

ACTIVITIES

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critical to continue offering extra-curricular activities because they play a vital role in maintaining students' social, emotional and mental health.

Staying vigilant

Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop is using the guidance to inspire himself and his district to continue being vigilant when dealing with COVID-19. He appreciates the focus the state's guidance is placing on extracurricular activities and is taking it to heart. Hislop, who is also Imbler High School's wrestling coach, noted that he was considering taking his team to one of two tournaments in Idaho during the upcoming weekend but ultimately decided



Hislop

Mendoza

Wells

against traveling to the Gem State because there would likely be schools at either of the tournaments he would know nothing about in terms of the COVID-19 safety protocol they follow.

At the Oregon wrestling tournaments Hislop's team travels to, as a precaution he has his squad stay together rather than spending a lot of time meeting with opposing wrestlers.

The Union School District, like Imbler, will not be making fundamental changes to extracurricular activities, according to Carter Wells, the school district's superintendent. Wells said the plan the school district is using

for operating activities safely is working well and has not sparked any outbreaks. He also said his school district's infection rate, which is low, has not been influenced by the omicron variant.

"We have not had complications because of the variant," he said.

North Powder School District Superintendent Lance Dixon said he also has no plans to cut back extracurricular activities because of COVID-19. He said it would not be fair to students after so many of their sporting events and other activities were canceled earlier because of the pandemic.

"We are not going to take sports away from kids again," he said.

The North Powder superintendent said he wants a semblance of normalcy to return to the lives of students.

"They have already missed so

many chances to participate in playoffs and state tournaments," he said.

Dixon noted that athletics and club activities give a number of students academic motivation.

"Some students come to school because of sports and extracurricular activities," he said.

Keeping schools open

The message from the Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority comes as schools around the state begin their new terms and the omicron variant of the coronavirus continues to spread.

"It's all about trying to continue to ensure that our students can attend school in person every day," ODE Director Colt Gill said on Jan. 3 following the release of the guidance.

Gill said that includes schools continuing to enforce the miti-

gation efforts they have already been using — including wearing appropriate face coverings, following physical distancing guidelines, frequent hand washing and use of ventilation systems.

The new ODE and OHA advisory also encouraged schools to implement free COVID-19 testing programs and to retrain school staff on safety protocols, as well as educate employees, students and families about COVID-19 symptoms. But the biggest change suggested in the advisory has to do with activities beyond the school day.

"(W)e have really asked our schools and other organizations that serve students to really be thoughtful about their extracurricular activities," Gill said.

— Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Meerah Powell contributed to this report.

TRUCKERS

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stuck for more than 24 hours at Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, as repeated accidents, heavy snow and maintenance closed down Interstate 84. It had been closed off and on several times during the past week. Snowdrifts one day, wrecks and traffic blockages by unchained semi-trailers the next. Dozens of other truck drivers had been stranded there, as well.

"It's been a long time since I've been shut down with this many trucks parked," Holman said.

Rows of trucks were parked, placed and maneuvered into the lot, blocking each other in and forming a logistical slide puzzle, one made trickier when the roads were clear.

She was anxious to leave Flying J — the roads had just opened eastbound, albeit briefly — and solicited other truck drivers to move their rigs so she could maneuver out of the lot. As one driver left — a day-route driver without a sleeping rig in the cabin who wanted to find a hotel for the night — space was cleared for her exit. But it was just a hair too late, as I-84 was closed yet again due to unchained semis blocking the route.

A few dogs perked their



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Brenda Holman, center, speaks with fellow truckers at the Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, as she waits for Interstate 84 to reopen on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022. Holman noted that the truck stop atmosphere is not like what she remembers when she started her driving career more than 30 years ago.

heads up over the dashboards in the trucks in the parking lot. Some drivers, Holman said, will bring dogs or family along on the routes. Partnering up, she said. It is a lonely profession. The truck drivers don't know each other, despite some driving along the same route for years. Holman said she hasn't seen some of her co-workers back in Nebraska for several years.

For brief moments, she and a couple of truck drivers she hadn't met before spoke outside as snow fell, and joked about the closure.

"I think we're stuck here till spring," one of the drivers said.

Past time

Ken Spriggs, 78, is a day-route truck driver. That means he goes home every night — at least when he's not stuck in a road closure spanning several days.

He said he has a daughter in Elgin he was thinking of staying with for the night if the roads didn't soon open up. Working for a company based in Vale, he has been a truck driver for 12 years. Before that,

he was a police officer with Prairie City for 20 years. Further back, a veteran stationed in South Korea just after the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. He said he'd been shot at in both jobs. He collects two pensions, but continues to work because he enjoys keeping busy.

"I just hate sitting around," Spriggs said, walking toward the Flying J, reminiscing of past days. "I used to come here and eat all the time, years ago. Those were the good days. Awesome restaurant — my daughter always met me

here, and we'd eat like crazy."

His truck was parked along Highway 30, several hundred feet away from the truck stop. He said he thinks this might be his last season driving.

"I thought about quitting these guys, but they said no," Spriggs said, filling up a coffee cup.

He charmed his way into a cheaper cup of coffee from the counter clerk, said it was a refill. He wasn't interested in watching TV. He sat down at a Subway counter and looked out the window. Rock ballads from the '80s played over the Flying J's sound system. The trucks outside are packed in like sardines.

"I spent a lot of years here," Spriggs said, reminiscing. "I think I might just make this my last run."

