

Another pandemic new year for Oregon

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SALEM — A rapidly spreading deadly virus. Record-breaking fires. Acrid smoke from the Pacific to Pendleton. A riot in the capitol.

As 2020 came to a welcome close a year ago, an exhausted Oregon public had hope for the New Year.

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed over with the arrival of vaccines. The Labor Day fires were gone and the smoke that gave the state the worst air in the world some days was gone. Protestors who fought with police in the Capitol in Salem were gone with the end of the special session.

Soon, 2020 would be in the rear view mirror. An optimistic joke that the worst had passed was that “Hindsight is 2020.”

But as 2021 in Oregon winds down, it feels like a sequel of the highly unpopular horror classic, 2020 in Oregon.

Dark humor dominates — the wordplay now is turned into rueful wordplay that 2021 is actually spelled as “2020 Won.”

Now the question is if we are going to have a trilogy.

In announcing that a sixth wave in two years of COVID-19 would arrive around Jan. 1, Gov. Kate Brown noted that another year of COVID-19 wasn't on anyone's wish list.

“I know that bracing for a new variant as we head into our second pandemic holiday season is not what we all hoped for,” Brown said.

Catastrophes return

Many of the catastrophes that marked 2020 as no one's favorite year were back in 2021.

The vaccines set off a mass scramble for appointments, with most people told they might have to wait until mid-summer for inoculation. Then demand fell off a cliff. Bottles of Pfizer and Moderna vaccine with fewer and fewer arms to put them in. From a high of 50,000 shots in April, demand in Oregon shrank to less than a tenth of that on days in June. Vaccination became another political wedge issue. A riot at the U.S. Capitol showed the fragility of peaceful democracy.

The fires were back — earlier and more remote this year — but burning miles of scars in the land and costing millions of dollars to contain. The smoke choked not just Oregon but jetstreams shared it with places as far as Boston. This year added a grim stretch of record-frying heat on June 28. It hit 116 degrees in Portland. Salem was 117. Temperatures more familiar to Death Valley than the Willamette Valley.

As 2022 is about to dawn, there is little swagger that the worst is over. The cornerstone of crisis — the COVID-19 pandemic — began on the last day of 2019 with a trickle of infections in China. It was worldwide — a pandemic — by the end of 2020 with over 300,000 dead in the United States.

Through 2021, the virus threw off variants — most little more than scientific curiosities. But a few — “Variants of Concern” — would start a roll call of names taken from the Greek alphabet. Delta brought contagion to a new



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File
Demonstrators outside of La Grande City Hall protest against vaccine mandates on Saturday, Sept. 18, 2021.

level. Omicron capped the year as the biggest and fastest, though hopefully less lethal, of them all. The cases in one city in one country that could be counted on two hands at the end of 2019 would march into 2022 with a tally of 273 million infections worldwide and 5.4 million deaths — led by over 800,000 in the United States.

In January, some forecasts predicted the virus would be under control by June. It felt that way in July 2021, when Oregon reported 92 deaths — the first monthly total to fall below 100 since June 2020, at the beginning of the crisis. A two-week respite around the Fourth of July gave a glimpse of what could pass for normal life.

Delta quickly crushed the hope. By Labor Day, delta peaked. The spike would bottom out in October. No, Thanksgiving. Christmas. March 2022. The steep line plotted on a graph that took two months to peak became a stretched out slope with bumps back up on the way down.

This time, there would be no hiatus. Delta dropped, then at the beginning of December surged in parts of the nation — driven by crisis fatigue of people who now gathered more often indoors, in larger groups, with varying levels of the official guidelines for masks and social distancing. Delta took two months to jump from where it was first seen in India to all 36 counties in Oregon. Omicron was reported in southern Africa on Nov. 22 and was officially in Oregon by Dec. 13.

Attempts to calculate when the pandemic was slowing or receding have led to futility.

After 612 people died in December 2020, the tally slowly dropped with the arrival of vaccines late that month. The worst seemed over.

When delta broke the record with over 900 reported deaths in September, then slid to 640 in October and 249 in November, the path forward looked much brighter.

'A gut punch'

But the virus is a living, morphing, shape-shifter. What it is today, it isn't tomorrow, much less a month or a year from now.

Today, nearly three out of four people in Oregon are vaccinated — the 12th highest rank among 50 states.

A New York Times survey on Saturday of federal, state and local data showed that since the pandemic began, Oregon has had the third lowest rate of infections and sixth lowest rate of deaths of

the 50 states.

But forecasts come with more caveats this December. The omicron variant may be less lethal. May be milder in most cases.

