



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Chairs and desks are covered up during renovations at Union High School on Tuesday, July 6, 2021. Interior renovations of the historic building are expected to be completed before Aug. 31, 2021, the first day of school, though some exterior improvements may take longer to finish.

UNION

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manager for Kirby Nagelhout Construction, the general contractor for the renovation project, said the COVID-19 pandemic is making it difficult for contractors, including his, to get materials and equipment in a timely manner because it has hurt supply chains.

“Procurement of materials has been a major challenge,” Towne said.

Except for the elevator, almost all of the other improvement projects are on pace to be completed on schedule. Projects set to be finished this summer include the installation of a paved parking lot in front of the east side of S.E. Miller School, which will boost safety; the creation of an east side entry into S.E. Miller Elementary School; the creation of a more secure east side entry at UHS; and renovations to the main entry of the UHS gym to make it much easier for the physically challenged to enter.

Work on these and other projects is on schedule due in large part to early purchases of materials.

“We made our orders as early as we possibly could,” Towne said.

The orders were made this spring after subcontractors were selected via a bidding process.

Not all of the materials

have arrived yet but if they are delivered on time, renovation work will be able to continue on schedule. Towne said his company is in a much better position than many other construction companies who have not even been given a date for when their materials will arrive because of supply problems.

Earlier this year, Union’s upgrade project received a funding boost when Union School District received about \$1 million in federal COVID-19 funding from the state. This funding, provided via an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief grant, is covering the cost of replacing heating and ventilation systems in Union’s two elementary school buildings and an air circulation system on the basement floor of UHS.

Some of the renovations have been particularly challenging because it has involved work in the attic of the Union Elementary School’s Hutchinson classroom building. The attic can be oppressively hot in the summer weather, said Ryan Larson, project superintendent for Kirby Nagelhout Construction. He said that when the outdoor temperature reached 108 degrees during the recent heat wave earlier, the temperature in the Hutchinson building’s attic was 152 degrees. Larson said crews working in Hutchinson’s

attic at that time started at 3 a.m. each morning to avoid the dangerous heat.

Towne said the upgraded heating and ventilation systems, like much of the work being done this summer, will not be visible but will greatly improve the school district’s infrastructure.

“A lot of the bond projects are behind the scenes, but the benefits will be huge,” Towne said.

He said the chance to be part of the school district’s renovation is an honor.

“It is fantastic to be a part of something so significant to the school district,” he said.

The renovation of Union School District received another boost, in addition to the COVID-19 grant, earlier this year when it was awarded a \$2.5 million seismic upgrade grant from the state. The grant will cover the cost of making UHS’s gym stronger so that it will be better able to withstand an earthquake. The seismic upgrades will be done in the summer of 2022, after which a new gym floor will be installed, said Cassie Hibbert, a project manager with the Wenaha Group, which is managing the renovation work.

Wells said the seismic work will help ensure that the Union community will have a safe place to gather and receive emergency services if there ever is an earthquake.

DRIVERS

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leave to seek full-time employment, while others quit because they didn’t understand what the job entailed.

“They can be driving anywhere between 20 and 84 students in a day, it can be trying at times,” Carpenter said. “My hat goes off to them.”

Another reason that residents are hesitant to apply is because of the drug testing requirement, Moore said.

“You cannot drive a school bus and smoke pot,” he said. “Even though it’s legal in Oregon, it’s a federal law. So a lot of people who might have applied to work for us, they’re just going to go work at a restaurant that doesn’t drug test at all.”

Because the job is part-

time, Moore said they often hire retirees or other older residents. This posed a problem last year when several drivers retired due to COVID-19 risks.

“COVID put us further behind than a normal school year,” Moore said. “When COVID hit, most people getting seriously ill were senior citizens, so we had some people retire.”

Applications have been slow to come in. The bus company has placed advertisements on the radio and has advertised positions at local events, such as Crazy Days in La Grande, hoping to draw in more applicants.

“Applications have been hit or miss,” Maley said. “Sometimes they’ll call, and I’m told they’re only looking for seasonal work or hoping to get unemployment.”

On multiple occasions, staff members at the bus company have had to fill

in for bus drivers who could not make their route. Moore said that hiring more drivers would help the company provide better service.

“We’re trying to find enough drivers so our dispatchers and managers don’t have to go out,” Moore said. “They’re all licensed and trained but we don’t want them on the road if we don’t have to.”

Maley agreed. She said she is optimistic that the company will soon be able to operate with a full staff and that new applicants will see the appeal of driving a school bus.

“I think people get intimidated or think it’s hard, but it’s not,” Maley said. “We make sure people are fully trained before they go out. It can be intimidating, but it’s very rewarding, every day is different, that’s why I enjoy it so much.”

CASES

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on all counties in the state, regardless of infection levels, if 70% of residents statewide had received at least one shot of vaccine.

