

**TRENDING**

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Although the county is seeing a spike in patients, Ford said that hospital administration does not anticipate bed capacity reaching 100% or any delays in service.

“At this point, however, we are managing well. It’s what we do. We know how to prepare for emergencies,” she said.

Other hospitals in Eastern Oregon are facing a similar situation. At CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, roughly two-thirds of the hospital’s inpatients over the past week tested positive for COVID-19, and more than a quarter of patients admitted to the emergency department had the virus, the East Oregonian reported on Aug. 5.

Of the 25 intensive care unit beds across six counties in Eastern Oregon, only three were available on Aug. 6, according to OHA.

**Cases going up**

Between July 28 and Aug. 5, Union County reported an average of 13.2 cases each day, a 776% increase from the average between June 1 and July 15.

Along with this, four COVID-related deaths were reported on Aug. 4, raising the county’s pandemic death total to 28.

These high rates make Union County an area of “extremely high risk,” according to public health experts at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Across the country, and internationally, many areas seeing high transmission rates have brought back requirements for masks, social distancing and more.

However, Union County officials have no such plans.

According to Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo, county and health officials met on Aug. 4 to discuss the possibility of bringing back COVID-19 restrictions, but no changes were made.

“If anybody wants to wear masks, that is their right to do so,” he said.

Scarfo added that to bring back restrictions, “we’ll have to discuss it with the experts, the experts will advise us. We are in constant contact with each other.”

In high-risk areas, experts recommend bringing back restrictions to slow the spread of the virus.

“Physical distancing, masking, good health hygiene, those mitigation factors work and have been proven to be very effective,” said Dr. Bukhosi Dube, senior health advisor for the Oregon Health Authority. “As a public health official, my personal opinion is that that is the right thing to do.”

**Vaccine rates stall**

Out of 36 counties in the state, Union County ranks fifth highest in COVID-19 case rates while also ranking fifth lowest in vaccination rates for total population, according to data compiled by the New York Times.

All of the available vaccines have been proven to slow the spread of the virus, but rates in recent weeks have lowered to about 18 full vaccinations per day.

To reach OHA’s goal of vaccinating 80% of adults in Union County, this number would have to increase to 254 every day until Aug. 31 — a 1,461% increase in daily

inoculations.

“The county and state have been trying to answer people’s questions and concerns and trying to encourage vaccination in all populations,” Dube said. “This is a preventable disease, but the fact that we have so many cases, it highlights that we need to get more people vaccinated.”

**Workplace outbreaks in Union County**

In addition to the workplace outbreak at Grande Ronde Hospital, the Oregon Health Authority disclosed two other workplaces in Union County facing active COVID-19 outbreaks in its Aug. 4 outbreak report.

One of those workplaces is a nursing home, according to the state.

The state publishes an active outbreak in nursing homes if the facility reports more than three cases. The outbreak is considered resolved if no new cases are reported within 28 days of the last case.

- Wildflower Lodge Assisted Living Community, La Grande, has reported five COVID-19 cases since July 18, according to the state. There have been no reported deaths.

In addition, the state publishes a workplace outbreak when five or more cases are reported at a facility with 30 or more workers. Like nursing homes, the outbreak is considered resolved if no new cases are reported within 28 days of the last case.

The state also reported this workplace outbreak:

- Miller’s Home Center, La Grande, reported 16 cases between its first reported case on June 29 and its most recent onset case on July 20.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Concerned citizens filled the gymnasium at Central Elementary School during the school board meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021.

**MASKS**

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mandate. Many were parents, including some who said they planned to pull their children out of the La Grande School District if there is a mask mandate. Their comments often were cheered loudly by many of the nearly 150 people present, including some holding anti-mask signs.

One man speaking urged the school board to stand up to the state and have the school district defy Brown’s mask mandate. The individual also reminded school board members they were elected officials and could be subject to a recall.

One early speaker became angry when the school board tried to cut him off after his three-minute speaking time limit expired. The school board let him finish, but after that a large digital timer was displayed on a screen everyone could see during the public forum.

Another man said the mask issue may create a divide similar to the one that existed in the U.S. just before the Civil War.

At the end of the meeting, which was monitored by a number of law enforcement officers, the board voted to approve a COVID-19 safety operations plan for 2021-22. The operations plan calls for students to attend school as members of cohorts, adhere to social distancing rules, wash their hands frequently, be in school much longer each day than in 2020-21 and to wear masks when indoors.

The passage of the operations plan did not trigger an angry audience, which Maille credited to La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza, who told the crowd why the district has no choice but to mandate masks.

“George did an excellent job of explaining this,” she said.

Mendoza noted the school district could be fined \$500 for each violation of the mask mandate.

**Community objection**

Prior to the Aug. 4 school board meeting, a group of community members gathered to

voice their opinion about Brown’s recent mask mandate. Brown authorized the Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Health Authority to mandate mask usage in indoor settings for grades K-12, as well as for staff, volunteers and visitors.

The Union County Freedom Alliance, in collaboration with the La Grande and Union County Parents Against Masking Children Facebook group, organized the demonstration in front of Central Elementary School prior to the meeting.

