

OUTBREAK

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to be handled by community engagement. Everyone in the community has a responsibility to help stop the spread of the virus. I have tremendous faith in the professionals we have in place.”

Source of outbreak quiet

Thomas Jeanne, deputy state health officer and epidemiologist, said during a Tuesday afternoon call with media members that 236 cases were connected to Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City. The outbreak is officially the largest to date in Oregon.

The church held “drive-up” services before the May 15 Phase 1 reopening. Videos of the services show church leaders and dozens of parishioners ignored social distancing recommendations, did not wear face coverings and often jostled and touched each other in group prayers. The church sometime after Monday removed those videos from its page.

James Parker, a pastor at Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, posted a video Tuesday morning to the church’s Facebook page with a message to members:

“Our fruit will show that what we did is the right thing. And more people need to do what we did. And the more people that do the right thing, the easier it’s going to be for the rest of the world to combat this, this pandemic that we’re going through. Umm, we shouldn’t hide from life’s circumstances. You got to stand up on your feet and you got to face them. That’s what we do. That’s what we’ll continue to do.”

Since then, the church’s Facebook page has been deleted. The Observer tried multiple times to contact someone at the church, and on Wednesday the church’s phone would not accept voicemail.

Spike could lead to rollback

Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday the state could reverse the “reopening” of Union County if the sharp spike in positive cases of COVID-19 isn’t contained.

The state reported 278 new infections Tuesday, surpassing the previous single-day record of 184 cases set Monday. There were 120 more cases Wednesday.

Union County’s 119 new cases Tuesday drove the spike, according to the official count from Oregon Health Authority and Center for Human Development, the nonprofit that oversees public health in the county.

Health officials on Tuesday said they believe they tested all the congregation members who might be infected and hope trace contacting will keep the outbreak in check, but added “all options are on the table,” including removing the county from Phase 2 reopening — which would mark the first reversal since the state plan to lift pandemic restrictions began last month.

Jeanne on Tuesday noted five people were in the hospital with COVID-19 but he was not able to share how many patients are in the ICU or on ventilators “due to privacy concerns.” The Oregon Health Authority, Grande Ronde Hospital nor the Center for Human



Screenshot of Lighthouse Pentecostal Church video

Members of the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, Island City, during services April 26 while Union County and the rest of Oregon remained under orders preventing large gatherings to help curb the spread of the coronavirus. The screenshot is from a video the church posted on Facebook, but the videos and the Facebook page have been deleted. The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church is the site of at least 236 COVID-19 cases in the county.

COVID-19 in Union County

Below are the dates cases of COVID-19 were reported in Union County, per the Oregon Health Authority:

Date	New	Total
March 19	1	1
April 1	2	3
April 9	1	4
May 15	1	5
May 18	1	6
June 9	1	7
June 11	1	8
June 12	4	12
June 13	2	14
June 14	8	22
June 15	99	121
June 16	119	240
June 17	2	242

Development would provide hospitalization information Wednesday. The OHA statewide update showed 929 individuals in Oregon have been hospitalized due to the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. That number was up 17 from the 912 shown in Tuesday’s update.

Nearly 1% of the population in the county now has COVID-19, making it by far the hardest-hit section of the state per capita.

“If I could say one thing to people it’s stay calm take responsibility stay home if you can and wear a mask when out in public,” Clements said.

Hospital prepared to expand

Mardi Ford, director of communications and marketing at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, said the hospital could not disclose why a person is in the hospital due to patient privacy laws, but as of Tuesday afternoon Grande Ronde’s census — the number of patients in the hospital for any purpose — was below the threshold of the hospital’s bed limit. The average daily census is between 10 and 20 depending on the season.

The normal capacity for the hospital is 25, but in the release from the Center for Human Development, the hospital also included a statement that in an emergency situation it could expand capacity to 40. If needed, the GRH Pavilion near downtown La Grande could serve as an alternative site capable of taking another 160 additional patients.

“We’ve been preparing for this since March 2,” Ford told The Observer. “We are prepared.”

In the event that hospitals within the county were overwhelmed, Jeanne noted other Eastern

Oregon hospitals may be able to help take transfers and there is additional capacity at nearby metropolitan areas such as Boise, Idaho.

“It’s certainly possible that with an outbreak and a bunch of people getting sick that you could see more people need to be hospitalized than there are there,” Jeanne said.

He noted the Oregon Health Authority has dedicated 10 additional contact tracers, two on the ground in Union County and eight working remotely, to assist the five local public health staff working on investigations.

“At this time it is enough for the outbreak,” Jeanne said. “We’ll have to keep monitoring that but we think this is enough at the time.”

The county’s count was among the lowest totals in the state a week ago with just six cases. That number jumped to 13 by Friday and passed 20 over the weekend before the 99 new cases were added Monday.

