

STORES

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“We try to stay overstocked,” he said. Once the Super Bowl starts, activity slows down, but Willson said that at halftime many people will hurry in to buy items. “We always make sure we are ready for people rushing in at halftime,” he said. Mike Colkitt, owner of the Union Market, also said Super Bowl-related sales traditionally peak the Saturday before the game. “It is our biggest snack day of the year,” he said. La Grande’s Safeway and those throughout the United States also experience a boost in sales during Super Bowl weekend, according to Jill McGinnis, director of communications and public affairs for Safeway. “It is considered the second



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

A signed photo of former Raiders player Mike Davis hangs on the wall at Benchwarmers Pub & Grill, La Grande, on Tuesday, Feb. 8, 2022. The pub, with its multiple TVs, anticipates a bump in sales as the Los Angeles Rams take on the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl LVI on Feb. 13.

biggest food holiday of the year next to Thanksgiving,” said McGinnis, who is based in Clackamas.

McGinnis said many of Safeway’s most popular items sold on Super Bowl Sunday are from its delicatessens and include

chicken wings. Restaurants that will likely be busy on Feb. 13 include Benchwarmers Pub and Grill, La Grande, where six large and three flat-screen televisions are available for diners to watch the game. Justin Marler, the manager of Benchwarmers, said normally Super Bowl Sunday is not one of the biggest days of the year at the restaurant and bar. However, he believes attendance might be higher this year. One reason is NFL playoffs leading to the Super Bowl game were exceptional and drew larger than normal crowds at Benchwarmers. Misty Cottingham, a bartender at Benchwarmers, is looking forward to working there during the Super Bowl. “Because it is a football game a lot of people will be here to have a good time,” she said. Marieta Gallagher, a cashier at One Stop Mart, La Grande, said that business is exceptionally

busy in the hours leading up to the game. Hot pizza slices and jojos are among the best-selling items at the store on Super Bowl weekend. Gallagher said the late-afternoon start helps business on game day because it gives people more time to pick up items before kickoff. Marco Rennie, co-owner of Market Place Fresh Foods, La Grande, said Super Bowl weekend is a busy time at his store, so his staff takes time to get prepared. “We definitely gear up for it,” he said. Items that are big sellers include salsa, guacamole and jerky, all made in house. “They are all made from scratch,” Rennie said, adding that Super Bowl Sunday impacts more than just on the economy — it also is important because it bridges gulfs in society during a time when political divisions are widening. “It brings family and friends together to celebrate,” he said.

MASKS

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before the omicron variant began to spread, according to the OHA. The news that the mask mandate will soon be lifted is being greeted enthusiastically by many people in Union County, including Grande Ronde Hospital officials. “Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics is very pleased to see these positive steps forward for our community and the state. It is good news,” said Mardi Ford, GRH’s director of communications and marketing. Ford noted that OHA’s announcement stated that the masking mandate will not be lifted for health care workers on March 31. She said the hospital’s staff is now studying the infor-

mation from the OHA to determine how the revised COVID-19 safety guidelines, when they are put in place, will apply to hospital visitors. She said GRH will announce its determination later. La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza, in a letter sent to parents on Feb. 8, said his school district will move toward pursuing an optional masking policy for students and staff, one that would take effect after March 31. He said the school district will work with Union County Public Health, Union County Emergency Services, Grande Ronde Hospital and school stakeholders to make final decisions. Mendoza said he is pleased with the direction the state is moving. He

said the school district has advocated for this to take place since December. He said La Grande School District representatives have met on numerous occasions with state officials, statewide superintendent groups and education advocates in Oregon to explain the district’s perspective. “We know this change will result in increased local responsibility and we will diligently plan for the continued safety of our staff, students and families,” Mendoza said. North Powder School District Superintendent Lance Dixon said that his school board will decide at its Feb. 22 meeting whether to continue to make mask wearing mandatory after March 31 or to make it optional. Union County Commis-

