

BUDGET

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deputies on duty at the jail are as highly trained as the new officers who would be hired, Bowen said. The sheriff said having the additional officers he is asking for would help reduce safety concerns.

The addition of the four corrections officers would cost more than \$326,000 but only a net of just over \$146,000. Bowen attributed this to the \$180,500 in savings the additional officers would generate because of reduced overtime costs and other factors.

The reentry officer would help prepare inmates for life outside jail. The officer would work with inmates being released to help them find housing and employment.

“Hopefully this would help them get back on the right track,” Bowen said.

The reentry officer would not cost the county money from its general fund because it would be funded by a grant, Burgess said.

The \$50.01 million proposed spending plan presented to the budget committee is about \$1 million less than the cur-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File
Union County Sheriff's deputy Patricia Kelly walks through a mobile home neighborhood to serve court papers in Island City on Wednesday, May 12, 2021. The Union County Sheriff's Office is looking to add five full-time positions by next year in addition to restarting its cadet and reserve deputy program.

rent 2020-21 budget. A big reason is many grant-funded projects, including a major one at La Grande/Union County Airport, were completed in the past fiscal year, Burgess said.

She said the county's budget picture also was hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced activities like travel in the state, resulting in Union County receiving less money from the state's gas tax. The activity slowdown also reduced fuel sales at Union County's airport and cut food and beverage sales at the county's Buffalo Peak Golf Course.

Burgess said many of these impacts will likely carry over to 2021-22 due to the continuing pandemic, a likelihood reflected in the proposed 2021-22 budget.

The revenue Union County lost due to the pandemic was partially offset by federal government funding it received to help it cope with the impact of the pandemic.

The Union County Budget Committee is expected to soon submit a proposed spending plan to the Union County Board of Commissioners. The commissioners must adopt a 2021-22 budget by June 30.

RISK

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Afterward, they can party until midnight.

The comparisons underline the new reality in Oregon this week: COVID-19 cases are no longer the only measuring stick for how tight restrictions are placed on counties.

The new key to opening up: vaccination rates. Get a shot of vaccine into the arms of 65% of eligible residents age 16 and up and any county could be dropped to the least restrictive level of rules.

“This disease remains dangerous for those in communities with high rates of unvaccinated individuals,” Gov. Kate Brown said May 25. “That’s why I’m encouraging all Oregonians to roll up your sleeves, take your shot, and get a chance to change your life.”

The new format explained why some counties with high vaccination rates but less than stellar marks on COVID-19 cases could be in the lower risk

group while counties with lower numbers might find themselves still facing moderate or high risk levels of restrictions.

From May 27 through June 3, the Oregon Health Agency has placed 15 counties in the high risk level, three at moderate risk, and 18 at lower risk.

Twelve of the lower-risk counties show smaller numbers of COVID-19 cases and lower percentages of positive cases.

But six of the counties are on the lower risk level because of Brown's waiver for counties that have put vaccine in just under two out of three adults.

Deschutes, Multnomah, Washington, Lincoln, Hood River and Benton counties have passed the mark and will move to lower level restrictions as of May 27.

The “one-shot” rule was put in place because most Oregon residents have been inoculated with either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, which requires two shots given about a month apart.

A smaller number of

residents have received the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Normally, the risk level changes go into effect the Friday after the levels are announced. But the levels announced May 25 will go into effect May 27.

Brown said that with COVID-19 cases declining in the state and vaccination levels going up, the revision of risk levels — and their associated restrictions — will be made every week instead of every other week.

The next risk levels will be announced June 1. Counties where infection rates and cases move them into a higher risk level will not have to immediately implement restrictions. OHA will allow a “caution period” of one week in which to get the metrics back down. If cases and rates stay high, the restrictions would then be imposed for the following week.

Counties with low vaccination rates are far from qualifying for the waiver. They will have to live with more restrictions for a longer time.

DROUGHT

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Reading from the resolution, Roberts said the ongoing severe drought means “the emergency seems to be of such magnitude as the economic impact to many livestock producers, farmers and agriculture-related businesses and the county economy may be putting them in need of economic assistance.”

