

RATES

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graduation rates. Charter school districts must accept all students who transfer in from other districts if it has room for them. This means, for example, Cove may be more likely to get a student transferring in his or her junior year who has earned limited credits, greatly reducing their chance of graduating their senior year. Pettit said when this happens students may be put on a program

allowing them to graduate as fifth-year seniors. “We put them on a different track,” he said. Statewide graduation rates at Oregon’s public high schools rose 2.6% from 2018-19, according to an InterMountain Education Service District press release. A factor that may have increased graduation rates in 2020 was the state’s waiver of its requirement that students pass essential skills tests for math, reading and writing. The state waived the requirement

due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Baxter said his school has never had students not graduate because they could not pass the essential skills tests. However, he said the need to pass these tests has made it harder for students to graduate in previous years because they were often concentrating more on the exams than on completing classes needed to earn a diploma. “The waiver took pressure off students,” Baxter said, “and allowed them to focus on their school work.”

LOOSE

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of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines that have been approved for use on adults. The vaccines require two shots space about a month apart. Oregon is currently on pace to get more than 12,000 shots administered per day. Allen said that OHA estimates 3.2 million adults are eligible for vaccination, meaning that the state will need 6.4 million doses of vaccine to finish the job. Allen said the state had enough centers for inoculation and qualified workers to give the shots. It just didn’t have vaccine to put to work. There is hope that new vaccines from Astra Zeneca, Johnson & Johnson and others will be approved and increase the flow of available doses across the country. Allen said with only the two approved vaccines and the current projected rate of supply coming to the state each week, some Oregonians will not be inoculated until the end of 2021 or beyond. The state is currently working through the highest priority group:

Health care workers, plus residents and staff of nursing homes that have accounted for over half of the deaths in Oregon. Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, a member of the committee, said he’d heard from constituents upset with Brown’s decision to vaccinate about 150,000 educators and school workers next as a step to getting schools reopened this spring. Those over 65 are the most likely to suffer severe illness or die from COVID-19, with fatality rates rising as people get into their 70s, 80s, or 90s. After waiting nearly a year in fear and isolation, the word that they will have to wait longer because of a desire to reopen schools is difficult to accept. “They are very, very unhappy about it,” Knopp said. Allen said that the federal guidelines calling for seniors living outside of nursing homes as the next priority are “advisory” with each state being able to make its own decisions. “We had to ask, what are our priorities going to be?” Allen said. Moving the schools group ahead of seniors meant the start date for inoculation of older Orego-

nians living independently was pushed back from Monday to Feb. 8. Even then, only those over 80 can apply at first. The eligibility age will drop five years each week, until those 65 and over are eligible March 1. Oregon is the only state that has placed educators above seniors in priority for the vaccine. Allen defended the decision, saying that Brown and OHA are trying to balance a variety of health needs. Getting educators vaccinated could return children to in-class instruction, which state education experts say will improve their learning, as well as emotional and physical health. “We are trying to accommodate a lot of different health objectives,” Allen said. “We are making progress.” Opponents of Brown’s decision to prioritize teachers and school workers say that there is no guarantee that teachers will return to the classroom if children aren’t vaccinated. Some educators have expressed concern that children could infect each other and while they are unlikely to become severely ill, they could infect parents and grandparents at home.

GYMS

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Under the four-tier risk ratings, counties are assigned a level based on COVID-19 spread: lower, moderate, high or extreme. As the levels go up, more health and safety measures, along with business and activity restrictions, are required. Tillamook County was the big mover, dropping from extreme risk all the way to lower risk. Curry County went from moderate to lower. Grant rose from lower to moderate risk. All other counties remained in the current status. The levels will be in place from Friday through Feb. 11, with the next revision announced Feb. 9. Brown’s new guidelines allow for indoor activities that were previously banned in extreme risk counties. Beginning Friday, a maximum of six people can be indoors at facilities such as gyms that are larger than 500 square feet. The new rules do not pertain to indoor dining.

Facilities smaller than 500 square feet allow for one-to-one customer experiences, such as personal training. All facilities must follow guidelines on social distancing, face coverings, hygiene and cleaning of surfaces. The full updated guidance will be posted to www.coronavirus.oregon.gov by Jan. 29. Cory Sudbrook, general manager of Grande Ronde Fitness Club, 2214 Adams Ave., La Grande, said he and his staff are in the process of determining what they will do. He said Brown’s six-person limit will make it difficult to operate the fitness center. He said having only six people in at a time while having an employee working there does not make sense financially. “It does not pencil out,” Sudbrook said. The general manager said he hopes to get more clarification on what the governor’s announcement means. Sudbrook said many club members have been calling since Tuesday but that is nothing new.

