

## TOLL

Continued from Page 1A

That trend could improve with the development and approval of other vaccines.

In all, Oregon had recorded 118,456 cases of COVID-19 and 1,506 deaths as of Monday, Jan. 4. Union County had contributed 992 infections and 15 deaths to those totals.

Even so, Union County is poised to drop into Oregon's "high risk" COVID-19 safety measures, which allow for limited indoor dining, the opening of gyms and indoor recreation, among other easements. County risk levels are reviewed on Mondays and ordinarily announced by the office of Gov. Kate Brown on Tuesdays.

If Union County is moved out of the "extreme risk" category, it will represent a major local victory in the war against COVID-19. Nonetheless, restrictions on social activity — including capacity limits in most



Kaleb Lay/The Observer, File

Workers with the Center for Human Development, Union County's public health arm, guide a patient through the process of taking a COVID-19 drive-thru test Monday, Dec. 7, 2020. CHD on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2021, announced Union County's 15 death due to COVID-19.

buildings and mandatory mask-wearing — will remain in place to prevent further spread.

More than 350,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States. One in every 78.5 people who have contracted the disease in Oregon have died as a

result, and that figure is even more severe in Union County — one in 66.

The death toll from 10 months of COVID-19 now stands at 10 times more than the 34,200-person death toll from the 2018-19 flu season, and a new, more infectious variant of COVID-19 has been found

in several states.

Officials are urging people to stay vigilant. The best way to protect yourself and others against COVID-19 is to wear a mask, wash your hands regularly, distance yourself from people outside your household, and avoid gatherings when possible.

## BOOST

Continued from Page 1A

school districts are able to offer in-person instruction, allowing EOU Head Start in those communities to do the same.

The La Grande School District is not currently offering online instruction. It's larger population means different state metrics apply to it, but it will begin providing in-person instruction for students up through sixth grade below

starting Jan. 11. Kleng said he and his staff celebrated this news.

"We are thrilled," Kleng said.

He said it has been hard for his staff to teach children remotely. Kleng added it is particularly critical to teach preschool children in person because 90% of brain development occurs by age 5. To take full advantage of this growth, he said, it is critical to provide in-person instruction.

"Children learn by

socially interacting with another person," Kleng said.

Kleng said the stimulus bill, which will provide \$600 to most Americans and extend unemployment benefits for those hurt by COVID-19, will help EOU Head Start students in more ways than just what will be given to the education program directly. He explained children will benefit because their parents, many of whom are struggling financially due to the pandemic, will be

able to devote more time to helping educate their children since they will be under less economic stress.

"It is hard to imagine how much federal funding helps a family which is struggling financially," Kleng said.

Putting parents in a position to spend more time educating their children is vital, the EOU Head Start director said.

"Parents are the first and most important teachers of their children," Kleng said.

## Bentz backs bid to upend presidential vote count

By GARY A. WARNER  
Oregon Capital Bureau

WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz of Ontario has called for an investigation of the 2020 presidential election, a move that would delay and possibly derail the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory over President Donald Trump in November's election.



Bentz

"I have joined many of my colleagues in asking for a congressional investigation and review into what has happened in states where election irregularities have been observed," Bentz said in a statement Dec. 15.

Bentz has declined repeated requests since last week to say whether he would join an effort by more than 100 Republican House members to vote against accepting the Electoral College results when Congress makes a usually perfunctory review of the process on Jan. 6.

Bentz's accusation of voting irregularities worthy of a congressional investigation is an about face from the stance of his predecessor, Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River.

Walden, who represented the district covering Eastern and Central Oregon for 20 years, stepped down Saturday, Jan. 2. Bentz was sworn in Sunday.

In a Dec. 1 radio interview with the National Journal, Walden said the election had been fair and "the die is cast" for Trump's departure. At the time he was one of only 27 Republicans in the House and Senate who would say Biden had defeated Trump.

Biden defeated Trump by over 7 million votes and the Electoral College con-

firmed his victory on Dec. 14 by a 306-232 margin.

Trump or his surrogates have filed more than 50 lawsuits, with only one procedural request winning. The other cases on his allegations and seeking to stop vote counting or certification of votes have been rejected. The U.S. Supreme Court declined without comment to consider lawsuits by Trump supporters.

Trump has kept up the pressure, switching to a long-shot gamble to get Congress to reject the Electoral College votes sent by the states.

The Electoral College results are sent to Congress, where they are read aloud. Normally, Congress rapidly certifies the vote in a largely ceremonial process.

However if a member of the House and a member of the Senate object to any slate of electors, both chambers must hold separate two-hour debates before voting whether to accept or reject the Electoral College numbers.

House members — including Democrats — have made single objections in the past, but no senator has joined the effort.

However, more than 100 of the House's 221 Republicans have said they will oppose the vote.

"Multiple states have engaged in litigation and thousands of witnesses have submitted sworn affida-

vits of reported fraud in the 2020 Presidential election," a letter signed by Bentz and other freshmen says.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, had lobbied his caucus not to join the objection. But Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri, announced he would object and an additional dozen senators, led by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, say they also will object.

While the moves to block certification are expected to delay the result by a few hours Wednesday, the House Democratic majority of 222 members will be joined by several Republicans who oppose the effort as un-democratic.

Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, the Republican presidential nominee in 2012 who lost to President Barack Obama, slammed those challenging the Electoral College votes as "dangerously threatening our democratic republic."

"I could never have imagined seeing these things in the greatest democracy in the world," Romney said. "Has ambition so eclipsed principle?"

Former House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin, told his former colleagues in the House that challenging the Electoral College results was "striking at the foundation of the republic."

Ryan said he could not think of "a more anti-demo-

cratic and anti-conservative act than a federal intervention to overturn the results of state-certified elections and disenfranchise millions of Americans."

