

Driver license renewal grace period set to end Dec. 31

By VIRGINIA BARREDA

Salem Statesman Journal

SALEM — If you've got an expired Oregon license or vehicle registration, it's time to consider booking an Oregon Driver & Motor Vehicle appointment — fast.

The grace period to renew already-expired licenses and registrations is coming to an end Dec. 31.

In 2020, the DMV closed its 60 offices across Oregon amid the pandemic, prompting a huge backlog, DMV spokesperson David House said.

When the offices reopened, the backlog was exacerbated by staff shortages and restrictions such as capacity limits and appointment-only services.

To help alleviate the pileup of requests and clogged phone lines, multiple vehicle-related moratoriums were put in place throughout the year.

One rolling moratorium provides a grace period on citations for expired driver licenses, permits, vehicle registration and disabled parking placards. The law only applies to expiration dates of six months or less and will expire Dec. 31, according to the DMV website.

Since reopening, the DMV has increased its available appointments and is also now accepting walk-ins. Though there are no capacity limits, customers are required to wear masks in the offices and during driving tests.

Save yourself a trip to the DMV

Many services are now available online, so agency officials say it's worth checking the DMV website before making the trip. If you have to go in person, make an appointment through dmv2u.oregon.gov/eServices, or just show up.

Bridging the digital divide

Grant County's first Cyber Mill brings broadband to Seneca

By BENNETT HALL

Blue Mountain Eagle

SENECA — When Logan Stanley moved to Seneca from Boise, she knew finding work would be a challenge. But with the arrival of the Cyber Mill, her options have expanded dramatically.

The nonprofit facility, which opened Nov. 16 in an 800-square-foot former restaurant building on Highway 395, is providing something that has been sorely lacking for many residents of this small Grant County ranching community: broadband internet access.

Stanley stopped by the Cyber Mill to check the place out and open a free account that comes with a code for the digital keypad for the front door, so she can access the building anytime between 5 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. She's hoping the facility's high-speed internet connection will allow her to parlay her political science degree into a good-paying job.

"I'm looking for remote work (and) this gives me access to find work outside the area," Stanley said. "Having access to the internet is what opens the door to that opportunity."

Stanley was just one of several local residents who came in Friday to see what the Cyber Mill was all about. Acting as host, tour guide and chief cheerleader was Didgette McCracken, a founding board member of Cyber Mill Grant County, the nonprofit behind the facility.

The project has been more than two years in the making, and McCracken couldn't be more excited to see how the people of Seneca make use of it.

"It makes my heart happy," she said.

It's a big change for the tiny town of Seneca, population 165, but it's also a sign of things to come for other isolated communities in this part of Eastern Oregon.



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County Cyber Mill's Didgette McCracken, left, chats with Grant Union High School senior Luke Jackson, center, and his father, Layne Jackson, in the Seneca Cyber Mill on Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. The nonprofit facility offers free high-speed internet access to Seneca-area residents.

Similar projects are already in the works for Prairie City and John Day, and long-range plans call for laying fiber-optic lines that could bring high-speed internet access to every community in Grant County.

All things internet

Think of the Cyber Mill as an internet cafe without the cafe (although the building still shows traces of its previous incarnation as a restaurant, and it does have a coffeemaker and a small fridge).

Just inside the front door is a living room-like space with small tables and comfortable chairs scattered around a Western-print throw rug and a large video monitor on one wall. On the other side of the room is a line of work tables with three desktop computer terminals available for public use. Still to come is a scanner/copier/fax machine.

You can still see the old lunch counter, which has now been refurbished as a work surface supplied with several stools.

In the back of the building is a small meeting space, with room for 10 or 12 people, a portable whiteboard and a wall-mounted monitor set up for videoconferencing. The room can be reserved in advance.

There's also a handicapped-accessible restroom, a utility room for computer servers, and a strong Wi-Fi signal throughout the building for people who want to bring their own laptops, tablets or

other wireless devices.

Working at a remote job is just one of the ways people will be able to use the facility, McCracken said.

The conference room can be booked for in-person meetings or classes, or people can use the videoconference capability for business meetings, training sessions or even virtual doctor's appointments.

Having access to a high-speed internet connection could also enable local artisans to sell their wares via online stores and empower entrepreneurs to launch all kinds of online businesses.

High school students can come in to do their homework or research a term paper, while older students can pursue a college degree through online coursework.

Or people can just come in to hang out, surf the net, watch a movie or connect with others for multiplayer online games.

And for now, at least, it's all free.

McCracken said Grant County Cyber Mill hopes to keep it that way, but even if the nonprofit has to start charging a user fee at some point, she thinks the cost will remain affordable.

"We've run the numbers to see what it would take to become self-sustaining," she said. "Once you've done the upfront costs, it's very reasonable to operate. If we have to do that, we'll do that, but we've also built in scholarships."

Life on the frontier

While internet service is available through commercial sources in Seneca, it can be cost-prohibitive for some area residents. Others say their homes are too remote for satellite or DSL service, or the connection they are able to get is slow and unreliable.

"This part of Oregon is considered frontier," McCracken said. "A lot of people don't really know what that means, but when it comes to broadband, there's really not a lot of options."

Layne and Janelle Jackson, who moved to Seneca from Boston with their son, Luke, said they've been frustrated by the lack of reliable internet service at their ranch 7 miles from town. The Cyber Mill, they said, could make a big difference for them.

"It's crazy how bad our internet is," said Janelle. "We've been waiting for this for a long time."

Luke, a 17-year-old senior at Grant Union High School, brought his Xbox to test out the Cyber Mill's signal. He hit a few glitches gaming online, but that's something he can't do at all with the spotty connection he gets at home.

"It was downloading really good," he said. "It streamed a couple videos for me. ... I probably did in the last hour and a half a day's worth (of downloading)."

Downloading a full-length movie using the family's home internet service, Luke added, sometimes takes as long as a week.

His mother said she'll use the Cyber Mill's videoconferencing capabilities to schedule doctor's appointments.

"This is a better option for telehealth meetings, so we don't have to go to Bend or Boise," Janelle said.

For now, the Seneca Cyber Mill is piggybacking on the broadband internet connection at Seneca Elementary School, which is tied into the Grant County Education Service District's wireless internet network. Eventually, McCracken said, that will be replaced by an even more robust and reliable fiber optic cable.

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