

THE OBSERVER

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Weekend Edition

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Good day to our valued subscriber Stephen Stanhope of Summerville

Union County seeks local control for managing COVID-19

County board sends letter to governor advocating for local oversight

By DICK MASON The Observer

LA GRANDE —The Union County Board of Commissioners took action Wednesday, March 17, guaranteed to create a buzz at the Oregon Capitol.

The commissioners approved a letter to Gov. Kate Brown and two other state officials asking the state to give counties the reins for managing their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We think the pandemic should be managed on the local level," Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes told The Observer on Thursday, March 18.

The letter is one of two advocating for local control. All three Union County commissioners signed the letter addressed to the governor, to Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority, and to Andrew Phelps, director of Oregon Emergency Management.

Anderes said county commissioners throughout Eastern Oregon are stepping forward to sign a second letter with the same text also bound for Brown, Allen and Phelps.

"We are getting buy-in from folks across the region," Anderes said.

Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo said he and others want to see a situation similar to the one school districts have. Brown earlier this year granted school districts the authority to manage the COVID-19 pandemic on their own while being allowed to regard direction from her as advisory.

Scarfo said local control would work best for counties because people on the ground know where COVID-19 outbreaks are coming from.

"All the state sees are numbers," Scarfo said.

He noted a state official he talked to recently regarding five new Union County cases in early March did not realize they all came from the Elgin School District, which addressed the issue by closing its high school to in-person instruction. Scarfo said in the eyes of the state, such an increase could have given the state reason to clamp down on the

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Kirk Shira (left) visits his mother, June Shira, at Bullock's Country Care, La Grande, on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. Kirk Shira, who lives in Baker City, says he's overjoyed to finally be able to visit his mother in her room again. COVID-19 restrictions have prevented in-person visits at local assisted care facilities until recently.

Greeting visitors again

Drop in COVID-19 risk level reopens assisted care facilities to friends, family

By DICK MASON The Observer

LA GRANDE — Kirk Shira has been making regular 45-mile drives from his home in Baker City to La Grande for the past 12 months, only to finish, until recently, just a foot short of where he desperately wanted to be each time.

Shira was coming to La Grande to see his mother, June Shira, at Bullock's Country Care, an assisted living home. Kirk Shira has not been able to go inside, though, because of state COVID-19 restrictions. He would do the next best thing — stand next to one of the windows in his mom's room.

"We would talk to each other on cell-phones," Kirk Shira said.

The window the two saw each other through seemed like several feet for Kirk Shira, who desperately wanted to hug his mom.

Shira finally had his chance last week

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

June Shira pauses on the bed of her room at Bullock's Country Care, La Grande, on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. Shira, a Catholic, was unable to receive Holy Communion since the start of the pandemic — a ritual she sorely missed.

"There were tears of joy. I could not be any happier. I was overwhelmed."

— Kirk Shira, on getting to visit with his mother in person

Honoring the victims of COVID-19

Disease took the life of Bret Bridges, Wallowa County 911 dispatcher and reserve deputy

By BILL BRADSHAW Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The ashes of a Wallowa County 911 dispatcher and reserve deputy were delivered by police escort to his parents' Joseph home Friday, March 12, and a special "last call" over the county's 911 system was issued for Bret Bridges.

The 47-year-old Bridges died March 2 at Portland's Legacy Emanuel Medical Center after testing positive for COVID-19 on Jan. 25. He reportedly had underlying issues, according to a press release from the Oregon Health Authority.

The "last call" was to be issued at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

"It's a very honorable thing to do in the 911 world," said Brenda Micka, administrative services director for Wallowa County. "We've lost one of our own. It's nice to do that, to do the 'last call' on the radio."

On Friday, Sheriff Joel Fish

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Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Wallowa County Sheriff Joel Fish, right foreground, watches as deputy Jeff Baty hands a bag containing the ashes of late 911 dispatcher and Reserve Deputy Bret Bridges to Bridges' parents, Dolores and David Bridges, at their Joseph home Friday, March 12, 2021. Fish and Baty escorted the ashes home from Portland, where Bridges died March 2 of COVID-19.

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 33 LOW Mostly cloudy
Sunday 46/33 A.p.m. shower

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



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TUESDAY NEW FIRE HOUSE

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