Trump tweeted that those members of Congress who were not supporting him were cowards.

The heat of the argument intensified Sunday when a recording of an hour-long telephone call by Trump in the White House to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, was made public.

In the call, the president told Raffensperger, the state elections official who had already certified the results, to go back into the votes again to overturn Biden's 11,779-vote win.

"So look. All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

Raffensperger said repeated recounts had not changed the outcome and that he would not change the result.

"Well, Mr. President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong," Raffensperger said.

Bentz is the only Republican among Oregon's five House members and two senators. One of his colleagues, Rep. Earl Blumenauer, said Trump's call to the Georgia officials should be prosecuted.

## HOSPITAL

Continued from Page 1A

every bed at the imposing institution in Salem, such as maintaining capacity for emergencies. The hospital halted all admissions in December, citing an outbreak of COVID-19 that has infected at least 24 patients and 71 workers.

The capacity of the Oregon State Hospital is just 671 beds spread across two campuses and offering three levels of care, said hospital relations director Rebeka Gipson-King.

"This does not include beds held for managed capacity — keeping one bed open on each unit for safety and treatment purposes, the two closed units on the Junction City Campus that we do not have funding to operate and beds we need for COVID-19 protocols," she said in a statement.

Zamora-Skaar's case has been settled — he was transported to the state hospital, where he recuperated; he was then found fit for trial, and later pleaded guilty. Attorney Laura Graser argued the appellate case.

Thibeault says she's surprised to see Judge Bailey's finding of contempt to be upheld and understands the reality of the hospital's struggle with COVID-19. And yet: "There's always going to be another justification that state agencies can come up with for violating our clients' statutory and constitutional rights," she said. "It takes a lot for one

government branch to say that another governmental agency could be held accountable."

The state hospital's seven-day admission rule is based on Oregon Advocacy Center v. Mink, which was adjudicated in Oregon federal court and upheld by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. It applies only to commitment orders known as a .370, of which there is a backlog.

The delay of .370 orders could lead to contempt motions in courts across Oregon unless the Health Authority appeals the ruling to the state Supreme Court. Administrators did not reveal their intentions in response to written questions.

"Even through the pandemic, we have continued to work diligently to make sure people who need hospital-level care are admitted to Oregon State Hospital. We are disappointed the decision does not recognize the hospital's capacity challenges — challenges that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Our priority must be keeping our patients and staff healthy and safe," Gipson-King said.

"We must maintain our focus on decriminalizing mental illness and homelessness," she said. "Going forward, we will continue partnering with counties and local courts to ensure every person in Oregon who needs mental health care has timely access to treatment in their own community or, when necessary, at the state hospital."

## Number of rejected ballots drops in Oregon general election

By JIM REDDEN  
Pamplin Media

SALEM — Although a record number of Oregonians voted in the 2020 general election, the number of ballots rejected for technical reasons dropped from the 2016 general election.

State election officials say 2.4 million ballots were returned in last November's election. That is 18% more than the 2 million ballots returned in the previous presidential election year.

But the number of ballots rejected for signature problems fell by 5%. In the 2016 general election, 17,574 ballots were rejected because their return envelopes were not signed or their signatures did not match those on file with elections officials. Four years later, only 16,680 ballots were rejected for those reasons.

The decline reflects the national results of the 2020 general election. Although final figures still are being collected, election experts said far fewer mail-in ballots were rejected for technical reasons across the country than expected, especially considering how many states allowed more people to vote by mail

because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

President Donald Trump and his supporters have pointed to the low rejection rate as evidence of voter fraud. But the reason in Oregon is simple.

According to Multnomah County Election Program Communications Specialist Eric Sample, state election rules were changed between the two elections to make it easier for voters who failed to sign their ballots to submit a new signature before the final results were certified.

Before the change, voters who did not sign their return envelopes had to physically come into a county elections office and do so before a deadline for their ballots to be counted. After the change, they only had to sign and return a statement that said they are legally qualified to vote and had voted.

The result of the change was dramatic. In Multnomah County, only 16% of voters who did not sign their envelope returned a new registration card in time in 2016. After the change, that jumped to 67%.

"The change made it a lot easier for voters who hadn't signed their envelopes," Samples said.

**La GRANDE AUTO REPAIR**  
975-2000  
www.lagrandeautorepair.com

Joe Horst

MOST ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE  
ACDelcoTSS

Imagine The Difference You Can Make

**DONATE YOUR CAR**  
1-844-533-9173

FREE TOWING  
TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Help Prevent Blindness  
Get A Vision Screening Annually

**Heritage for the Blind**

Ask About A FREE 3 Day Vacation Voucher To Over 20 Destinations!!!

**dish** BRING EVERYTHING YOU LOVE TOGETHER!

Blazing Fast Internet!  
ADD TO YOUR PACKAGE FOR ONLY \$19.99/mo. where available.

2-YEAR TV PRICE GUARANTEE

\$59.99/mo. America's Top 120 Package  
190 CHANNELS Including Local Channels!

CALL TODAY - For \$100 Gift Card Promo Code: DISH100

1-866-373-9175 Offer ends 7/15/20. **dish** ACTIVITIES

All offers require credit qualification. All month commitment with early termination fee and autoPay. Prices include Hopper Duo for qualifying customers. Hopper, Hopper w/Sling or Hopper 3.0/mo. more. Uniform fees may apply based on credit qualification.

**Turning 65?**  
We're here to help!

Joel Myer  
jmyer@valleyinsurance.com

**Valley INSURANCE**

1603 Washington Ave, La Grande  
(541) 963-3121

Let us take the **mystery** out of Medicare for you!

Kathy Rienti  
krienti@valleyinsurance.com