

15 counties creep out of 'extreme' COVID-19 risk

By **GARY A. WARNER**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The indoor dining ban and other major restrictions under COVID-19 rules will be lifted Friday, May 7, for 15 counties because a key metric was missed by .1%.

Gov. Kate Brown announced late Tuesday that 15 counties put on the extreme risk level for spread of the virus — the highest of the four-tier risk levels — could operate under the high risk standards instead.

“Oregon no longer meets the statewide metrics,” Brown said in a statement.

The extreme risk level shuts down indoor dining, limits crowd sizes, caps entertainment and exercise activities and requires most businesses to close by 11 p.m. Visits to residents of nursing homes are curtailed. Under high risk, restaurants can offer indoor

dining and other restrictions are loosened.

Brown’s statement ended a confusing delay of several hours beyond the normal release of risk level ratings.

In early April, when infections were on the wane, Brown announced that counties that would normally be in the extreme risk level could stay at the high risk level as long as hospitalizations statewide didn’t top 300. The policy also required that hospitalizations rise more than 15 percent to keep the severe limits in place.

The period on which risk levels will be based beginning Friday is from April 18 to May 1. Oregon saw a statewide rise in infections. The state had 11,266 cases — 265.9 per 100,000. Positive tests made up 6.4% of all results.

But on Tuesday, hospitals reported 345 COVID-19 patients, and the

percentage growth of hospitalizations was pegged at 14.9%.

The .1% miss led to a major policy u-turn.

“Based on today’s numbers, I am keeping my commitment to Oregonians,” Brown said.

As of Friday, no counties will be under extreme risk limits. The new numbers put 24 counties at high risk, four at moderate risk, and eight at lower risk.

Oregon Health Authority projections show the state can handle the current rate of demand for hospital beds.

Brown also said she did not expect the state to move back to the extreme level again at any point. The state is expecting a major increase in vaccine shipments from the federal government.

“Vaccinations are still our best path to protecting our loved ones, and staying

on track to fully reopen our economy by the end of June,” Brown said

Political friction in Oregon has increased with Brown’s extreme risk decision and again extending her emergency powers, first put in place in March 2020, through at least June 28.

In the most concrete bid to curb Brown’s authority, the House voted 28-27 Tuesday against a motion to consider a bill that would give the Legislature a larger say in governor’s declarations of emergency.

“Oregonians deserve a balance of power between their separate branches of government again,” said House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby.

Brown and the Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen have pointed to Oregon’s safety during the pandemic that has killed over 575,000 Americans. Oregon has had the third

OREGON COUNTY RISK CATEGORIES EFFECTIVE MAY 7-13

Lower Risk (8)	Clackamas (Moved from Extreme)	Lane (Moved from Extreme)
Gilliam	Clatsop	Lincoln
Harney	Columbia (Moved from Extreme)	Linn (Moved from Extreme)
Lake	Crook (Moved from Extreme)	Malheur (Moved from Moderate)
Morrow	Union	Marion (Moved from Extreme)
Sherman	Wallowa	Multnomah (Moved from Extreme)
Union	Wheeler	Polk (Moved from Extreme)
Wallowa	Coos (Moved from High)	Umatilla
Wheeler	Curry	Wasco (Moved from Extreme)
Moderate Risk (4)	Hood River (Moved from High)	Washington
Coos (Moved from High)	Tillamook	Yamhill
High	Jefferson	Extreme Risk (0)
Curry	Josephine (Moved from Extreme)	
Hood River (Moved from High)	Klamath (Moved from Extreme)	
Tillamook		
High Risk (24)		
Baker (Moved from Extreme)		
Benton		

lowest per capita number of cases in the nation, at 4,432 per 100,000 during the entire pandemic.

Brown will next announce any revisions in risk levels on May 11.

Restrictions for each level can be found at

sharedsystems.dhsosha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/le3461.pdf.

A full list of county risk levels and explanation of data is at www.oregon.gov/oha/covid19/Documents/DataReports/Weekly-County-Metrics.pdf.

IMBLER

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the parents of a son who is an Imbler High School freshman and a daughter who is an Imbler High senior.

Fisher is a 1993 graduate of Union High School and has an associate’s degree in architectural engineering technology from Mount Hood Community College. He has been a volunteer in the Imbler School District for several years, assisting with its high school FFA program.

Fisher said what he likes best about the school district is how its teachers and the community support the activities students are involved with, including FFA, sports and

Future Business Leaders of America.

Phelps said he is running because he wants to continue giving back.

“I feel that as a parent of school-aged children it is important to be involved in the community,” Phelps said.

Phelps has served as a volunteer for youth flag football and Optimist football programs. He is a 1992 graduate of Imbler High School and attended Eastern Oregon University for three years. He is director of sales and marketing for Barreto Manufacturing.

Phelps and his wife, Jenny, are the parents of three children, ages 6, 10 and 12.

The candidate said he appreciates how hard everyone in the school dis-

trict and the community work to help one another.

“It is like a big family,” Phelps said.

Whitcomb did not return phone calls to discuss his candidacy.

