SCHOOLS

Continued from Page 1A

playgrounds and fields, so they will not come into contact with students outside their class and they will not be where other children have been.

Smith also noted classes cannot share playground objects, such as basketballs, with other classes.

Mayes, like Smith, said the process of making sure students will be safe is meticulous.

"I believe we have done our utmost to make sure we have covered all our bases. We have gone over and over the guidelines and have met repeatedly with our admin team to figure this all out," the Central principal said.

Smith said teachers have known for weeks there was a good chance the school district would be able to have K-3 students on-site starting Oct. 5.

Dick Mason/The Observer

Island City Elementary custodial staff member Dale Read sanitizes a surface at the school Thursday, Sept. 30, 2020. The La Grande School District is preparing for all of its K-3 students to return to classrooms Monday.

"(The K-3 announcement) was not a surprise," said Smith, who was La Grande High School's assistant principal for two years before taking his position at Island City Elementary in July.

Smith said he was impressed with the professionalism his staff demonstrated this summer, noting many teachers worked hard to boost their online teaching skills.

"Our staff has done a great job of adapting. A lot of our staff took classes to get up to speed," he said.

Fourth and fifth graders at the La Grande School District's elementary schools will be missing on Monday because state COVID-19 standards for their return have not yet been met. Mayes said she hopes they can be back at school shortly.

"It is truly a bittersweet situation because it feels very awkward to not bring back our fourth and fifth graders. We will certainly miss them and hope they join us soon," Mayes said.

K-3 students will be attending school on-site Monday through Friday. There will not be a staggered start and the school day will run from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., according to a letter La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza wrote to school district staff, parents and community members.

If families of K-3 students do not want their child to return at this time, they will need to visit with their teacher and principal, Mendoza wrote. Students have the option of transitioning to the La Grande Learning Academy for long-term virtual education.

Students who cannot attend on-site because of short-term illness, quarantine or other medical situations will have access to asynchronous learning from their teachers. This means instead of live instruction they will receive lessons via recorded videos, written instructional materials and other means.

ATTACKS

Continued from Page 1A

Clements

Howard

Dutto

make and vote on are bread and butter things of the city, the basic things for living, those are the issues we are taking care of. I do not vote based on a party direction either. I think of each issue and make a decision on my own."

Dutto said it is important to remember their positions on the council are nonpartisan.

Howard said the person who made the post had not reached out to her or any other councilors and the claims he made are unsubstantiated.

"I am discouraged to read the Union County Republican post," Howard said. "It supposedly represents my views without having any idea of what those views actually are. To insert partisan politics into a nonpartisan election is not just unfortunate — it distracts us from the real issues that confront our city. I hope that people of all political persuasions can come together to discuss and debate civilly how we might solve problems. La Grande deserves as much."

Hildebrandt suggested, in his post, the city council is working to defund the La Grande Police department.

Dutto said there has not been any conversation about defunding the La Grande Police Department, and the city recently renewed its labor contract with the police union for another three years. The city council gave a unanimous vote in favor of the three-year collective bargaining agreement with the police department that went into effect July 1 and includes cost-of-living increases of 2.5% in 2019-20 and 2% each in the next two years.

The city allocated $2.77 million for the police department in fiscal year 2020-21, according to the city budget document, a slight decrease from the $2.79 million in the previous cycle.

"There has never been a discussion of or consideration for defunding or taking any money away from the police department," City Manager Robert Strope said. "In fact, the city's agreement is adding changes to benefit the police department."

Another issue Hildebrandt raised is the assumption the city councilors are in support of the rioting that has occurred in Portland and elsewhere.

"I suspect Mayor Steve Clements, Nicole Howard and Corrine Dutto (the 3 Democrats) on the council would support Black Lives Matter 'protests' if they came to La Grande," Hildebrandt wrote. "I'm also fairly certain that they would condone the 100 days of Antifa 'protests' in Portland."

Hildebrandt went on to urge people to write to the councilors and ask if they would support or condemn Black Lives Matter and Antifa protests in Portland should they come to La Grande.

Dutto, Howard and Clements said they do not condone violence or looting. Howard and Dutto said they did not see any violence during the June protest in La Grande, and they welcome peaceful protest as afforded by the freedom of speech. Dutto said First Amendment rights to free speech still apply.

"I support having a protest for whatever the issue is," she said. "It is the suppression of speech that is more frightening. That suppression will run us down the same road as North Korea and Russia. So I support the freedom of speech, just like I support the right to bear arms. I was impressed with the (local) Black Lives Matter protest and counterprotest across the street and how it was handled. I don't support violence or vandalism, but protest is good."

Clements echoed Dutto, and added that in his position as mayor he would do everything he could to stop a riot if it were to occur.

"People have a right to peaceful assembly, not to riot, loot or agitate violence," Clements said. "The riots in Portland should never have been allowed to persist. I would not tolerate rioting or looting here and would use every power available to the city to stop them immediately."

Dutto said her and other councilors' voting records indicate where their priorities are, not their political party registration.

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Lawmakers approve money for wildfire bills, housing aid

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers approved money to start paying wildfire costs and helping homeowners rebuild, add workers to process unemployment claims and update technology and expand capacity for coronavirus testing.

They did so Friday, Sept. 25, during an Emergency Board meeting that lasted more than three hours. The board's 20 members handle budget matters between sessions of the full Legislature.

And Monday, Gov. Kate Brown extended the state ban on evictions from residential rental units through the end of the year.

ONLINE

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Though the board has met monthly since the 2020 session adjourned March 5 — and twice in August — Friday's session was the first after the board committed all of Oregon's $1.4 billion share of federal pandemic aid under the CARES Act.

The board enabled the Oregon Department of Forestry to tap $75 million, instead of the original $20 million, to start paying suppression costs of the wildfires that have swept through about 1 million acres of forests since Labor Day. As many as three dozen fires burned at once across Oregon.

Prior to Labor Day, 2020 wildfire suppression costs were estimated at $31 million, with the state on the hook for about $24.5 million after federal aid.

Officials have said the costs of Oregon wildfire suppression will approach $100 million. Though about half that total will be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, State Forester Peter Daugherty said his agency will have to pay the bills pending reimbursement.

"With this kind of a fire season, we have started conversations with our federal partners about completely revamping the approach we take with the expected amount of cost processing that we are going to have to do," Daugherty said.

The agency had a backlog of about $100 million in costs from previous wildfires. It has whittled that number down to $44 million.

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MAYORS

Continued from Page 1A

taught him to be diverse in how to communicate. Comfort also is a certified dental technician, which he believes shows he has great attention to detail.

Comfort said his desire to serve his community came from an experience in high school when he attended an American Legion program called Boys State, where he learned about the different branches of government. Through his work on Island City's budget committee, he said, he has gotten to know his local government personally.

"The staff of Island City is awesome," Comfort said. "Great people doing great things. Island City is a great place, and it is because of the relationship between the mayor and staff. I plan to continue to help them in any way I can."

He also said he hopes to see more development in Island City, and with plenty of land available, he sees this as a real possibility.

"It is my goal to lead Island City into the future," Comfort said. "Cultivating ideas from the city council, staff and residents that will make Island City a great place for families and commerce."

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