

FAIR

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Brazeau Red Hawk said the board realizes there is a chance the fair would have to cancel again if COVID-19 rates spike or if the state tightens rules regarding public events because of the pandemic.

“The state will either let us fly or we cancel,” Brazeau Red Hawk said.

The fair in 2020 went online only, which allowed youths in 4-H and FFA to show their animals virtually at the fairgrounds. It was successful but did not come close to replicating the fair experience for the participants or the public.

“I hope we do not have to do that again,” Brazeau Red Hawk said.

The Union County Fair Board now is inviting vendors to register for the 2021 fair.

Brazeau Red Hawk is optimistic that response from vendors will be strong. She noted that in 2020 about 90% of the vendors the fair had in 2019 expressed interest in signing up before the fair was canceled.

The fair manager is not sure if an amusement company will again provide carnival rides at the fair.

“I’ve contacted several and they all said they will

not make commitments until April,” she said.

Brazeau Red Hawk noted Cascade Amusements of Portland, which provided rides for many years including 2019, is no longer operating because the owners retired.

She said even if the fair does not land an amusement ride company, some carnival-type activities will continue, including the plastic bubble ball station that Frank’s Bubble Fun operates, which allows people to roll around inside a big container of plastic balls.

To meet social distancing standards, if COVID-19 restrictions still remain in place when the fair opens, the fairgrounds may be divided into sections and the number of people who could be in each at one time limited. Restrictions on how many people could go into buildings also likely would be in place.

Brazeau Red Hawk said she is encouraged that activity at the Union County Fairgrounds is picking up. She noted a yard sale is set to be conducted there in May, and several birthday parties and weddings are scheduled several months from now.

“This means that more people are beginning to think that things will be okay,” Brazeau Red Hawk said.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

The blue sky behind the Union County Fair sign Wednesday, March 4, 2021, hints at the coming of warm-weather activities and events, including the fair, which will resume this summer if it is safe to do so.

CLASSROOM

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Gov. Kate Brown’s proposed 2021-23 state budget includes significant funding for the expansion of Head Start in Oregon.

Early Head Start serves children and infants up to age 3. Regular Head Start provides education to children ages 4 and 5.

The Early Head Start program would operate five days a week, year round. Kleng said this will provide an opportunity to boost the cognitive development of children at a critical time.

“Eighty percent of brain development occurs from prenatal (before birth) to age 3,” Kleng said.

The program will do more than boost intellectual development, as it also will make daily life easier for parents and guardians.

“It will give residents a chance to receive child care while they are working,” said Stan Steffey of Community Development Partners.

EOU Head Start has centers in La Grande, Elgin, Union and Baker City. The organization’s services are available at no cost to qualifying families in Union and Baker counties.

EOU Head Start has an Early Head Start program, but it is a home-based program rather than operating in a central location.

EOU Head Start staff make regular visits to families of children age 3 and younger. The program teaches parents how

to best help with their child’s development and shows parents they are a “child’s first and important teacher,” Kleng said.

He said families of children already in the program would be welcome in the classroom at Timber Ridge Apartments.

Construction at the Timber Ridge Apartments should begin in about four months, Steffey said.

“We will get started around mid-year,” he said. He said the construction budget for the project is being finalized. Once the budget is in place, the process of arranging for the start of the work will pick up quickly.

Construction of Timber Ridge Apartments, which will be owned by the Northeast Oregon Housing Authority, will take about one and a half years, Steffey said.

A portion of funding for the construction of Timber Ridge Apartments is coming from the state’s Local Innovation Fast Track program, also known as LIFT. The Oregon Legislature approved this program about two years ago and it is providing funding for affordable housing projects throughout Oregon. The Timber Ridge project’s general contractor is set to be CB Construction of La Grande.

La Grande Community Development Director Mike Boquist said the city’s planning commission will have to approve plans before construction starts in order to ensure the project conforms to the city’s codes.

RETURN

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In neighboring Washington state, Gov. Jay Inslee has implored educators to return to the classroom, but most students there are in online classes and the Seattle teachers’ union is defying a district plan to return special education students to schools. In Chicago, the teachers’ union agreed last month to return to class with expanded access to vaccinations and metrics that will lead to school closures again if case numbers spike.

Under the Oregon order, students in K-5 must have an in-person learning option by March 29. Students in grades six through 12 must have one by April 19. Students who prefer to remain in online class are to be given that option.

State education officials have until March 19 to revise their guidelines for in-person instruction to help districts facilitate the return, Brown said.

In a letter to the state Health Authority, the governor said the “science was clear” and that she was “relieved” that she could bring children back to class.

“I feel so much hope for Oregon’s kids, their parents and their schools, as we continue to navigate this pandemic,” she said in the letter. “Our kids are our future and we need to do everything we can to make up for the losses of 2020.”

Many parents reacted with relief and said the past year had been extremely difficult for their children.

“It’s very positive and definitely a step in the right direction — and frankly, it’s about time. Clearly, it’s been hard for districts to figure out what’s going to be best for their students, and it’s taken a long time,” said Katie Chrisman, who has a child each in elementary school, middle school and high school in the Portland suburbs.