“About a dozen people (club members) have been calling me every day since we closed,” Sudbrook said. The news could be better but Sudbrook is encouraged by Brown’s step. “It is better than staying closed,” he said. “At least it is progress.” Brown encouraged people to exercise outdoors whenever possible. “The science has shown us that outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities when it comes to the spread of COVID 19,” she said. But a recent drop in infection rates and the lack of a major spike in COVID-19 cases over the winter holidays allowed for some limited indoor activity during the colder winter months. “We have seen over the last several weeks that Oregonians have largely complied with risk levels to the point that we have not seen a surge in hospitalizations that would have jeopardized hospital capacity,” Brown said. — Observer reporter Dick Mason contributed to this article.

RETREAT

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takeout only — we don’t want to lose any more of those businesses.” Clements voiced similar sentiments, saying he preferred not to commit additional resources so long as state and federal programs were available to help businesses, but he supported keeping some funds in reserve as a safety net. Councilor Mary Ann Meisner added her support for that course of action as well.

City development

One major topic of discussion during the Monday night half of the council’s retreat was the city’s business park, which La Grande has used in recent years in an attempt to attract out-of-area businesses to develop a local presence and boost economic activity. Councilors voiced their displeasure with the park’s lackluster performance and expressed concerns about dedicating large chunks of funding toward it, especially given the pandemic largely has halted efforts to recruit incoming businesses. “So we have \$400,000 dedicated to the business park, and we’ve just talked about how we’re not going to be actively recruiting people because of COVID-19,” said Councilor John Bozarth. “Why in the hell are we doing that?” Councilor Nicole Howard shared Bozarth’s concerns, referring to the business park as an “albatross” and suggesting the city’s efforts may be better focused elsewhere. “Light industry is not flocking to La Grande,” Howard said. “The couple of bites we had didn’t take for all kinds of reasons, some of them unfortunate. I wouldn’t want to spend any more energy than we’re spending to get somebody out there because I don’t think that dog can hunt.” Christine Jarski, economic development director for the city, said one reason businesses have been reluctant to invest in the park was because it is in a floodplain. Clements floated the possibility of reallocating funds from the business park instead to be eligible for calls for projects in the downtown area. Housing, poverty and homelessness Since the completion of La Grande’s housing needs analysis in June 2019, which confirmed the city was in dire need of addi-



Kaleb Lay/The Observer, File

The La Grande City Council met for its annual work retreat on Monday, Jan. 25, and Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2021, to set out priorities for the coming year. Topics included COVID-19 recovery, city development and wildfire emergency preparedness.



tional housing, the city council has been working toward the adoption of a housing production strategy. That strategy has been in production for several months, Community Development Director Mike Boquist told the council on Tuesday, and could be ready for review in the coming months. “We’ll get the public’s input on what they see as our needs for the community and challenges that may need to be overcome,” Boquist said. Clements said he believed the issues of housing and homelessness in La Grande were closely linked. He also raised the possibility of developing a homeless shelter in La Grande, saying he did not support the city itself doing so but the concept needed to remain on the council’s radar. “The city is unable, I believe, to bring any resources to (addressing homelessness) in any meaningful way,” said Clements, suggesting the council should find ways to be involved and keep informed on the efforts of local organizations such as Housing Matters Union County. Howard pointed to the efforts of the Cook Memorial Library, which has implemented free Wi-Fi hotspots and technical help with matters such as printing, as an example of measures that help take on the issue of poverty. Kip Roberson, director of the library, suggested the council follow a national trend in doing away with late fees for overdue library materials, saying the fees disproportionately burden those unable to afford them — often, those who rely on library services the most. “The American Library Association recommends

that libraries not charge overdue fines on at least the basic library materials,” Roberson said. “I would like to eliminate those. Studies have shown that doesn’t affect the return of library items, that overdue fines are not punitive to those who can afford them and they only hurt those who can’t really afford to pay them.” The council appeared widely supportive of the idea, with many nodding in agreement as Strobe entertained the idea of moving forward with a vote in the near future. Wildfire preparedness As the western United States has burned with more and more intensity during recent fire seasons, the destruction of towns such as Paradise, California, and Phoenix, here in Oregon, have illustrated in no uncertain terms the risk many communities, including La Grande, carry during the summer months. While it was one of the last points the council discussed Tuesday evening, the council struck an urgent tone on the subject of wildfire preparedness. Howard minced no words on the issue. “I think that we are not prepared. I think we do not have a clear evacuation plan or communication plan,” Howard said. “When you look at what’s happening in the West, you’ve got your head in the sand if you don’t think it’s going to happen to us this July, or this August.” Howard went on to say La Grande needed a “clear community plan” on what to do in the event of a wildfire emergency, and development of that plan needed to happen quickly.

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