cells today is barren while the other sports a blacksmith tool display.

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Gerald Hopkins, left, and Charlie Horn examine a lantern Saturday in a cell which once served as Elgin’s jail. The old jail will be open to the public for the first time since its renovation when the Elgin Museum’s 2020 season begins Thursday. Staff photo by Dick Mason

Police investigate humane association’s former director

Current and former BMHA members respond to rumors and allegations

By Sabrina Thompson
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande Police Department is looking into whether the former director of the Blue Mountain Humane Association embezzled funds and

committed other criminal acts.

La Grande police detective Ryan Miller said an investigation is underway and the department has partnered with the FBI to look into rumors and accusations against John Brinlee, including for embezzlement and false advertising.

Brinlee resigned from the local animal shelter and humane association in June 2019. Miller could

not say what the investigation has turned up because it remains in the early stages, but he said the current board members believe Brinlee could have taken up to \$250,000.

The Observer tried numerous times to contact Brinlee without success. Miller said the police have not talked with Brinlee because it is too soon in the investigation.

Minutes from Union County Board of Commis-

sioner meetings and from BMHA board meetings detail a rocky relationship with Brinlee.

Brinlee began his time at the association working at Barkin’ Basement, a secondhand store in La Grande that supports the shelter. He served as chairman of the Blue Mountain Humane Association Board of Directors and assisted with animal control prior to becoming director. By 2014, Brinlee was the director

and living at the shelter. He was not receiving financial compensation at the beginning of his time as director, according to a former board member.

During Brinlee’s tenure, the shelter went through multiple changes and difficulties. Bri Troutman, vice president of the association, said the shelter’s finances were a serious problem under Brinlee.

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Wednesday 67/42 Partly sunny

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
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