

OREGON

State jobless claims begin falling again

Fewer than 4,200 Oregonians filed new benefit claims last week

BY MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — New jobless claims, which remained stubbornly high in Oregon last spring, have dropped substantially over the past few weeks.

Fewer than 4,200 Oregonians filed new claims for benefits last week, the lowest number since October. The number of new Oregon claims is now below the average number of new claims in the 10 weeks before the pandemic.

That's a hopeful sign. Oregon's jobless rate was near an all-time low until COVID-19 hit. The dearth of new layoffs this summer, combined with a steep fall in the number of people collecting benefits each week, suggests the state may have a path to get back to something like full employment.

"Employers added as many payroll jobs in the first six months of this year as they did in the 22 months leading up to the pandemic," Oregon Employment Department economist Gail Krumenauer wrote in an email. "We still have a large gap to full jobs recovery, but the recalls of workers to their jobs and much additional hiring is bringing people back into the workforce."

It's no great mystery why claims are falling now. Oregon has pulled down nearly all COVID-19 restrictions over the past few months, enabling bars, restaurants, hotels, movie theaters and other sectors to reopen after an unprecedented downturn leading into the pandemic.

What's a little more confounding is why Oregon claims didn't fall sooner.

The number of new unemployment claims began a steep decline across the country in spring. Through May, though, claims remained elevated in Oregon. The employment department said fraud was a significant reason why Oregon's claims weren't dropping faster.

Cyberthieves have stolen billions of dollars in jobless benefits nationwide during the pandemic. It's not clear how much Oregon has lost — the state won't say for fear of tempting the crooks — but claims its losses aren't as great as elsewhere. It does appear that attempted fraud hit Oregon somewhat later than it hit other states.

Fraud isn't the whole story, though. Oregon endured a fresh set of business closures last fall as COVID-19 levels spiked. Restaurants, bars and gyms shut down, accompanied by a fresh batch of layoffs.

The "freeze" that began in November affected 53,000 workers, according to an analysis by Krumenauer, producing 19,000 more new claims and 34,000 renewed claims. A fresh wave of COVID-19 cases that hit Oregon in the spring peaked in late April.

At the same time, some jobless Oregonians were hitting the one-year anniversary of layoffs that began in the spring of 2020. Krumenauer said that meant they had to file new initial claims to continue receiving benefits.

As vaccines proliferated, though, health restrictions eased and the economy sprang back to life. Oregon's reopening came later than in some other states, Krumenauer noted, and that kept the number of new jobless claims comparatively high into summer.

Now, though, the economy is reopening rapidly, and the number of new jobless claims is back near historic lows. The current increase in COVID-19 cases associated with the delta variant is introducing uncertainty into the state's economic outlook, but there is no indication of new large-scale business shutdowns and no sign yet of any weakness in the job market.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Tony Hensley, left, along with Jase Richter and Taran Hardwick work on installing insulating foam to the new area of Les Schwab's Adams Avenue location in La Grande on Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021.

Les Schwab remains open amid construction

By CARLOS FUENTES
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Extensive construction and renovations are underway at Les Schwab, which remains open for car servicing at 2306 Adams Ave., La Grande.

Phase one, which includes replacing service bays, repaving the parking lot and adding light posts, is estimated to be completed by the end of August, according to Bo Stroud, project manager with LJH Construction.

Even with the extensive work, the tire dealer and repair shop has remained open throughout the construction and will continue to serve customers during both phases of the project.

"It's made everything logistically more difficult, but our customer base has been very understanding," Lee Stebar, manager of the La Grande Les Schwab Tire Center, said. "It keeps us excited and wanting to continue providing world class service to our customers."

The new service bays will have more equipment on hand, such as new air compression drops, which is only one way the construction will improve wait times and service quality, according to Stebar.

"Our main focus is going to be to lessen wait time," he said. "We want to be able to get people in the store, give them the service that Les Schwab is famous for, and get them back to their day as soon as possible."

Additionally, the light posts in the parking lot will provide a more comfortable environment for customers, particularly in the winter months, Stebar said.

Phase two, which will begin in mid-August and finish by late fall, will involve remodeling the building's interior and repainting the exterior and interior.

"It's going to have new lights, an all new showroom, upgraded bathrooms, new tile, just everything," Stroud said. "It's gonna look really nice inside."

There have been several delays with material shortages and a lack of original blueprints for the building, according to Stroud.

"They had no original prints on the building," he said. "This whole front area has been completely redesigned by me and the engineers and architects."

Additionally, crews found old walls and a floor underneath the old service bays when digging up the site.

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Under construction on Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021, the new 12,000-square-foot OXARC building in La Grande will give the business considerably more space.

OXARC hopes to be in new facilities by late September

By CARLOS FUENTES
The Observer

LA GRANDE — OXARC will soon have a new home in a 12,000-square-foot facility being built next to Miller's Home Center off of Island Avenue.

According to Jarod Teeter, project manager at Mike Becker General Contractor, the new building is expected to be completed by late September.

"We're moving along right now, hoping we'll be done by the end of September," Teeter

said. "This COVID thing has gotten things slowed down in terms of getting materials, but the weather has been super great. We haven't had much rain, so we were able to get in early."

OXARC, a Spokane-based and family-owned company, supplies construction, welding, chemical and fire services equipment. The new facility will include an expansive showroom, a loading dock and a higher capacity for material storage.

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ENVIRONMENT

Survey: Most Oregonians concerned about water management



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin, File

Seven out of 10 Oregonians are concerned about how the state's groundwater and surface water are being managed. Most Oregonians say the answer to resolving water problems is increasing state subsidies for high-efficiency irrigation equipment.

More than half of state is in extreme or exceptional drought

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

PORTLAND — Seven out of 10 Oregonians are concerned about how the state's groundwater and surface water are being managed. Most Oregonians say the answer to resolving water problems is increasing state subsidies for high-efficiency irrigation equipment.

Those are two findings in a recent survey conducted by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, a Portland-based nonprofit. The survey was conducted statewide in July and involved 1,464 respondents. It

carries a margin of error of 1.5% to 2.6%.

Results of the survey show that while Oregonians are largely concerned about water issues, many believe that there is enough water to serve all needs and shortages are not likely to occur. These opinions are being expressed while the entire state is in some form of drought.

According to the U.S. drought monitor, more than half of the state is in extreme or exceptional drought. Coastal areas and the Willamette Valley are in moderate or severe drought.

Key findings in the survey show that a quarter of respondents are not very or not at all concerned about the management of surface and groundwater.

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