But new information can make current information grow old and out-of-date very quickly.

In June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it was fine for people with two vaccine shots to meet in small groups with others whose status was the same.

Delta was tagged as “the pandemic of the unvaccinated” — and was in the most severe cases.

Omicron could be held at bay in the United States by the dominance of the delta variant. Instead, it is pushing it aside.

“Fully vaccinated” meant two shots of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or one of Johnson & Johnson. Now a booster of the first pair is the marker for maximum protection, while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been shelved amid caution over its effectiveness and side effects.

“Exactly one year ago this week, we came together to celebrate the first COVID vaccinations in Oregon,” Brown said Friday. “We watched with excitement, and frankly a huge sigh of relief, as health care workers from across our state received their first dose.”

One year later, the New Year opens with omicron.

“A gut punch,” said Dr. Renee Edwards, chief medical officer of the Oregon Health & Science University.

On the streets and stores of Oregon, the sign

of the pandemic as of late has been, at most, people wearing masks. In some parts of Oregon where going maskless is a sign of skepticism of the science or political belligerence, even that symbol is absent.

Health workers prepare for more

But health workers across the state say inside hospitals, exhausted doctors, nurses and other medical and health staff deal

with an undulating but never absent stream of sickness and death. Now they must prepare for more.

Cloaked by privacy laws, the state daily issues a ticker of deaths — people reduced to which county they lived in, when they became sick, when and where they died, their gender and age and if they had the catch-all “underlying conditions” that made fatality more likely.

With a few exceptions that attract a public obituary or a level of fame that makes it impossible to conceal their identity, the daily list of names, faces, stories and suffering of the dead remain unknown to all but family and hospital staff who watch as they pass.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's chief epidemiologist gave a mournful soliloquy on Sept. 16 when Oregon passed 3,500 deaths from COVID-19.

COVID-19 Vaccine

Other vaccine events offered in December:

Location: Center for Human Development

Time: 10:00 am to 2:00 pm every Friday with the exception of New Year's Eve in addition to Christmas Eve.

Additional options: Scheduled appointments available throughout the week.

Vaccines offered: 1st dose, 2nd dose, 3rd doses and booster vaccines. All Covid vaccine configurations will be available including pediatric vaccination. Other pediatric and adult immunizations also available at CHD.

CDC General Vaccine Info:

COVID-19 vaccines are effective

COVID 19-vaccines are effective and can reduce the risk of getting and spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Learn more about the different COVID-19 vaccines.

COVID-19 vaccines also help children and adults from getting seriously ill even if they do get COVID-19.

While COVID-19 tends to be milder in children than adults, it can make children very sick, require hospitalization, and some children have even died. Children with underlying medical conditions are more at risk for severe illness compared to children without underlying medical conditions.

Getting children ages 5 years and older vaccinated can help protect them from serious short- and long-term complications.

Getting everyone ages 5 years and older vaccinated can protect families and communities, including friends and family who are not eligible for vaccination and people at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

Booster Information from CDC:

Fast Facts Everyone age 18 and older is eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine booster beginning Nov. 20, 2021. Some people are strongly advised get a booster dose to protect themselves and others. You can choose which vaccine to get. The COVID-19 vaccines are extraordinarily effective at preventing serious illness, hospitalization and death. That said, we are seeing immunity drop over time, especially in people over age 50 and those with compromised immune systems who are more likely to experience severe disease, hospitalization and death. For these people, another dose boosts their immunity, sometimes greater than what was achieved after the primary, two-dose series. Health experts strongly recommend people over age 50, people over 18 who live in long-term care facilities, and anyone who received one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine get a booster dose. Younger, healthy people may also get a booster dose to protect themselves and others. A booster will re-build neutralizing antibodies that strengthen the body's ability to fight getting a breakthrough case. Even if you're not at high risk, you could be infected and then pass it on to others, such as children too young to be vaccinated, the elderly, or people who are immunocompromised. Booster doses help people maintain strong immunity to disease longer. The first vaccine series built up the immune system to make the antibodies needed to fight the disease. Over time, the immune response weakens. A booster dose stimulates the initial response and tends to result in higher antibody levels that help people maintain their immunity longer. Boosters take about two weeks to bring up the immune response. This continues to be studied, but we can reliably say it takes two weeks to bring the immune response up to or better than that after the primary series.

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As we take the time to enjoy the holidays and reflect on what matters most, we thank you - our friends and neighbors -- for the trust you place in our hands every day. It is our honor and privilege to care for you and your loved ones. We wish you peace and joy this season, as we hope for good health and happiness in the new year.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
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