



Dick Mason/The Observer

Ashley O'Toole, center, hands a '2021' sign to Nicholas Ducote Sunday, Dec. 27, 2020, to set up for the New Year's Eve ball drop. The event will be held virtually this year.

ONLINE

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But while many will surely be thrilled to bid 2020 a not-so-fond farewell, they will have to do it virtually this year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Instead of an in-person gathering, La Grande Main Street Downtown will broadcast the ball drop via livestream.

"We're not even going to do any street closures, anything like that," O'Toole said. "There's no sanctioned

event, there is no sanctioned block party. No street closure, no burn barrels, nothing like that."

Main Street Downtown is collaborating with EO Alive TV and the Blue Mountain Translator District to livestream the event in lieu of in-person activities.

Each organization will have their own program using the same feed, and coverage with light commentary will begin at roughly 11:45 p.m. on New Year's Eve.

"The name of the game

is pretty much to keep it as low-key as we can," O'Toole said.

While there won't be any official event downtown, O'Toole said that people can still choose to gather informally on the sidewalks if they want to count down to 2021 in a more traditional fashion — properly masked and safely distanced from other households.

To watch the New Year's Eve ball drop online, visit the Blue Mountain Translator District's website at bmtd.org or EO Alive at eoalive.tv.

COVID

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to another spike in cases in the coming weeks.

The facts

Union County recorded 24 cases of COVID-19 during Christmas week and another three on Sunday, Dec. 27. With just one more reported on Monday, Dec. 28, a total of 971 people have been infected in Union County and 13 have lost their lives to the disease.

Daily cases continue to decline locally, and on Saturday, Dec. 26, Union County scored another victory against COVID-19: for the first time since late October, the Center for Human Development reported no new cases of the disease.

Test positivity in Union County during Christmas week was also low, coming in at 3.2% according to tracking data from the Oregon Health Authority. With case counts and test positivity low, the county has its first plausible opportunity to move out of Oregon's most severe COVID-19 restrictions since the "two-week freeze" began on Nov. 18.

If 35 or fewer new cases are recorded between Sunday, Dec. 27, and Saturday, Jan. 2, and test positivity rates stay below 5%, the county will be removed from the state's "extreme risk" category and local restaurants could be serving meals in-person in the first week of the new year.

Of course, there is no guarantee this best-case scenario will come to pass. Spread has continued in the county, as was illustrated by the emergence of a new outbreak in La Grande. The new outbreak was reported by the Oregon Health Authority at Legacy Chrysler Jeep Dodge Ram in La Grande, where five people had contracted COVID-19 as of Wednesday, Dec. 23.

Additionally, Wildflower Lodge added five new cases to the care facility's outbreak, bringing its total to 75 infections. The outbreak at Northwood manufacturing was reported unchanged from 18 cases,

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Representatives from Grande Ronde Hospital, the Center for Human Development and La Grande School District will answer local residents' questions about COVID-19 in Union County at a town hall at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 30. Topics include vaccination, school resumption plans and the current state of the pandemic in the county. There will also be a Q & A segment.

- To submit a question, email it to communityrelations@grh.org.
- To view the town hall, go to eoalive.tv at 6 p.m. Wednesday.

and the outbreak at Grande Ronde Hospital has been labeled inactive.

Even so, sporadic transmission — new cases of the disease that cannot be traced to a known source — have been the dominant mode of spread locally and beyond since early November. Since then, according to the OHA, more than half of the state's cases have been sporadically spread.

Daily cases have also been on the decline across Oregon. In the week preceding the Christmas holiday, total new cases of COVID-19 dropped for the second week in a row and total hospitalizations fell by 11%. The state also recorded fewer than 1,000 cases several times since the beginning of last week after breaching the 1,000-case mark almost invariably since mid-November.

Nonetheless, the Oregon Health Authority highlighted last week that the state's fatality rate stood at 1.3%. For context, a 1.3% fatality rate means that roughly one in 77 Oregonians who have contracted COVID-19 have died as a result. Union County's fatality

rate mirrors the state's.

The facts appear to illustrate a devastating pandemic that is in decline across Oregon and in Union County. However, public health officials like Anthony Fauci have expressed concerns that holiday gatherings could lead to a spike in cases early in the new year, which could set back local reopening efforts and lead to a resurgence in cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

To answer local residents' questions about COVID-19 in Union County, a town hall with representatives from Grande Ronde Hospital, the Center for Human Development and La Grande School District will take place on Wednesday, Dec. 30.

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VACCINES

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"We are very excited."

Frontline workers who are set to be vaccinated this week include staff at the La Grande VA Clinic.

Once all front line workers within the Walla Walla VA are vaccinated, veterans who are enrolled with the VA will begin being contacted. Veterans will need a scheduled appointment before they can receive the vaccine.

"We will not be taking walk-ins," Wondra said.

There is no need for enrolled veterans to pre-register or come into a clinic to sign up.

If a veteran is not enrolled with the VA, they can check eligibility by

"Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered."

— **Chris Bjornberg**, Walla Walla VA Medical Center director

going to the VA's "how to apply for VA health care" site at va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/. From this site, veterana can apply online or download the VA form 10-10EZ form.

Veterans who are at higher risk will be the first to be contacted about vaccination appointments. Those most vulnerable to COVID-19 include individuals who are age 60 and older and who have underlying health conditions.

The Walla Walla VA is one of 113 VA Medical Centers across the country to receive the first limited supply of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

"Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our ultimate goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccinations to all veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated," said Chris Bjornberg, the Walla Walla VA's Medical Center Director in a press release.

The Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was 94% effective in clinical trials in preventing COVID-19 disease, according to the press release.

SCHOOLS

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dents should be engaged in this decision-making process to allow schools to make the best choice for their community and their students."

The OHA and ODE were also instructed to collaborate with school to provide on-site rapid COVID-19 testing, to review and update the Ready Schools, Safe Learners state guidance for reopening by Jan. 19, and to collaborate with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to ensure school safety protocols allow for maximum in-person instruction while ensuring safety for students and staff.

Comprehensive distance learning has been widely panned as detrimental to the academic success of students as well

as the mental and social health of students and school staff alike.

North Powder, for example, released a video about in-person versus distance learning in which students of all ages widely attest to the ineffectiveness and difficulty of online learning. Schools across the county also mounted a social media campaign against a return to distance learning earlier this month.

The governor acknowledged the severe negative effects that long-term distance learning has had on students, citing it as a driving reason for the change in guidance. She also reminded Oregonians that keeping COVID-19 under control in each community is key to ensuring that returning to in-person instruction is safe.

"The long-term benefits of both heading off an emerging mental health crisis for our children and youth, and addressing the

academic challenges that are becoming prevalent for far too many students in the absence of in-person learning, now far outweigh the short-term risk," the governor said. "I am confident that if all Oregonians do our part over the holidays and in the new year, our schools, educators and local public health officials will have had the time, the on-the-ground experience, and now the resources to return our students to school."

Mendoza will participate in a virtual town hall with Union County's public health authority, the Center for Human Development, and Grande Ronde Hospital on Wednesday, Dec. 30. The online event will feature a public Q & A and will be moderated by EO Alive TV. Mendoza is expected to discuss La Grande's return to school during the town hall, which will begin at 6 p.m. at www.eoalive.tv.

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