In all, 1,109 tests have been processed in Union County as of Wednesday, with 242 of those being positive and 867 negative, according to the OHA website. This means about 22% of tests have come back positive. The infection rate in the county is 0.94%, which is nearly double the next highest county in Oregon — Lincoln, which is at 0.49%.

One in every 107 people in the county has tested positive for the virus.

Seven of the cases in Union County are patients who have recovered, meaning 235 of the cases are active. There have not been any deaths in the county due to the virus.

As of Tuesday, the virus had not made its way into the area’s long-term care facilities, as OHA’s list of facilities reporting staff or residents with COVID-19 did not include La Grande or Union County. Statewide, three adult foster care facilities have confirmed cases of the virus and two have suspected cases with test results pending. OHA does not list which facilities are included in this list.

Businesses closing voluntarily

Local businesses are closing their doors to protect employees and clients after reopening a little more than a month ago.

“I volunteered to close to protect my family and friends, and not put any of my clients at risk,” said Chelsea Weber, an esthetician at Skinplicity at Blue Mountain Mermaid, a salon in Elgin.

She explained even though her businesses can take precautions in protecting clients, such as frequent sanitation and pre-screening customers before they enter, her line of work makes it difficult to keep a proper distance between clients.

Blue Mountain Outfitters, John Howard & Associates Real Estate and Community Kindness of Northeastern Oregon, all in downtown La Grande, announced temporary closures because of the outbreak.

“The last few months have taught me a lot about acting on personal conviction in the absence of further direction from state authorities, so we have always erred on the side of caution in our policies around sanitation and opening/closing,” said Jim Whitbeck, owner of Blue Mountain Outfitters.

“We all need to do our part to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and that includes wearing masks out in public and maintaining social distancing,” John Howard and Associates wrote on Facebook. “Our actions do affect the community we live in, the business community and especially those who are in a compromised health condition. As a business owner, I think it’s important we be responsible and take actions ourselves rather than waiting to be told we have to by state authorities.”

Closures come with costs

Some local eating establishments also are going back to takeout and delivery only. Moy’s Dynasty Restaurant and Local Harvest Eatery and Pub, both in La Grande, and Cowboys and Angels Place and Timber’s Feedery, both in Elgin, announced they would be closing for dine-in service until further notice.

“We feel with these current outbreaks and the possibility of many more that this is our only option at this point to keep our staff and customers safe,” Bruce Rogers, owner of Local Harvest and Timber’s Feedery said. “We need to be responsible to our community and until someone really knows what is going on there is a possibility that not being responsible could make things worse.”

These closures do not come without a cost.

Weber said she worries that even if she can come back, the services she offers still may be restricted and that could mean losing clients who came to her specifically for those services. Additionally, she said those whose jobs depend on a license to work are sitting idle as “time on the meter runs” and Weber said she hopes the government will consider extending licenses.

“Whether I believe this is ‘real’ or a ‘political fight’ or not, I am going to do my part to keep those

around me healthy and safe,” Weber said.

Whitbeck said the decision to close comes at a time of heavy traffic to the store.

“As a retail business entering a high traffic part of our season, we felt our staff would have to endure a high level of exposure in order for us to remain open,” he said. “That traffic also also puts us in a position to potentially help slow the spread of the current outbreak.”

Many are taking the closures on a week-by-week basis. Rogers said his restaurants are in no rush to reopen, and while it is important people continue to work, employee and customer health is the most important. Weber said she would like to see a drop in cases before she reopens her practice.

“I would certainly want to see new cases level off and existing in decline, but from everything I’ve seen this will get worse before it gets better and circumstances seems to change every 20 minutes, so I’m not in a position to set a time table,” Whitbeck said about reopening. “Other variables that will get figured in to the reopening calculus include unemployment availability for staff, general comfort level with exposure, ability to mitigate risk, and of course how the business can actually survive with the doors closed.”

Take precautions

The Center for Human Development in its press release Tuesday also encouraged people to take precautions to a higher level.

“Please avoid social gatherings with those not in your household,” the release states. “Continue to practice physical distancing, stay home when you are sick, wash your hands or use hand sanitizer often, and wear cloth face coverings when public.”

CHD listed three instances where a person must quarantine for 14 days: If they are a confirmed positive case, if they have been in close contact (within 6 feet for more than 15 minutes) with a confirmed positive case, or if they are symptomatic. Symptoms include “fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea.”

Tuesday afternoon, the outbreak in Union County led to La Grande Parks & Recreation immediately closing “all park restrooms, Veterans’ Memorial Pool and Summer Day Camp programs.” The release added that Morgan Lake will remain open.

Oregon is at 6,218 cases as of Wednesday afternoon, and the state has seen 183 deaths related to the virus.

The Bend Bulletin, EO Media Group reporter Alex Castle and Observer editor Phil Wright contributed to this report.

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