More than 800 members have joined the Facebook group, with more than 50 attending the demonstration prior to the start of the meeting. By the time the meeting started, that number climbed to approximately 150 individuals in attendance for the gathering at the Central Elementary School gymnasium.

“I think at the heart of it, we really have a deep concern for our children,” said Blake Bars of the Union County Freedom Alliance. “We want to stand up for their health, safety and freedom.”

**CYCLING**

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**Dirty Freehub’s purpose**

English said the group’s goals are multiple.

“We’ve been providing five-star gravel bike route guides since 2014, but becoming a nonprofit better reflects our mission,” English said. “While cyclists use our website to find routes, our real mission is to connect cyclists to the places they ride.”

The group also has other missions.

“We have a bunch of social missions: inspiring people to get outside and ride, utilizing existing roads but trying to keep cyclists off busier roads,” English said in an email. “Economic development for areas that depend on tourism, inspiring cyclists to become donors, volunteers and advocates to organizations that preserve these areas.”

She said Wallowa County offers some unique opportunities for cyclists.

“To connect a cyclist to where they ride, we can use a variety of approaches,” she said. “The stories about the granges are fascinating. The history of Joseph, information about the fish hatchery and environmental info from organizations that work to protect the beauty of the area, the ecosystems, etc.”

Dirty Freehub also is focused on how to utilize technology to help cyclists find the best routes.

“I’m so impressed with the range of technology they have implemented,” said Chuck Allen, a board member and retired Microsoft executive. “They offer downloadable routes with turn-by-turn directions, a searchable database and mapping overlays that let you look at multiple routes on a map in one area. With media, they have pictures, videos, and now podcasts. They are really changing the game of route guides.”

Another board member, Mike Hobson, said the

**MORE INFORMATION**

Find Dirty Freehub online at [www.dirtyfreehub.org](http://www.dirtyfreehub.org), or for more information, email [info@DirtyFreehub.org](mailto:info@DirtyFreehub.org) or call Executive Director Linda English at 541-550-8930.

group’s goals fit right into places like Wallowa County communities.

“Farming towns ... are just a blast to ride,” he said. “I love the big views of the mountains and quiet roads.”

He also noted that this means tourism dollars to communities that could really benefit.

And what about e-bikes? Dirty Freehub fully supports gravel e-bikes, with each route clearly tagged as e-bike friendly.

**Dirty Freehub’s past**

Dirty Freehub has a long history with gravel cycling.

“Back in 2014, Dirty Freehub founders Linda and Kevin (English) were enthusiastically convincing me that gravel was going to be the next big thing in cycling, they were on the forefront of the gravel scene with a pointed vision to start creating routes for their community to enjoy,” said Nicola Cranmer, founder and general manager of TWENTY24 Women’s Pro Cycling Team and Dirty Freehub adviser.

“They were so passionate about riding gravel, who could have foreseen the explosion of events, culture and participation in the years that followed, they were such visionaries.”

English said she’s particularly eager to get cyclists around Wallowa County, with which she’s become familiar.

“We also love to help with dispersing people; we worked on routes that used roads up toward Hells Canyon Overlook and saw absolutely nobody,” she said. “Same thing with the road up Zumwalt, which was spectacular. There are loads of great farming roads around Lostine and Enterprise. Same thing around Imnaha.”

**PGG**

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a store and restaurant. The McGregor Co. of Colfax, Washington, completed acquisition of the PGG grain division and the McKennon Station seed processing center, which will continue to operate under the Pendleton Grain Growers banner.

But the centerpiece of PGG’s once extensive holdings was its headquarters at 1000 S.W. Dorion Ave. The facility includes the co-op’s former retail showroom, automotive service center and warehouse.

The PGG building has sat mostly empty as the cooperative sold assets elsewhere. The city of Pendleton considered the PGG building when it was trying to decide a new location for its fire department in 2016, but ultimately opted to build a new facility on bare land



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

An electronic sign in the parking lot of the former Pendleton Grain Growers building advertises job openings for CDL drivers at “EO Rentals” on Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021. The former PGG building sold at auction to Braseth Properties, of La Grande, on July 23, 2021, for roughly \$1.8 million. Braseth Properties does business as Eastern Oregon Rentals & Storage in La Grande, and the family also owns Eastern Oregon Rental & Sales and Mountain West Moving & Storage.

at 1455 S.E. Court Ave. In 2019, PGG commissioned renderings of concepts that could fit the building, including a van or RV conversion business or a Goodwill-like operation

with retail and workforce training.

By the time the building went up for auction with a reserve price of nearly \$2 million, PGG had lowered the asking

price from \$2.1 million. When PGG completed the sale of the building on July 23, Braseth Properties bought the property for roughly the same amount as its assessed value.

**Thank you Dr. Stephen Bump for giving us 30 years**

of your dedication and kindness while providing excellent medical care to our community. We will miss you.

From your GRH family— we wish you all the best that a happy retirement brings!

**It is richly deserved.**



Stephen Bump, MD—Internal Medicine