

Vaccine may soon be available to local vets

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Veterans, including those served by the La Grande VA Clinic, will be among the first in Northeast Oregon to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Linda Wondra, public affairs officer for the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which oversees the La Grande clinic, said Saturday, Dec. 26, that veterans in Northeast Oregon may begin receiving calls inviting them to come in and get free Moderna COVID-19 shots by mid-January. The La Grande VA clinic will be among the sites where the vaccine will be provided.

The vaccine will come from the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which received the vaccine Dec. 22. The Walla Walla VA, with a service area encompassing Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington, has been vaccinating all of its staff who have direct contact with veterans including doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners since then.

“We started right away. We didn’t miss a beat,” Wondra said.

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New Year’s Eve to be online this year

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As has been the case with so many cherished traditions in 2020, the New Year’s Eve ball drop in downtown La Grande will look different as residents bid welcome to 2021.

Over the previous six years, Adams Avenue in downtown La Grande was blocked off to allow people to gather in the street in a Times Square-style celebration of the passing of the old into the new.

“It’s usually a hoot and a half,” said Ashley O’Toole, who’s set up the ball drop and accompanying block party since its inception at the dawn of 2015.

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The Observer, File

The La Grande School District, which was set to return K-6 students to in-person instruction after winter break, now has more authority to determine how its students will be taught during the pandemic thanks to new policy initiatives from Gov. Kate Brown announced Wednesday, Dec. 23, 2020.

Back in the classroom

Oregon schools to have control over their own reopening in 2021

By Kaleb Lay and Dick Mason
The Observer

SALEM — Oregon schools have been granted more power to determine how they will teach their students during the COVID-19 pandemic thanks to new policy initiatives from Gov. Kate Brown.

In a letter to Oregon Health Authority director Pat Allen and Department of Education director Colt Gill on Wednesday, Dec. 23, the governor issued several directives to the agencies with the goal of opening Oregon’s schools for in-person instruction. Most notably, the governor said that guidance from the state on school reopening would become advisory rather than mandatory in the new year.

“It is my hope that more Oregon schools, especially elementary schools, will transition to in-person instruction by February 15, 2021,” Gov. Brown said in the letter.

While most schools in Union County were already set to return for in-person instruction in January — including K-6 students in La Grande — the changes could mean that La Grande’s middle and high schoolers might return to in-person instruction in the near future.

La Grange School District Superintendent George Mendoza said that La Grande schools are still planning to move forward with the reopening plan he announced on Dec. 16, which returns kindergartens

through sixth-grade students on Jan. 11 and seventh- through 12th-grade students tentatively returning for in-person instruction at the start of the next semester, on Jan. 27.



Mendoza

“I am fairly sure we will move forward with middle school and high school getting the opportunity to be in school starting the beginning of our second semester,” Mendoza said in an email.

“What we currently planned with K-6 should be a good phase in plan to help us initially with lower grades then successfully transition all other secondary (7-12) students that want to be back in our schools.”

Union, Cove, Imbler, Elgin and North Powder schools were expected to continue providing in-person instruction to all their students in the new year thanks to an extension of Oregon’s Safe Harbors program, with the exception of those who need to quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure, symptoms or positivity.

With Brown’s announcement that reopening guidance would become advisory in the new year, that expectation is now all but a certainty.

“We will be able to continue using the model we have been using, one which has been successful,” said Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells.

Wells said his school district’s teachers and students are happy they will not have to open the new year in January using an online model.

“That would have been very disappointing for our students and teachers,” Wells said.

The superintendent said onsite instruction is “hands down” the best way to educate students.

The metrics for school reopening, which some Union County school officials have previously described as “moving goalposts” for their frequent changes, are slated to become advisory rather than mandatory on Jan. 1, 2021. This means that individual school districts will have the authority to determine how their students will be taught during the pandemic based on the local situation.

“Moving forward, the decision to resume in-person instruction must be made locally, district by district, school by school,” Gov. Brown said in the letter. “In addition to schools continuing to adhere to required health and safety protocols and working in close consultation with their local public health authority in understanding and considering the metrics, teachers, school staff, parents and stu-



Wells

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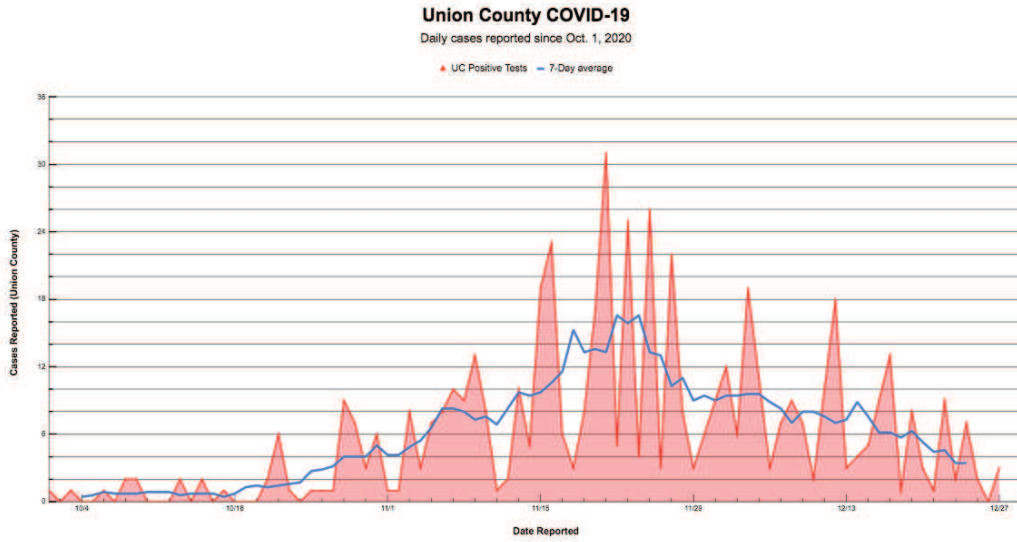
Local COVID-19 on the decline, for now

Local and state cases continue to drop, but officials fear a looming post-holiday spike

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The past week in Union County has brought good news on several fronts of the war against COVID-19: daily cases continued to taper off, vaccines were administered to local health care workers and the county inched closer to dropping out of the “extreme risk” category of statewide measures to stop the spread.

However, local spread continued in the county, both sporadic and outbreak-driven, and public health officials have expressed concerns that holiday gatherings could lead



Kaleb Lay/The Observer

A chart depicting daily cases in Union County reported by the Center for Human Development, the county’s public health arm, between Oct. 1 and Dec. 27, 2020.

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
27 LOW
Rain and drizzle



Wednesday
36/31
Cloudy

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541-963-3161

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La Grande, Oregon

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THURSDAY

FIFTEEN MONTHS OF SEWAGE

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