

RISK

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from Gov. Brown, and a lot of businesses are hurting,” he said. “Last thing they need is to have food not go out the door.”

Guentert said he understands why businesses might flout regulations regarding in-person dining: It’s a matter of survival.

Removing three COVID-19 cases from Union County’s record seems like a small thing, but it might make the difference for any number of local businesses.

Union County in a press release Tuesday, Feb. 23, explained county commissioners disputed a three-case discrepancy of COVID-19 the Oregon Health Authority incorrectly posted to the county’s totals. The county had totaled 46 cases for the period of Feb. 7-20, but after the fix, the total stands at 43 for the two-week period.

The three cases were in another county, according to the press release, and removing them dropped Union County two risk levels, from the extreme risk category to the moderate risk category, effective Friday, Feb. 26.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Kody Guentert, owner of Brother Bear Cafe sits at a window-side table in the La Grande business on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021. Union County establishments can open Friday to in-person dining and other services. “If we’re limited to takeout only,” Guentert said, “then the whole point of the business is moot.”

Union County is among the 10 counties out of Oregon’s 36 that Gov. Kate Brown Tuesday said were dropping off the extreme risk tier. Another six counties also will improve their infection risk levels.

The moves means restrictions on businesses, dining and activities will be less strict starting Friday for a long list of Oregon cities — including Astoria, Lincoln

City, Prineville, The Dalles, Hermiston, Pendleton, La Grande and Ontario. Among the larger cities that will see less restrictions are Eugene, Salem, Medford, Beaverton, Albany, McMinnville and Oregon City.

Five counties — Jefferson (Madras), Benton (Corvallis), Josephine (Grants Pass), Douglas (Roseburg) and Coos (Coos Bay) — remain at

the extreme risk level. That compares to 26 counties in late November at the height of the holiday spike in infections.

The state’s four-tier risk level rates counties at lower, moderate, high and extreme levels for COVID-19 spread. Ranking is determined by measures including total cases, cases per 100,000 people and positive infection rate. The

MORE INFORMATION ON COVID-19 AND RISK LEVELS

The State Sector Risk Level Guidance Chart from the Oregon Health Authority with all risk levels is available for viewing at shredsystems.dhsosha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/1e3461.pdf. Additional detailed state sector-specific guidance is at coronavirus.oregon.gov/Pages/guidance.aspx. You can find information regarding COVID-19, including vaccinations, online at the Oregon Health Authority at govstatus.egov.com/OR-OHA-COVID-19, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV and the Center for Human Development’s Union County Public Health site at www.chdinc.org/covid19.

higher the level, the more restrictive the rules on businesses and activities.

The state reevaluates levels every two weeks. Announcement of the next level changes will be March 9 and will go into effect March 12.

Frankie Chen, the owner of GC Asian Fusion, a few blocks down Adams from Brother Bear Cafe, said his staff is eager for Friday.

“All the employees are happy and excited, because in the past few months it’s been hard for everybody, and a lot of our staff are relying on their tips to survive,” he said.

He said during the ban on in-person dining, the restaurant only had to lay off one person — the dishwasher because there were no dishes. That was a critical position, he said, and will be again.

“I try to keep everyone working. That’s my priority,” Chen said. “Because, there’s a couple reasons for it. One is the disruption of the business. If you shut everything down, and try to open it back up, it’s pretty hard to do.”

During the previous lockdown the restaurant lost about 25% of its staff, and he said many moved on to find other work.

“I have experience with that last time, so I refuse to lay anyone off,” he said. “So even if someone comes and they sit around, do some preparation or cleaning or whatnot, I simply have them come in just to hang out. I try my best to support everybody here. It’s good for me, and it’s good for them, too.”

— Gary Warner with the Oregon Capital Bureau contributed to this article.

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health care workers. The pandemic took a toll on hospitals and medical centers who saw severe illness and sometimes death of the very people whose jobs were to save lives of others.

The long months of the pandemic had also shown society’s weakest points. Nursing homes reported just 5% of all COVID-19 infections nationwide. But the often frail residents and close quarters mean these residents account for just over one-third of all deaths. Oregon is one of 10 states where more than half of all deaths are from these “congregate care” facilities, according to the New York Times.

Residents and staff of the homes were put next to medical workers at the top of the priority list.

At that point, the states’ unanimity ends.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that those over age 65 be next in line. About 80 percent of deaths from COVID-19 in the United States are aged 65 and over. Risk rises with age so that while someone 85 is only twice as likely as a 17-year-old to become infected, they are 7,900 times more likely to die, according to the CDC.

All but five states followed the recommendation, including California and Washington.

Oregon did not. Gov. Kate Brown decided teachers, school staff and daycare workers should be next in hopes of jump-starting a return to school this spring by students shuttered at home with “virtual learning.”

Brown argued that 153,000 educators and school staff were a relatively small number of people to put ahead of the 795,000 Oregonians over the age of 65. Oregon Public Broadcasting estimated that about 86 seniors would die for each week of delay.

It was a price Brown believed was worth it to get the state’s future func-

“Can you require vaccination for a job? It’s problematic. But it is a question that’s coming.”

— Dr. Arthur Caplan, director of New York University Langone’s Division of Medical Ethics

tioning. The governor and health officials portrayed it as a short delay.

“I know there will still be some who disagree with this choice,” Brown said at a press conference Jan. 22. “The harsh reality is we are managing a scarce resource right now.”