Extended stay

Michael Cruz had been at the Flying J for two days due to closures. He was sitting sideways on a lounge chair in the back watching television. Next to him, Randy Payne, a truck driver of 10 years, was watching the television as well. Payne had been there for two hours. A string of commercials played over the TV. Payne wore a Pittsburgh Steelers beanie, a well-worn and stained reflective vest, and a Bluetooth headset. He was checking his phone, passing the time.

"Other than your CB receiver, you have nobody around you," Payne said. "That's it. It's a mindset. Trucking is a lifestyle, it's not a job, it's a lifestyle. You are living in a walk-in closet. You live there for two to six weeks at a time. You're away from your family — I don't live here, I live in Albuquerque. It can be a dream job for somebody, but the wife has to sign on for it, the husband has to sign on for it, the kids sign on for it."

Truck drivers are paid per mile. Typically, it's less than 50 cents per mile, lower for newer drivers, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics numbers. When the trucks aren't moving, the drivers aren't getting paid, and the companies aren't turning profits. It's a pressure that incentivizes long hours and driving in poor conditions.

"There are some companies that will be 'Go, go, go' no matter what," Payne said of the pressure to keep the wheels turning. "With my company, I don't really feel that way."

Time is the enemy. If you keep still, you make no money. Boredom creeps in. Some pass time with video games, or movies, or books — or hitting refresh on Trip-Check or other news stations to know right away when the roads open back up.

"I was supposed to be in Seattle today," Payne said, "and that's not happening."

POWERS

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jurisdictions should be under a state of emergency.

According to the proposed legislation, the declarations cannot exceed increments of 30 days. After 30 days, the decision to extend a state of emergency would go to a local governing body for a vote. County and city governing bodies could then create a hybrid of emergency restrictions if they choose to do so regarding such measures as masking, school closures and vaccine requirements, Owens explained in an interview.

Additionally, the legislative concept states that a governor may not retaliate against a county whose governing body has determined not to fully continue a declaration of emergency beyond the initial 30 days of the order. Owens said this includes threats to pull state funding, fines against local businesses and other types of state sanctions.

Under current Oregon law, the governor must review and reevaluate emergency orders every 60 days to determine whether those orders should be continued, modified or rescinded.

Local control emerged as a significant issue for Grant County residents in August after Gov. Kate Brown reversed course on her June

30 executive order handing over public health decisions to counties amid a resurgence of COVID-19.

While the swiftly spreading delta variant sent COVID case counts soaring, Brown issued a barrage of new executive orders mandating masks in K-12 schools, inside state buildings and, finally, in all public indoor spaces in the state. Those actions drew the ire of Grant County leaders.

Parents asked for the county court's support in getting decision-making back to the districts and out of the hands of the state.

County Judge Scott Myers told parents that the county does not have the power to take back local control of its school districts from the state. However, the county signed a letter from the Eastern Oregon Counties Association asking for local control of school districts.

"Some people might be mistaken in thinking that the county has power beyond a voice," Myers said. "We don't have the power to make those things happen."

In a Dec. 21, 2021, press release, Brown extended the COVID-19 state of emergency through June, saying scientists believed the state was just weeks away from a new wave of hospital-

izations due to an anticipated surge of the rapidly spreading omicron variant.

Oregon Health and Science University lead data scientist Dr. Peter Graven predicted that the omicron variant could surpass the delta variant in the number of cases due to its extreme transmissibility.

Brown's office said in the press release that the emergency declaration provides the necessary framework to access resources in response to the pandemic, which includes the deployment of medical providers to hospitals, flexibility around professional health licensing, and access to federal disaster relief funds.

"As Oregon prepares for what could be our worst surge in hospitalizations during this pandemic, I know that this is not the beginning of the new year any of us had hoped for," Brown said.



Owens

Constitutional framework

Jim Moore, a professor of political science at Pacific University in Forest Grove, said Oregon's constitution defines the governor's emergency powers and what types of "catastrophic disasters" can allow them to be used.

The state constitution puts acts of terrorism at the top of the list, along with earthquakes, floods and public health emergencies.

Moore said that the catastrophes spelled out within the constitution are assumed to be relatively short-lived.

"The problem we have right now is that it's going on long term," Moore said. "And so Republicans have decided that is an abuse of emergency power."

Indeed, Moore said, everyone has a partisan take on the debate.

"Republicans say, 'We need to change it.' Why? Because they don't like what Kate Brown is doing.

Democrats are saying, 'No, we don't need to change it' because they do like what Kate Brown's doing."

Since the pandemic's beginning, it's become evident that the federal government has minimal power in this situation and that the ability to deal with the pandemic rests with the states, Moore said.

That limitation on federal power, he said, is by design as part of the U.S. Constitution. For instance, he said, Oregon was able to pass an assisted suicide law because states have the right and the frontline duty to deal with public health issues.

Almost from the pandemic's beginning, the question of how to respond to the coronavirus has been a hot-button political issue.

That said, Owens' proposed legislation is something of a departure from recently passed legislation in GOP strongholds. For instance, conservative leg-

islators in more than half of U.S. states, spurred on by voters angry about lockdowns and mask mandates, have stripped local officials of the power to protect the public against infectious diseases.

Moore said the conservative ethos has long been that more governing power should be local. However, legislation passed in red states like Florida runs counter to what has traditionally been the GOP ideology.

Thus, he said, this means one's political ideology shapes one's views on emergency powers.

For his part, Owens said his motives are not politically driven.

"Honestly, it's not about partisanship," Owens said. "I by no means think the governor should not have the ability to declare an emergency declaration for 30 days, maybe even longer," Owens said. "That's reasonable."

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