

# THE OBSERVER

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**BAKER COUNTY**

## Carrying on the name

Rural Baker County town is gone, but namesake store remains

BY LISA BRITTON

Baker City Herald

PONDOSA — Bob Bennett is just three years older than the Pondosa Store, where he's been selling cold drinks and ice cream since 1983.

Bob, 98, was born in 1923.

The store was built in 1926 to serve Pondosa, a mill town about 36 miles southeast of La Grande on state Highway 203, a couple miles from Medical Springs.

Pondosa as a town no longer exists. But Bob is happy to share the story with anyone who happens by his remote store.

Although Pondosa was home to 500 people at one time, it was wholly dependent on a lumber mill. The mill closed in 1959 — the same year the area was named the geographic center of the United States with the addition of Alaska and Hawaii.

"They were going to name it Centerville, USA, but the town closed up," said Lori Brock, Bob's daughter who moved to Pondosa several years ago.

Lester Gaddy, brother to Bob's wife, Jean, saw an advertisement in the Eugene Register-Guard.

"The whole town. For sale," Lori said.

Lester, she said, "traded three city blocks for the whole town."

Lester died in 1982, and left his property to Jean, his only sister.

Jean and Bob Bennett faced a decision: sell the Pondosa property, or sell their Eugene home and move to Eastern Oregon.

"I had a debate on it," Bob remembers.

He'd lived in Eugene all of his life, and had recently retired from Georgia-Pacific, a timber company.

But he was tired of the rain west of the Cascades.

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**COVID-19**

## 'We're in this together'

Grande Ronde Hospital, local officials tackle capacity concerns during COVID-19 surge

By DAVIS CARBAUGH

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Beds and staff. Those are the two things hospitals are short on during the pandemic.

Grande Ronde Hospital is no different.

Hospital staff addressed those concerns during a virtual public forum on Wednesday, Aug. 18. Doctors, hospital staff and public officials outlined the current status of the hospital and how it plans to navigate through the recent rise in COVID-19 cases.

"We must band together against this unrelenting pandemic and the variants we're facing if we want to reclaim the way of life that we enjoy in Eastern Oregon," Grande Ronde Hospital President and Chief Executive Officer Jeremy Davis said.

Davis spoke at the virtual meeting alongside several doctors from the hospital as well as La Grande Mayor Steve Clements, Center for Human Development Public Health Administrator Carrie Brogoitti, La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza and Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo.

Davis emphasized the increasing statewide COVID-19 numbers in August and noted staff fatigue and shortages are weighing heavily on the hospital. According to Davis, there were only two available ICU beds in Eastern Oregon at one point earlier this month. To his knowledge, there are currently none available in Eastern Oregon.

As of Aug. 18, Union County had recorded 328 COVID-19 cases, setting a record high for monthly cases, and the county's seven-day average for positive tests was



Mardi Ford/Grande Ronde Hospital

Only five beds remained empty at Grande Ronde Hospital on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021. Increased hospitalizations from COVID-19-positive patients from the virus's recent surge in Oregon is affecting hospitals everywhere.

just over 20 per day.

Davis also stated approximately 10% of ICU beds in Oregon are currently available for new patients. The ICU at Grande Ronde Hospital has six beds, operating with a maximum of three to four COVID-19 patients at once.

Grande Ronde Hospital has 25 total beds, but that number can be increased in the case of a mass influx of patients. On Aug. 19, five beds remained empty at the hospital, but that number fluctuates daily. In the case of a large increase of patients, alternative care sites in the area can be utilized to create extra space. Grande Ronde Hospital is not currently utilizing the GRH Pavilion for additional space.

Davis said staffing issues

are more pertinent right now. From overall fatigue due to the pandemic to the large amount of labor and equipment required to work in the ICU, the staff has been pushed to new limits by COVID-19.

"We're struggling because of a staffing issue, but there are beds available," he said.

**Nationwide issue**

The hospital capacity stretches across the region and the entire country.

GRH would typically transfer patients to medical facilities in Boise, Walla Walla or the Tri-Cities, but many of the larger hospitals are currently unable to take patients. Davis mentioned an instance of a patient being transferred

to Montana and a patient who required more than 40 phone calls to find a bed for.

"It's hard to transfer patients, and it's hard to get them admitted to our hospital because we're low on beds at times," said Dr. Stephen McIlmoil, an emergency medicine doctor at Grande Ronde Hospital.

McIlmoil noted that the emergency room at the hospital is packed with patients beyond just those dealing with COVID-19.

The hospital staff reported there has been a 200% increase in emergency room visits in

See, **Surge/Page A5**



Davis



McIlmoil

## Brown orders a double dose

Teachers, health care workers must get COVID-19 vaccine by Oct. 18

By GARY WARNER

Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Facing a sharp surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to swamp Oregon hospitals, Gov. Kate Brown ordered a double dose Thursday, Aug. 19, of mandatory vaccination mandates.

All K-12 educators, school staff and volunteers must be vaccinated no later than Oct. 18, or six weeks after the Food and Drug Administration approves a vaccine.

"COVID-19 poses a threat to our kids, and our kids need to be protected and they need to be in



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande High School teacher James Akers leads a class at Freshman Academy on Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced Thursday, Aug. 19, that all health care workers and teachers will be required to get a COVID-19 vaccine by Oct. 18, or six weeks after the Food and Drug Administration gives final approval to the vaccines.

school," Brown said.

A second mandate with the same deadline would apply to doctors, nurses,

emergency medical teams and other health care workers.

The mandates have a

deadline far beyond the projected Sept. 3 peak of the current spike in cases.

Brown said there were

no current plans for earlier actions, such as restoring pandemic restrictions on businesses and gatherings, or curbing big events upcoming events such as the Oregon State Fair, the Pendleton Round-Up or Oregon Ducks football games.

"Everything is on the table," Brown said, using a frequently invoked phrase to leave open options if the pandemic trends shift again.

**Problem will only get worse**

State health officials know they have an explosion of COVID-19 cases with a likelihood that the problem will only grow over the next two weeks.

Daily infections have exploded in the past six

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

	<b>Tonight</b> 52 LOW Mainly clear		<b>Friday</b> 79/51 Partly sunny
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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.



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**TUESDAY**

LOCAL REACTION TO VACCINE MANDATE

Online at [lagrandeobserver.com](http://lagrandeobserver.com)