Union County Clerk’s Office election filing records indicate Whitcomb is a graduate of Kamiah High School in Kamiah, Idaho, and Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho.

The race for Position 3 is one of two contested school board races in the Imbler School District. A second contested race is for Position 5 between Lavar Bowles, a project manager for a construction company, and Jason Beck, a rancher. The Observer published a story about the Position 3 race in the Tuesday, May 4, edition.

CLINIC

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beginning,” Brogoitti said.

Union County has approximately 8,000 vaccinated residents, according to the Oregon Health Authority, which works out to around 30% of the county having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Brogoitti said almost everyone who received their first

dose returned to get their second dose, according to the data.

Statewide, nearly 1.6 million Oregonians have received the vaccine, or approximately 42% of the state’s population, according to OHA. Rural counties such as Union, Baker and Umatilla fall slightly behind with a vaccination rate of roughly 30%.

People who are still wanting to receive their

first dose of the vaccine can sign up through the state’s website getvaccinated.oregon.gov or by scheduling an appointment through CHD.

Retailers such as Walmart also offer free vaccines to the public. No insurance is required to get a dose.

“We’re trying hard to help make sure we get enough to cover the needs that we have here,” Brogoitti said.

HOUSES

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low-cost of entry allows first-time homebuyers to get a foot in a market that increased dramatically since the 2009 housing crisis, which saw foreclosures across the country and downwardly spiraling home prices that left many with negative equity. And older homebuyers are interested in smaller spaces, due to children leaving the home and having excess space.

Tiny homes often are confused with modular or manufactured homes, which Fehrenbacher said have lower quality than her company’s tiny homes. While manufactured homes have improved over the years, the stigma around them remains, as well as often true stereotypes of cheaper materials and workmanship in their construction.

For Fehrenbacher, the focus is on quality.

“We definitely build a heavy and nice house,” she said.

There is a drawback, however. In Oregon, tiny homes are technically illegal to sell — instead, Fehrenbacher markets her homes as “trailers” or “cabins” to work around the prohibition.

Of the workers at Mega Tiny Homes, Ray Valdez is the most dedicated. Prior to his employment, he would walk to the manufacturer each work day, sit down for lunch and wait for his



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Sparks fly as Ray Valdez, an employee with Mega Tiny Homes in La Grande, cuts a steel beam on Friday, April 30, 2021, for use in the construction of a tiny house.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Stacey Bowman wet sands a countertop for construction of a Mega Tiny Homes dwelling Friday, April 30, 2021. Bowman was one of the first to help Megan Fehrenbacher build her tiny home business.

chance to work.

At first, Fehrenbacher wasn’t interested in hiring the man. After a week, Valdez left. Fehrenbacher asked her employees which car he drove. They replied he didn’t. She ran after the man and hired him on for a week. She said Valdez is her most crucial employee.

“He’s the man,” she said.

As home prices around the state continue to rise, Fehrenbacher said she hoped the legislation around tiny homes changes, and her business helps to solve the housing issues in La Grande and Union County.

MUSEUM

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and Chime, in the 1960s.

Miller’s collection includes an Atmos clock made in the mid-1950s, which does not need to be wound manually. It gets the energy it needs to run from temperature and atmospheric pressure changes in the environment, Miller said.

“They were very expensive, but they kept good time,” he said.

A 400-day clock is another item to catch the attention of visitors. The clock, which has a glass cover, will run for 400 days after being wound one time.

“It just needs to be wound once a year,” Miller said.

Miller, who earned a degree in clock repair from Oregon Institute of Technology in the early 1950s, has been repairing clocks and watches for six decades. It is a labor of love for Miller. He said it was a delight to work on clocks, and he finds the tasks relaxing.

“I have a grand time working on clocks,” he said.

May 9 will mark the first time in about 18 months the Union County Museum, at 331 S. Main St. in Union, has been open to the public. The museum, which traditionally opens on Mother’s Day and closes in October, was shut down all of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be able to open its doors again on Sunday because of falling



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Volunteer Jerry Brounstein hangs up a frame of an antique triptych at the Union County Museum in Union Tuesday, May 4, 2021. The museum is set to open Sunday, May 9, after the pandemic kept it closed more than a year.

infection rates in Union County.

Social distancing and other COVID-19 rules will be in effect at the opening. Everyone coming has to wear masks, and the museum will not serve refreshments.

Other new additions to the museum include wedding dresses Union County women wore in the 1940s and 1950s.

“They are in very good condition,” said Sharon Hohstadt, a member of the Union County Museum Board.

Hohstadt is among many community volunteers working hard to get the museum in tip-top shape before the opening. The list of volunteers also includes Ann Rodriguez, who is happy the public will be able to visit the museum

again. She said not having the museum open would have been sad.

“Even during a pandemic we need history,” Rodriguez said.

She said it is important to have a place to reflect on what the world was once like when “technology was not raging” and things were calmer.

The Union County Museum will be open May 9 from 1-4 p.m. There is no admission fee on opening day.

The museum’s regular schedule begins next week when it will be open from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. The schedule will remain in place at least through September. Admission will be \$5 for adult, \$3 for students and free for those younger than 6.



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