The blowback was immediate. Senior advocates, medical groups and even her own Governor’s Commission on Senior Services weighed in against Brown’s decision.

“There are 45 other states that are listening to the science and vaccinating vulnerable seniors,” commission members said in a Jan. 28 letter to the governor.

Adding to the timeline troubles was a Feb. 3 federal court order requiring Brown to immediately start vaccinating about 12,000 inmates at Oregon correctional facilities. About 28% of inmates had been infected with COVID-19, compared to 3% of Oregon’s overall population. The delay in vaccination violated the U.S. Constitution ban against “cruel and unusual punishment.” The state did not appeal the ruling.

Caplan, the NYU ethicist, said governors who deviate sharply from federal guidelines risk cracking public consensus.

“Why are elderly in group homes vaccinated, but the elderly living on their own must wait?” Caplan asked rhetorically. “Why are teachers more important than the grocery store bagger or UPS guy?”

The governor’s objectivity was called into question because she had received \$240,000 in contributions from the Oregon Education Association PAC in her 2018 race for governor, a relatively small portion of the \$18.5 million she raised for the race.

Some union officials said even with the vaccine, they might not go

back to the classroom without wider vaccination of the public. The CDC announced last week that schools could safely reopen without vaccinating teachers.

Brown also had Oregon go its own way for age-related vaccinations. Eligibility was staggered, beginning with those 80 and older on Feb. 8, two weeks after the education group. The minimum age for eligibility would drop five years every week until everyone 65 and older was eligible March 1.

Vaccine shortages hit every state. But media reports of 65-year-olds lucky enough to get an early appointment at mass inoculation sites like Disneyland and Dodger Stadium in California stoked resentment in Oregon.

“States are amending their criteria of who is eligible — sometimes adding millions of people — but without any additional supply,” Caplan said.

The differences between states were inexplicable to someone who was eligible across the country, but not in their own hometown.

“It erodes public trust,” Caplan said. “In the end, it comes down to ‘I’m just going to do whatever I have to do to get a shot.’”

Also souring the public mood were reports of well-connected people getting shots through dubious eligibility. In Oregon, Providence Health included its board of directors — which includes large donors — in the medical group at the top of the list.

“We all hate people who butt in line,” Brown said when told of the action.

Brown, 60, said on Friday that she had not been vaccinated. Under her current plan, there is no timeline for when she would become eligible.

Brown is expected to announce the next eligible groups on Feb. 26. The actual start date for those

inoculations isn’t likely to be before early spring.

Often overlooked was the sheer size of the national effort to eventually offer vaccination to the estimated 333 million Americans.

President Joe Biden made headlines with a promise to put 100 million shots into Americans’ arms in his first 100 days in office. Since the current vaccines require two shots, the promise covers only 50 million people. At that pace, vaccination eligibility for some Americans will stretch into 2022.

Problems ahead include getting a vaccine that is safe for children. The current vaccines are only recommended for those 16 and over.

New vaccines could significantly shorten the timeline. The estimates also don’t take into account Americans who decline to get vaccinated. Some estimates put the refusal rate at 30 percent.

Caplan says that is the issue that looms large in the future.

“The focus now is on who is getting the vaccine,” he said. “At some point the question will be who is not getting the vaccine.”

States will have to navigate legal and ethical questions on treatment of those who do not get vaccinated.

Israel has vaccinated almost half its population and is planning laws and rules for post-pandemic activity. Israelis who are vaccinated received a “Green Badge” — a certificate with a unique QR code, according to the Associated Press. When museums, concert halls, theaters and other public venues reopen, the “Green Badge” will be required to get inside.

Caplan said a similar system could be used in the United States for everything from football stadiums to neighborhood bars.

How far the prohibitions facing those who go unvaccinated is an ethical debate still over the horizon for now.

“Can you require vaccination for a job?” Caplan said. “It’s problematic. But it is a question that’s coming.”

LOSO

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to appear to trek long distances as sets representing different regions circle past.

Heather said he believes Schwarz Theatre may be the only one in Eastern Oregon with a turntable stage. Such turntables are normally only in theaters in much larger areas.

Other renovation work includes the installation of cameras and viewing screens for people to see productions throughout Loso Hall. For example, if a performance at McKenzie Theatre is sold out, people will be able to view it live on a large screen in Schwarz Theatre.

Operating the lighting and curtains at McKenzie Theatre also will be easier because of technological upgrades. Previously, all the theater’s curtains had to be lowered and raised by hand, a challenging process because of their weight. Now this can be done electronically with the push of a button, Fowler said, in just 24 seconds.

And new heat sensors mean curtains drop automatically in case of a fire, preventing it from spreading.

Other electronic

upgrades will make it easier to alter sound and lighting during productions. Making this possible has involved the installation of an extensive amount of new wiring in protective pipes.

“We added miles and miles of conduit,” Fowler said.

Keeping the conduit out of sight while maintaining the integrity of Loso Hall was an enormous challenge. Fowler called it the hardest part of the renovation process and said determining how to best install the wiring kept him up at night.

Upgrading Loso Hall’s aging infrastructure, including its heating, cooling and ventilation systems, also is part of the renovation project.

Much of the remodeling has been accomplished while classes were in session at EOU. David Moore, EOU’s capital projects manager, credited Nagelhout Construction with doing a good job of working in an unobtrusive manner that did not have an effect on classes during fall and winter terms.

“We never received any complaints from professors,” he said.

The capital projects manager said many on campus and in the community are eager to see the Loso Hall upgrades.

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