

COVID continues to take a toll across Union County

The Observer

FEDERAL COVID-19 RELIEF PLAN BENEFITS LOCAL COMMUNITIES

WASHINGTON — The federal American Rescue Plan Act was a trickle-down stimulus that sent millions of dollars into local economies staggering under the weight of the pandemic.

The \$1.9 trillion aid plan included \$350 billion for state, local and tribal governments. Union County received \$5.2 million, Wallowa County \$1.4 million and Baker County \$3.13 million. La Grande received \$2.77 million, \$410,000 in relief funds went to Enterprise and Baker City got \$2 million.

Populations dictated the amounts local governments received.

School districts, too, were on the receiving end of the stimulus.

The La Grande School District received about \$5 million in stimulus funding, and the remaining smaller eight school districts in Union and Wallowa counties received smaller amounts, from \$720,000 going to Wallowa to \$211,000 for Imbler.

Cove School Superintendent Earl Pettit said his district would likely spend its \$389,000 in ARPA funding on remodeling work to create office space for professionals providing mental health, counseling and nursing services to students. The need for such services increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The plan also provided \$118 million to hospitals and health care providers across Oregon serving rural populations. The Center for Human Development, La Grande, and Wallowa County Health Care District, Enterprise, were among the recipients.

Businesses struggling due to the pandemic received a financial boost as well, with \$500,000 in ARP funds coming to Union County, where the county board of commissioners oversaw passing the funds on to local businesses.

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage at the time said it was critical to do everything possible to help local businesses.

“The best way to help Union County’s economy is keep our businesses from going out of business,” she said.

WHERE ARE THE WORKERS?

LA GRANDE — No industry was hit harder by the continuing pandemic than the restaurant industry. But even still, other sectors of the economy bore the struggles of the virus all the same, albeit in different ways. And as the pandemic seemed to wane, with large sections of the entertainment industry opening its shuttered doors, a new problem arose.

There simply weren’t enough workers. Employers who once had piles of resumes now sifted through a handful of CVs. No industry was spared: Positions for police officers, lifeguards, servers and countless others sat empty.

Myriads of reasons came forth why hiring had slowed, or seemingly stopped altogether. Economists posited that fears of the virus itself, lack of child care and inadequate pay were among the reasons why jobs remained unfilled as demand for services skyrocketed. Others reasoned that the elephant in the room, increased unemployment benefits, was the sole cause of the labor shortage.

EO Media Group put out an ambitious effort over the summer to find the truth behind the worker shortages.

Our findings echoed sentiment from both camps. Employers gave countless testimony of how potential employees would hand in resumes solely to fulfill a requirement that allowed them to keep



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Sean Altizer, a server at Nookie’s Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, looks through orders Saturday, June 26, 2021, at the kitchen window. According to the managers, the restaurant has a full wait staff but the kitchen remains sorely understaffed, with nearly every cook working overtime.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Concerned citizens fill the gymnasium at Central Elementary School during a school board meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021. School board meetings became platforms for anti-mask protests across the nation as schools reopened with state-required protocols amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

collecting unemployment benefits.

“We get a lot of random resumes dropped off, which I guess is people trying to satisfy job-search requirements,” said Jared Hillock, a manager and co-owner of Hillock Electric in Enterprise.

But further compounding the labor shortage was a rapidly changing demographic — the boomers were retiring at a faster pace than in previous years, due in part to the continuing pandemic.

As employers continued to struggle to find workers, more problems arose from the cracks in the logistical infrastructure. Soon, labor shortages in key industries mixed with higher gas prices led to yet another shortage — supply chains were in disarray as store shelves and consumptive goods arrived late, or not at all. It was felt everywhere, from cafeterias and construction to retail stores.

At the end of 2021, supply chain issues continue and a new variant of the COVID-19 virus looms, and it’s unclear what the future might hold.

MANDATE PROTESTS

LA GRANDE — As the pandemic ebbed, waned and then returned with a vengeance in the summer, protests in rural America began to emerge against vaccine and mask mandates issued by the state.

La Grande was no different. Only, instead of the capitol in Salem serving as a backdrop, there were the Blue Mountains.

And while a number of speakers were mainstays at the protests and demonstrations, none were as vocal as Blake Bars, an organizer with the Union County Freedom Alliance and one of the major players in organizing the protests in downtown La Grande.

“In order to be the best we can be for other people, we have to take care of ourself,” Bars said at a rally at La Grande City Hall on Saturday, Aug. 28. “We have to do what’s right for our own bodies, our own minds and our own souls.”

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen also took the forefront as a vocal critic of the statewide mask and vaccine mandates, his notoriety stemming from a viral letter he penned to Oregon’s Gov. Kate Brown.

“We haven’t really had a voice in this. It’s not really our fight, if you will. And then when it became the homefront of our children, and my own child in school having to wear masks, it put that fight right in my living room,” Bowen said. “I wanted to stand up and be a voice and let folks know that I supported the majority of Union County residents — the strong majority of Union County residents — that it should be an individual’s choice and we shouldn’t be masking our children.”

In addition to the streets, protests took up an altogether new battleground — school board meetings. As mask mandates for students and vaccine mandates for staff loomed, schools saw an eruption of concerned citizens flooding school

gymnasiums as officials wrung their tied hands over the state mandates.

SCHOOLS REOPEN, EOU REOPENS, SPORTS RETURN, VISITATIONS RESTART AT CARE FACILITIES

LA GRANDE — While the surge of COVID-19 cases has risen and fallen throughout the pandemic, a major beam of hope was the reopening of schools, sporting events and care facilities.

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza on Thursday, Jan. 21, had good news to share at an evening virtual town hall.

Mendoza announced that all students in the La Grande School District will return on Jan. 27, marking the first time they were in classrooms since March of 2020. By March, all public schools in Union County were back to in-person instruction, with the exception of Elgin High School having a brief shutdown after an outbreak.

Also in March, state mandates allowed for a much-missed interaction — visitations at elderly care facilities. Kirk Shira of Baker City was just one example of an individual who relished the opportunity to see loved ones at care facilities again, regularly traveling to La Grande to see his mother, June Shira.

After months of standing outside his mother’s window, Kirk Shira was able to be in the same room with her again.

“There were tears of joy. I could not be any happier,” Shira said. “I was overwhelmed.”

Eastern Oregon University announced in June that students and employees engaging on campus must be vaccinated once the FDA approved one or more of the COVID-19 vaccinations. By October, 75.7% of students on campus were vaccinated, while 24.2% had exemptions approved.

Another element that was badly missed in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was a beloved outlet for students — sports.

The La Grande girls soccer team marked the return of sports after a hiatus off the field, taking down Four Rivers 8-0 on March 2. The ensuing modified spring season presented new challenges, such as limited capacity attendance, masks during indoor games and winter sports leaking into the summer.

DELTA VARIANT ARRIVES AND SPARKS NEW CALLS FOR VACCINATIONS

LA GRANDE — Oregon eased off its pandemic restrictions in early July regardless of infection and vaccination levels in individual counties. Some independent epidemiologists were concerned the move could lead to a spike in new cases in areas where most residents were not vaccinated — such as Eastern Oregon, where the vaccination rate in several counties was at no more than 40%.

Just as the state was reopening, Oregon also found it, too, was home to the most virulent form of the coronavirus to that point: the delta variant.

The strain was two to three times as transmissible as the original coronavirus strain and wreaked more havoc on areas where a higher percentage of the population was unvaccinated. Oregon by mid-July reported 14 delta cases with three in Region 9, an area that encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Malheur counties.

The three cases of the delta variant were in Umatilla County, but experts reported that number was almost

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