

COVID-19

Vaccines expand to teachers

Pandemic ebbs locally as well as statewide

By KALEB LAY

The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Even as the tide of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ebb across Oregon and locally, Union County will remain under the state’s most stringent public health measures — as it has since mid-November — until at least Feb. 11.

When Gov. Kate Brown earlier this week announced the update to county risk levels, Union County missed the mark to drop into more lenient restrictions. The county needed to have recorded fewer than 60 new COVID-19 cases and less than 10% overall test positivity during the two-week period from Jan. 10-23, but recorded 98 new cases and 9% positivity during that time, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority.

Now, the county will have to wait until the state’s next “movement week,” which begins on Feb. 7. Changes that week will take effect Friday, Feb. 11. At that point, Union County will have to have met those same thresholds during the two-week period from Jan. 24 through Feb. 6.

The county was off to a good start in that endeavor as of Friday, Jan. 29. In the first six days of the two-week period, the county had tallied 25 new cases of COVID-19, and local test positivity remained below the 10% threshold since Jan. 3, according to the OHA.

If the county manages to average four or fewer cases per day until next Saturday, it will likely be able to drop out of the “extreme risk” category of Oregon’s COVID-19 safety measures, and restaurants will at long last be allowed to seat a limited number of patrons indoors.

Other indoor recreational businesses saw changes to the way they can operate in the meantime. Brown announced this week the state would allow fitness facilities with at least 500 square feet of space to cater to a maximum of six people at a time beginning Friday, unless the facility can separate groups of six into different indoor spaces. In that case, the maximum is 24 people.

“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

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Students return

Heating problem delayed opening of LG High School

By DICK MASON

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The hallways and classrooms of La Grande High School are coming back to life.

Students returned to the high school for in-person instruction Thursday, Jan. 28 — the first time since mid-March of 2020 when the state closed all schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changing state metrics for COVID-19 helped open the doors to real classrooms as opposed to virtual ones. The metrics also allowed in-person instruction to start again for students in grades seven and eight on Wednesday at La Grande Middle School. The district’s kindergarten through sixth-grade students have been receiving in-person instruction since earlier this month.

La Grande High was to open for in-person instruction Wednesday, Jan. 27, but a heating system broke down and needed repairs, which delayed the opening.

LHS Assistant Principal Eric Freeman said he sensed students were gratified to be returning after taking all of their classes online, most recently through the La Grande School District’s Comprehensive Distance Learning program. He said teachers are also delighted that students are returning to their building.

“We’re excited to have the kids back and are doing everything we can to give them an awesome experience,” Freeman said.

LHS math teacher James Akers said he is finding it much easier to teach students in person rather than online. He said he can more quickly determine which students need help and then give them the assistance they need, which speeds up the learning process. Akers said students seem to be enjoying making the transition back to in-person learning.

“They like being back in a classroom,” Akers said.

Students at the middle and high schools are attending school in A and B cohorts based on where their names fall in the alphabet. Half of the students in grades seven to 12 attend school in person on alternating days to allow the schools to comply with state social distancing rules. Students also are



Dick Mason/The Observer

La Grande High School students leave school Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021, after a day of classes. This was the first time students attended classes at the school since March 2020 because of the pandemic.

“Their eyes were smiling and there was lots of laughter. I gave them air hugs and air high fives.”

— Anne Marie Fritz, La Grande Middle School social studies teacher

attending classes smaller than they did before the March 2020 closure.

Akers said he likes this because it means he can provide students with more individualized attention. He added the smaller classes give him additional time to help students.

High school science teacher Brandon Galvez also said he believes students like the smaller classes because it provides them with more room.

“They enjoy having the extra space,” Galvez said.

Sophomore Brady Morgan said he is delighted to be learning in a classroom again because he felt uncomfortable in an all-online educational world.

“I like being able to do hands-on work,” Morgan said.

Sophomore Layne Scott said adjusting to the changes on the school front because of COVID-19 has not been arduous for people in his age group.

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Fired deputy sues Grant County

Tyler Smith files federal lawsuit claiming whistleblower retaliation, wrongful discharge

By SEAN HART

Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A sheriff’s deputy who was fired before entering a plea on criminal charges is suing Grant County and several employees.

Former Grant County Sheriff’s Office deputy Tyler Smith claims the county and its employees violated his constitutional rights under the First and 14th amendments, retaliated against him as a whistleblower and wrongfully discharged him from employment in a complaint filed Dec. 21, 2020, in U.S. District Court in Pendleton.

In addition to the county, the suit names former Sheriff Glenn Palmer, District Attorney Jim Carpenter, Undersheriff Zach Mobley and former deputy Abigail Mobley as defendants and seeks damages for lost wages and distress as well as punitive damages and attorney fees.



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

Grant County Undersheriff Zach Mobley, left, and former Sheriff Glenn Palmer sit in on a discussion on the recruitment of a new emergency management coordinator at a Grant County meeting on May 27, 2020. A former sheriff’s deputy claims the county retaliated against him as a whistleblower and wrongfully fired him. Mobley and Palmer, Grant County District Attorney Jim Carpenter and former deputy Abigail Mobley are defendants in the lawsuit.

Smith claims in the suit that Palmer and Mobley “orchestrated” a plan to get him arrested and removed from the sheriff’s office.

County Judge Scott Myers said county policy prohibits discussing active litigation. Attempts to contact Palmer were unsuccessful, and the other defendants did not respond to questions from the Blue Mountain Eagle.

Smith was fired Dec. 17, 2019,

before he entered a plea on criminal charges against his spouse, including attempted rape. A Sept. 27, 2019, grand jury indictment filed in Grant County Circuit Court accuses Smith of attempted first-degree rape,

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 39 LOW A passing shower
Sunday 41/40 A snow squall

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
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