The resolution stated that a continuous lack of rain with no significant change forecast for the rest of agricultural season could affect all businesses in Wallowa County. Nash said that Wallowa Lake — the primary source for irrigation water — hasn't filled up like in the past and the dry conditions have led irrigators to turn on the tap a month earlier than usual.

A map of the entire county was attached to the resolution, which was sent as a request to Gov. Kate Brown and a request that

she forward it to U.S. secretary of agriculture for consideration.

“If you wait longer, it just takes longer,” Roberts said, so the state “recommended we move this forward in an expeditious manner.”

Nash agreed. “The wheels of government move slow,” he said.

The last time Wallowa County declared drought was in 2007, before any of the current commissioners were on the board.

But Commissioner John Hillock said he's seen the benefits of such a declaration in other counties.

“Umatilla County had this last year and it opened up a lot of different funding sources ... low-interest loans, grants, a few different things,” he said. “Sometimes ... that even drops down to ag-related businesses, for instance if someone doesn't sell enough fertilizer, they could get a loan to keep going. It just opens up USDA funding for a lot of different things.”

The aid can come down

to what could seem minor amounts.

“If a rancher has to haul water to livestock, there are some reimbursement funds,” Nash said. “There can be an allowance for Conservation Reserve Program grounds to open them up for grazing.”

Roberts said the determination of drought comes mainly from input from county residents.

“We determine here as to whether we're in drought,” she said. “Our producers and people here help us determine that.”

Hillock agreed, saying he and the other commissioners have sought that input.

“You drive around and you talk to the producers,” he said. “The grass (for grazing) isn't growing.”

But the drought extends beyond traditional agricultural areas up into the timberlands. Nash told of one resident who conducted a controlled burn recently and was amazed how dry it was.

“Those were fires like we'd see in late July,” he said. “They burned some trees they didn't intend to.”



Alex Wittwer/The Observer
Volunteers, from left, Carolyn Young, Etta Ruberg and Mary Dodds inspect a plaque containing the names of members of the former United Methodist Church on Tuesday, May 25, 2021. The church building is now home to the Catherine Creek Community Center.

UNION

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as Union's United Methodist Church until 2019 when it closed because of declining membership.

The Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church assumed ownership of the building plus its fellowship hall and parsonage building. It then put it up for sale in 2020.

The Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall purchased the complex in February 2021 to save it from possibly being converted into a business or being torn down. Today the complex's old Methodist Church building is a chapel available to all denominations for religious services, weddings, funerals and more.

The new memorial area in the chapel will be dedicated at 1 p.m. Sunday, May 30. Its centerpiece is a trophy case from Union High School's gym that was installed at UHS in memory of one of its students, Anna Marie Hall, a cheerleader who died of an illness in 1978 at age 14. She was the daughter of LaVon Hall, one of the

leaders of Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall.

People examining the trophy case and other parts of the memorial site will find albums filled with photos of past church members, old Bibles, handwritten stories about the church and many documents including Sunday school attendance records from the 1960s and a list of the church's pastors and lay speakers. The list includes people like A.J. Joslin, a minister more than 100 years ago for a single year; V.A. Bolen, a minister from 1948 to 1958, one of the church's longest serving leaders; and Ernie Smith, who served from 1994 to 2001, in one of two stints as minister.

Visitors to the memorial site will later be able to read a story about the Methodist Church's bell, which was donated by an old church in Union about a 100 years ago, according to Geneva Williams, a member of the Friends of the Historic Union Community Hall. Williams said the Methodist Church could not use it at first because it lacked a bell tower. One was later built

with funds raised by a penny drive conducted by children, Williams said.

The bell is still in place today and can be rung by pulling a rope hanging from a ceiling in the church's second story.

The May 30 dedication will follow an alumni and community breakfast at Catherine Creek Community Hall. The breakfast will be served from 7:30-10:30 a.m.

Following the dedication, a lunch will be served at the Catherine Creek Community Center in honor of three women who worked tirelessly to help create the Catherine Creek Community Center but died in the past year before it became a reality — Joy Anne Smith, Gracie Tarter and Marty McKeen.

“They were all big supporters of this,” Hall said.

Hall hopes the memorial site will keep memories of these women and other former church supporters shining as brightly as the sun does when it pierces the church's striking stained glass windows.

“We want the spirit of the church to live on,” she said.

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