While just short of the goal, Brown announced that she would give the green light to reopen the state in time for the “near normal” Fourth of July holiday sought by President Joe Biden.

The announcement also seemed to be a truce in the political wars over Brown’s emergency orders that had been in place since March 2020. OHA would continue in an advisory role, help get vaccines to centers that wanted it, and compile records on the pandemic.

But county health officials would now be empowered to determine what was best for their communities. Any actions needed to curb the virus would be decided by county commissioners.

The blanket lifting of restrictions came despite a wildly different rate of infection and vaccinations across the state. Several counties in the Willamette Valley, Deschutes County, and some northern coastal areas were above the 70% mark. A high vaccination rate in the three-county Portland metro area inflated the overall state numbers.

Elsewhere, vaccination rates were under 40%, especially in Eastern and Southwestern Oregon. Many of the counties have small populations, but the list also included Umatilla County, home to Pendleton and Hermiston, and Douglas County, which includes Roseburg.

At first, the decline in the virus seemed to hold, even as other parts of the country reported an increase in the delta variant, first reported in India. While most scientists said it was no more virulent than the original virus, the delta variant spread up to twice as fast, roaring through parts of the South and Midwest like a viral wildfire.

In Oregon, the Independence Day holiday came and went with a buoyant public celebration across the state. By July 9, the seven-day average of new cases fell to 110.

But the eddy soon ended. As some independent epidemiologists had forecast, the lifting of restrictions on counties regardless of their individual infection and vaccination levels created a spike in new cases in areas where most residents were not vaccinated.

The result has been an explosion of cases. On July 27, Umatilla County reported 8% of all new COVID-19 cases in Oregon, though it only represents 2% of the state population. The county’s case rate was more than seven times higher than Multnomah and Washington counties, which each have more than 500,000 more residents than Umatilla County.



Grande Ronde Hospital/Contributed Photo, File

Doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine await use at Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande on Dec. 23, 2020. In July, a possible fifth wave of the COVID-19 is swelling in a pandemic-exhausted Oregon that less than a month ago seemed to be on the verge of recovery.

Hospitals filled up, with at one point just 8 of 81 intensive care unit beds unoccupied.

Union County has also seen a recent spike. In the last week, the county reported an average of nine cases every day, over three times higher than the case rate in early July. The county reported 19 cases on July 26, the highest one day count since January.

Local control or state mandates?

The length of the current spike isn’t yet known, but Oregon, which reported more than 1,000 new cases on July 27, had not reported over 1,000 cases in a day since a brief spike in April. While the current increase is still forming, Oregon had not averaged over 1,000 cases per day since January 21.

Brown and state health officials have said that while the state does have ultimate authority over public health, for now it would continue the policy of local autonomy.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said last week that the state did not want to make blanket directives on the “highly political” issue of mandatory vaccinations and other requirements. Federal and state statements were often contradictory.

The CDC on July 27 said masks should be worn indoors only in areas where the virus was spiking. However, all schools in the country should mandate masks in the classroom.

The Oregon Health Authority said masks should be worn indoors in all counties regardless of transmission levels. But school mask decisions were up to local authorities, with no overall suggestion from the state agency.

The New York Times reported that the differences were confusing and subject to interpretation based on political views.

Republicans leaders in Oregon were reluctant to endorse anything that seemed coercive to their constituents.

Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, represents the largest legislative district in Oregon, including Baker, Grant, Harney, Jefferson, Malheur, Wasco, Wheeler, and parts of

Deschutes and Lake counties. Malheur and Lake are the only counties in the state that have vaccinated fewer than 40% of residents. Infection rates range from virtually nonexistent in Grant and Wheeler counties to extreme in Jefferson County.

Findley said that a mask mandate would be a tough sell in much of his largely rural district, suggesting “thorough education” about “appropriate precautions” instead.

“We’ve been here before — mask mandates are difficult to enforce and put an undue burden on our businesses who become responsible for implementing a mandate at their doors,” he said.

Findley declined to say if he had been vaccinated.

“I will not share my personal medical information,” he said. “I believe the decision to get the vaccine is a personal, private matter between an individual and their physician.”

Pushing forward with vaccinations

OHA said it would push on with vaccination efforts, all voluntary.

Under a 1986 law, Oregon is the only state in the nation that specifically exempts medical and health workers from any vaccine requirements. Private companies in other industries could require vaccination as a condition of employment, but many government workers could not be compelled to be vaccinated because of union contracts negotiated with state and local governments and agencies.

The current Oregon Health Authority count shows that 68.6% of eligible adults over the age of 18 have had one shot of vaccine. The state percentage is actually somewhat higher because some federal programs aren’t captured by the state count.

The new goal is 80% vaccinations, or just over 2.72 million adults, by Aug. 31. That is looking unlikely at the current pace. The state needs just over 389,000 more shots to hit the mark.

To reach the goal, OHA says it would need to be inoculating 11,443 new people per day.

The latest seven-day average is 2,064.

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