

# THE OBSERVER

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## MERA partially reopens

Recreation site again open to nonmotorized uses

By **DICK MASON**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE— Nearly 50 miles of trails are again available to hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders in the western Grande Ronde Valley.

The Mount Emily Recreation Area reopened for day use on Saturday, July 31, for nonmotorized activities after having been closed completely the previous 10 days because of high fire danger due to hot and dry conditions.

The decision to partially reopen MERA was made by the Union County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday, July 28, via a 3-0 vote.

No motor vehicles of any kind are now allowed at MERA under the partial reopening rules, and smoking, campfires and overnight camping is still prohibited. Smoking and campfires are banned under Oregon Department of Forestry regulations.

Mountain biking, hiking and horseback riding are among the nonmotorized activities people can enjoy at MERA.

The commissioners voted to partially reopen MERA after receiving emails from hikers and mountain bikers asking for it to be reopened for nonmotorized use. Commissioner Paul Anderes said that mountain bikers and hikers campaigned the hardest.

Anderes, who proposed the partial reopening, said his decision was based on information he received from the Oregon Department of Forestry, the U.S. Forest Service and county officials. He said the guidance provided from them made proposing the partial reopening of MERA appear to be the right move to make.

The decision the board of commissioners made to

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## COVID-19 RESURGENCE



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A mask hangs from the handlebars of a bicycle outside GC Asian Fusion Restaurant in La Grande on Thursday, July 29, 2021. Local officials have not imposed restrictions following a surge of COVID-19 cases in the county and region. The Centers for Disease and Prevention and the Oregon Health Authority are advising returning to mask wearing.

# Masks left hanging

County officials to meet Aug. 4 to discuss reinstating restrictions

By **CARLOS FUENTES**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Union County is seeing a rise in COVID-19 cases less than a month after statewide restrictions were lifted.

In the last two weeks, Union County's COVID-19 cases have exponentially increased. In the past week, the county reported an average of 13 cases every day, more than four times higher than the average case rate in early July.

On July 26-27, 19 positive

tests were reported to the state — tied for the highest one-day county total since January. On July 28, the new case count was 21.

According to Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo, a group including members of the Center for Human Development, Grande Ronde Hospital and county officials will not meet until Wednesday, Aug. 4, to discuss reinstating restrictions.

"Because the state government gave us local control, we better have a plan in case COVID cases continue to rise," he said. "So we've gone through with opening the lines of communication, in case of an outbreak."

Scarfo said the group has

not set any specific numbers to define an outbreak, despite COVID-19 cases quickly rising amid the county's low vaccination rate of 37%.

A press release from the Center for Human Development stated the county's test positivity rate also has increased, indicating there likely are more cases in the community that have not yet been reported.

"We want to provide Union County residents with this information so that they can use it to make informed choices for themselves and their loved ones. Particularly for people with underlying conditions where the virus could lead to serious outcomes including death. And for those unable to be vaccinated," Union County Public Health

Administrator Carrie Brogoitti said.

Scarfo said county officials have been monitoring the progress of COVID-19 spread by looking at hospitalizations.

According to Mardi Ford, communications director at Grande Ronde Hospital, hospitalizations have been low and consistently under the capacity of the 25-bed hospital. There were 11 bed occupants at the hospital on July 29. Information on the presence of COVID-19 was not available.

"We would like the community to be reminded that we have had more babies in the hospital during this pandemic than we have had COVID

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## Local educators not excited about mask mandate

Oregon to require masks indoors for K-12 schools

By **DICK MASON**  
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Masks will be required for anyone inside a school in Oregon this year, according to a directive Gov. Kate Brown announced Thursday, July 29.

"The science and data are clear: the delta variant is in our communities, and it is more contagious," Brown said in a statement. "My priority is to ensure our kids are able to safely return to full-time in-person learning this fall, five days per week and with minimal disruptions. With many children still ineligible to be vaccinated, masks are an effective



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

La Grande High School art teacher Rich McIlmoil assists a student with an art exercise during class Thursday, May 27, 2021.

way to help keep our kids safe in the classroom, the learning environment we know serves them best."

The news left some local educators feeling worried.

Mark Mulvihill, super-

intendent of the Inter-Mountain Education Service District, which serves all of Union County's

school districts, fears the mandate will raise the temperature of debates in communities over whether masks and vaccinations are needed to quell the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It is pulling communities apart," he said.

Mulvihill said he is concerned about superintendents and other colleagues who will be in the middle of conflicts in their communities.

"They will be caught in a situation they can't win," he said.

Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells said his district was planning on making the wearing of masks optional prior to the July 29 announcement. He said the decision would have benefited students by making it easier for them to focus on school work since masks

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### WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	<b>Tonight</b> 66 Low Showers around		<b>Sunday</b> 80/65 A t-storm around
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### CONTACT US

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Email story ideas to [news@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:news@lagrandeobserver.com).  
More contact info on Page 4A.



TUESDAY

SUMMER'S HERE & TOMATOES ARE RIPE

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