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THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

Weekend Edition

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Good day to our valued subscriber Alex Karrels of La Grande

Union County records 17th COVID-19 death

Nearly 1,000 county residents vaccinated so far as cases taper off

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Daily cases of COVID-19 again tapered off this week as Union County recorded 36 new cases from Sunday, Jan. 17 to Friday, Jan. 22.

Even so, the Center for Human Development, Union County's public health arm, reported the death of the 17th county resident to COVID-19. No additional details on the deceased was available by press time Friday.

With 58 cases during the preceding week, from Jan. 10-16, Union County's two-week caseload remains above the threshold for extreme risk public health measures, which have prohibited in-person dining in restaurants and indoor recreation activities for months without respite.

As of Friday, Union County recorded a total of 1,140 cases of COVID-19 and 17 deaths.

But there are promising signs those stringent public health measures may be having an effect across the state. The Oregon Health Authority reported fewer than 900 new statewide cases of COVID-19 every day from Jan. 17-22.

The number of COVID-19 infections across Oregon this week dropped 4% from the week before, and the number of Oregonians newly hospitalized with the disease dropped 7% in that time. Roughly 47 people in Oregon are hospitalized per day for COVID-19, according to the OHA's weekly data report.

Even as statewide cases and hospitalizations dropped, the number of reported deaths from COVID-19 hit an all-time weekly high last week, and fatality rates remain near one in 77.

"One hundred ninety-five Oregonians died in association with COVID-19 — the highest weekly toll recorded in Oregon to date. Of the 134,468 cases reported in Oregon since the start of the pandemic, 1,808 have died — a case-fatality rate of 1.3%," the OHA stated in its report.

However, the trend of high daily reported deaths also tapered off during the week beginning Jan. 17. From that Sunday to Thursday, the Oregon Health Authority reported a total of 68 deaths.

Union County registered no new outbreaks in the OHA's weekly outbreak report, published Jan. 21. Eastern Oregon

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Reopening moves

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Tymra Anderson, right, and the Elgin Huskies fight for the ball Feb. 25, 2020, in Echo at the OSAA 1A Basketball State playoffs. Elgin is among Union County schools districts pushing to alter some basketball rules to make the game safe enough to resume play during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools press for sports

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Some area schools are putting forward a proposal to alter some basketball rules to make the game safe enough to resume play during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposal would be geared toward keeping players spread out during games by taking measures such as prohibiting full-court press and zone defense tactics, and games would be livestreamed for fans in lieu of playing front of a crowd.

"We're trying to work with (the Oregon School Activities Association) and the Oregon Health Authority to be able to play basketball," said Lance Dixon, superintendent of the North Powder School District.

The basketball season would operate in a more localized league, akin to those from decades past.

Teams would compete among Baker, Union and Wallowa counties to minimize out-of-area travel and keep the risk of COVID-19 spread as low as possible, according to Union High School Superintendent Carter Wells.

The Oregon Health Authority and OSAA have to accept the proposal before local schools can implement it, and play depends on COVID-19 levels becoming and remaining low.

"If the outbreaks were really bad, I'd have to make the call that my kids aren't participating," said Elgin School District Superintendent Diane Greif. "Do I think that's best for my kids? Absolutely not, they need to be participating in stuff. But if our infection rate were to bounce back up or get out of control, or we started seeing some infections in the school districts in our region, then I would have to make that call."

Greif said keeping her students and

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LGSD to begin on-site instruction for grades 7-12

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza on Thursday, Jan. 21, had good news to share at an evening virtual town hall.

Mendoza announced that because of changing COVID-19 state metrics and other factors, all students in grades seven through 12 in the La Grande School District will be able to receive in-person instruction starting Jan. 27. This will mark the first time all LGSD students in middle and high school will be back in school since the state closed Oregon schools to in-person instruction in mid-March of 2020 because of the pandemic.

Mendoza

The move announced Thursday comes after the school district began making in-person instruction available to all students in kindergarten through sixth grade earlier this month.

"It is very exciting to have everyone coming back. It is the next step to coming back to normal," Mendoza said.

The school district will employ a hybrid model to educate the seventh- through 12th-grade students, who have been receiving instruction online via the school district's Comprehensive Distance Learning program. The students will receive in-person instruction one day and then study outside of school the next day with materials from the school. They will be in the physical school every other day in cohorts based on where their names fall in the alphabet.

Half of the students, therefore, every day will receive in-person instruction, allowing the La Grande High School and La Grande Middle School to meet COVID-19 social distancing requirements. Mendoza said it will be important for students and parents to realize the days when students will not be taught in-person will not be days off.

"There is still work to do even if you are not on-site," Mendoza said.

The superintendent said the school

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Legislature cranks up 2021 session

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — After a two-day delay caused by FBI reports of possible right-wing attacks on state capitals, the Oregon Legislature got down to the business of the 2021 session.

On Thursday, Jan. 21, 12 committees kicked off with virtual hearings. About 46 House members held a 20-minute floor session to move along the first batches of bills onto the political conveyor belt of readings and assignment to committee.

Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, gave what was officially the opening prayer, but was more a plea for cooperation amid the crises and chaos — with an "amen" at the end.

"We must figure out a way to climb out of the mire, and the time is now," Noble said. "Is it naive to think we can create a vision forward and people with differing options can engage without vilifying each other? Maybe. But I'm willing to try."

Noble said the alternative of remaining in the political mire would destroy families, communities, the state and nation.

Andrew Selsky/AP Photo, File

In this June 29, 2019, file photo, lawmakers convene at the Oregon Senate. Legislative committees kicked-off the 2021 sessions on Thursday, Jan. 21, with virtual hearings because of the pandemic. About 46 House members held a 20-minute floor session to move the first batches of bills onto readings and assignment to committee.

It's just a whole lot of paper

A lot of trees died to churn out the 1,500 bills and resolutions submitted by House and Senate members for the 2021 session.

But Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, tweeted a simple truth: "Just because there's a bill about something, it doesn't mean 'the legislature' or 'the Democrats' want to pass it. At this point, it means one legislator had an idea."

If history is a guide, recycle bins around the Capitol will fill up fast with much of the legislation. In normal years, about 20% of bills make it to the full House and Senate for consideration.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, are eager to cap the time lawmakers are in Salem and the hours staff in the Capitol have to work on preparing bills and support materials. That's a formula for an extra high attrition rate on legislation not fast-tracked from the beginning.

Drawing lines for 2022 election

Along with the official crises in front of the Legislature, the House and Senate committee on redistricting will be closely watched. Every 10 years, the new U.S. Census numbers are used to re-draw 60 state House districts, 30 state Senate districts and five Congressional districts.

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight
19 LOW
Patchy clouds

Sunday
35/27
Cloudy

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La Grande, Oregon

Email story ideas to *news@lagrandeobserver.com*. More contact info on Page 4A.

TUESDAY TRAIL REPAIR

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