Her children “haven’t had a ton of suffering, but they’re definitely not thriving — and for me, that’s been the biggest concern,” she said.

Other parents, as well as some state GOP lawmakers, said more was needed.

Rene Gonzalez, with a parent group called Ed300 that has called for a return to full-time in-person learning five days a week, said teachers’ unions have been inflexible and the state education and health officials had set up “insurmountable barriers” for a return to classrooms for too long.

“We will not rest until every Oregon child has access to five-days-a-week, full time in-person school; until children’s co-curric-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A student at La Grande Middle School walks toward a bus after school on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has said she will order all K-12 public schools to provide in-person learning by April.

ular activities and community life fully return; and until libraries across the state (have) reopened,” he said in a videotaped statement.

Data tallied by the state Department of Education show about 20% of Oregon’s public schools are already operating with full-time on-site learning, mostly in rural areas with fewer students in the eastern and central parts of the state. Another 23% are offering hybrid learning, and 56% currently have almost all distance learning, with limited in-person instruction for students with extra needs.

Rylee Ahnen, spokesperson for the Oregon Education Association, the state’s largest public school employees union, said in a statement that teachers support returning to the classroom if it can be done safely.

The union understands the frustrations of both school districts and parents, he said, as everyone navigates how to return to class. He added that most districts were already planning to resume some sort of in-person learning in the coming weeks.

“We hear, understand, and share the frustration expressed by many in our communities about the uncertainty this pandemic has caused for our public education system,” he said.

The union represents 44,000 K-12 teachers across Oregon.

Oregon started vaccinating teachers in late January ahead of seniors, but the state health department can’t say for sure how many educators have been vaccinated because it does not track the profession of recipients.

The union also could not say what percentage of teachers have

received the vaccine.

Brown said all but six counties in the state currently meet or exceed the advisory metrics for a return to in-person, hybrid learning for all grade levels. Five of the counties that do not yet meet the guidelines for all grade levels make the cut-off for a return to elementary school.

After the dates announced by Brown, all public schools in Oregon will operate either on a full-day of in-person school or a hybrid model, in which students spend parts of the day or some days each week in a classroom setting and other parts of the day or week online. The approach that districts choose will be dictated by COVID-19 case numbers in their county and local decision-making, officials said.

Portland Public Schools, the state’s largest district with 49,000 students in 81 schools, was already planning to bring elementary students back in April. It’s unclear whether Brown’s order will affect that timeline.

The Salem-Keizer School District, the state’s second-largest after Portland, announced Friday that it would welcome middle and high school students back to a hybrid model that combines in-person learning and distance learning starting April 13.

Elementary students in the district have already been back in class on a hybrid model.

Elsewhere, California’s governor on Friday signed a law aiming to return public school students to classrooms. It offers \$2 billion to school districts that reopen physical classrooms by the end of March.

— Observer reporter Dick Mason contributed to this article.

SNOWPACK

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Nathan Petrucci saw blatant evidence of the month’s achievements firsthand.

Petrucci, a deputy watermaster for Baker County, wallowed through freshly fallen powder recently with another deputy watermaster, Luke Albert.

The pair’s destination was a meadow just east of Anthony Lake, in the Elkhorn Mountains about 35 miles northwest of Baker City.

This is one of Oregon’s oldest snow survey sites — crews have trudged into the meadow every winter since 1936 to sample the snow, a key element in estimating the coming summer’s water supply.

Petrucci, who also was a member of the group that measured snow in the meadow in late January, said the scene “was quite a bit different.”

The snow was almost twice as deep — 89 inches compared with 45 inches a month earlier.

“It was nice to see,” Petrucci said in an interview on Thursday, March 4.

Although the depth increase was impressive, a different statistic — snow

water content — is the one that matters most in gauging snowpack.

Water content, as the term implies, measures the amount of water that will trickle away when the snow melts this spring and summer.

In that respect February’s feat wasn’t quite as noteworthy. The water content rose from 13 inches at the start of February to 22.6 inches at the end.

But that’s still a significant jump. The water content was 18% below average when February began, but it was 32% above average when the month ended.

Although the onslaught of storms that distinguished February dissipated with the arrival of March, Petrucci said this week’s mainly sunny and milder weather potentially can have a benefit for the summer water supply. The daily cycle, with the snow surface thawing during the day and refreezing at night, creates ice layers. Those layers will slow the melting of the snowpack this spring, Petrucci said.

“We like it to ice up,” he said.

Lohmann warned higher than average snowpack means there is a slightly above average risk of flooding from the spring snowmelt. Water supply forecasts at this time show

amounts from 100-120% of normal for streamflows for the April through September period.

— Observer multimedia journalist Alex Wittwer contributed to this report.

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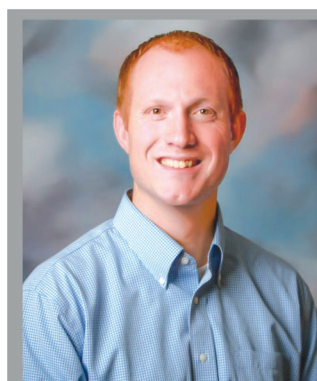
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