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Eastern Oregon reacts to omicron

School officials cautious about potential booster requirement

By **ANDREW CUTLER**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Officials at Eastern Oregon University are keeping their options open about instituting COVID-19 booster shot requirements amid a sharp national spike in coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant.

Tim Seydel, EOU's vice president for university advancement, said the university is not yet requiring boosters but has been having conversations about a requirement, especially in light of the University of Oregon's Twitter announcement on Monday, Dec. 20, that it would require booster shots as omicron reached Oregon, saying students, faculty and staff should get the extra dose "as soon as they are eligible."

"Our focus probably right now is continuing to watch what's happening, monitoring the situation and recommendations from health officials statewide and, of course, locally," Seydel said. "There's no requirement right now for students or employees to have a booster as we start with our winter term. We're going to continue to monitor to see how the situation evolves."

Seydel said with so many moving parts and differing projections, Eastern Oregon officials continue to meet on a weekly basis with the Center for Human Development to stay abreast of COVID-19's impact locally.

The school instituted a vaccination mandate in October that requires all of EOU's on-campus staff and students to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 or to have an approved religious, philosophical or medical exemption. Seydel said the on-campus vaccination rate for employees and students

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LA GRANDE SCHOOL DISTRICT



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A bond measure is being considered to tear down and replace the old Annex building on the La Grande Middle School grounds, as well as the adjacent maintenance structure, in order to make room for a new athletic and academic center.

A new center?

La Grande School District would receive a \$4 million matching grant from the state if voters approve a proposed bond levy

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A new academic and athletic center may be in the La Grande School District's future — one which would be built without raising tax rates.

The La Grande School District is considering asking voters to approve either a \$6 million or a \$7.1 million bond levy for capital construction in May. The passage of one of these bonds would not raise the total school taxes paid by property owners in part because of the recent refinancing of the 20-year \$31.5 million bond voters approved in 2014.

"We could improve our educational facilities without raising taxes," said La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza.

Money from the bond would pay for the construction of a



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

The Annex building and adjacent maintenance shop on the La Grande Middle School grounds show their age on Thursday, Dec. 23, 2021. A potential bond measure is being discussed to replace the structures with a preengineered building to be used as an academic and athletic center.

multiuse academic and athletic center where the Annex building is now. The building would include two gyms and two classrooms that would be used for a variety of classes, including health, science and technology. The building would be a preengineered metal building that would be available for public use and would meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, which the current Annex building does not, according to Mendoza.

The school district's aging Annex building, which has a gym and is about 10 feet north of La Grande Middle School, is more

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COVID-19 relief program boosts area hospitals

Northeastern Oregon hospitals, providers receive nearly \$8 million in funding

By **ALEX WITTWER**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — A bevy of local hospitals and providers are receiving more than \$7.8 million in funds through the American Rescue Plan via a program specific to rural hospitals.

While the fund allocated \$118 million to hospitals across the state, nearly 25%, or more than \$29.4 million, was sent to hospitals in Portland — mostly to Providence, a hospital chain that serves the Willamette Valley and coastal regions of Oregon.

The largest single fund in Northeastern Oregon went to Good Shepherd Health Care System, Hermiston, which collected a little more than \$2.6 million, while Baker City's Saint



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Motorcycles fill a portion of the parking lot at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston on Dec. 5, 2020, following the Echo Toy Run. Good Shepherd Health Care System, which operates the hospital, received \$2.6 million in funds through an American Rescue Plan program for rural hospitals.

Alphonsus Medical Center received more than \$1.1 million through the program. The list of providers and suppliers that were awarded funds also includes Interpath Laboratories, Pendleton; Center for Human Devel-

opment, La Grande; Wallowa County Health Care District; Blue Mountain Hospital District, John Day; and Morrow County Health District.

"Good Shepherd Health Care System did receive the \$2.6 mil-

lion, and we plan on using it for either of two areas — to be applied to additional COVID expenses we have incurred or to lost revenue due to the COVID pandemic," Caitlin Cozad, marketing and communications director for Good Shepherd Health Care System, said in an email.

An official with Baker City's Saint Alphonsus Medical Center said the funds will be crucial in renewing depleted resources and hiring temporary staff, such as nurses.

The American Rescue Plan Rural payment program pool totals nearly \$7.5 billion in federal funds, and was targeted toward suppliers and providers that serve rural Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicare beneficiaries, according to a release from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"Health care providers in rural communities have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page A4.



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THURSDAY

NEW COVID TESTING RULES IN PLACE

Online at lagrandeobserver.com