sioner Paul Anderes said he believes the OHA’s decision was made based on sound science. “It looks like the right thing to do now,” he said, adding he is very happy that schools were included as part of the OHA’s decision. **No need to draw it out** Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit said lifting the mask requirement means the state will no longer stand out as one of the few that has a mask mandate in its schools. “I’m happy that the mandate will be lifted,” he said. “We are in a minority because many other states do not have mandates. I’m glad that we are finally catching up to them.” La Grande City Councilor Nicole Howard said

she has confidence the OHA is making the right decision. “If that is what the science is telling us to do, I will be happy to oblige,” she said. Union Mayor Leonard Flint said the mask mandate hurts students. “It is making it harder for them to interact,” he said. Flint said this is particularly true for students who have hearing impairments, since masks make it impossible for them to read lips and read nonverbal facial cues. Flint is glad that no time is being wasted in lifting the mandate now that the omicron variant is declining. “There is no reason to draw it out,” he said. **In the rearview mirror** La Grande City Manager Robert Strope said he

is encouraged by what the state mandate represents. “All of us are ready to put COVID-19 in the rearview mirror,” he said. Strope said he appreciates what OHA is doing in terms of delaying the lifting of the mandate until as late as March 31. “If keeping the mandate through March 31 saves one life, all that we are going through will be worth it,” he said. Strope noted that in the past, mandates have been lifted when COVID-19 infection rates fell but then had to be reinstated when infection rates surged again. Strope hopes this will not happen again and said he is guardedly optimistic that it will not. “I hope that the worst is behind us,” he said.

DEATH

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(monoclonal antibody) infusion therapy. She was tired for a couple, three days,” he said. Unprompted, Barnett also said Malec had not been vaccinated. “She didn’t want to be vaccinated, but she did fight it naturally. She pulled through,” he said. After overcoming COVID, Barnett said his mom had returned to much of her normal activities, and had been driving weekly to Walla Walla for treatment of her breast cancer before defeating it. “They had given her the all clear on the breast cancer,” he said.

A new diagnosis

He said his mom sounded “really tired, winded,” in a phone conversation with her Nov. 29. The next day, she was in the emergency room in Enterprise, originally given a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, Barnett said. She was LifeFlighted that night to Walla Walla, where it was determined, instead, the diagnosis was liver cancer. She also initially tested positive for COVID while at Walla Walla, Barnett said, but that positive test was followed by two negative tests for the coronavirus — the second about a week later — which enabled Barnett to get into the hospital to visit her. Barnett eventually took Malec to his Salem home where she was put on hospice and died about a week later.

The death certificate

The text on the death certificate made Barnett wonder if Malec would

be classified as a COVID death. The certificate — Barnett shared the document with the Chieftain and gave permission to publish the information in it — lists cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest and liver cell carcinoma as the causes of death. Below that, it lists anxiety and breast cancer as significant conditions contributing to death. Next to those, it states “history of covid 19 (2 negative tests).” The funeral home that worked with Barnett said it had “never seen this on a death certificate, ever,” he said. “I had that feeling.” His feeling was confirmed on Jan. 27 when OHA reported the 70-year-old Wallowa County woman’s death, which the Chieftain reported later that day. Barnett reached out the following day seeking to clarify the details.

Seeking answers

Barnett said OHA was not forthcoming on details in an email response to his brother, Ty, who also had been seeking answers. The OHA told the Chieftain it could not comment specifically on if Malec was listed as a COVID-19-related death, and that it “cannot provide any specific information related to a person’s death or death certificate,” according to Tim Heider, OHA public information officer. The OHA did confirm to Ty Barnett in an email Josh Barnett shared with

the Chieftain that it does use the phrase “COVID-19-related deaths” and that it could mean a person who had COVID-19 died, but that it wasn’t necessarily the cause. “The deaths we report each day include people who died with COVID-like symptoms, which in some cases means that a person did not necessarily die as a result of COVID-19. Sometimes public health cannot determine (the) exact cause of death, so our data focuses on people who most likely or definitely had COVID-19 and died, based on local reports,” the email stated. The OHA’s Investigative Guidelines state that any of the following are considered a COVID-19-related death:

- “Death of a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case within 60 days of the earliest available date among exposure to a confirmed case, onset of symptoms, or date of specimen collection for the first positive test;
- “Death from any cause in a hospitalized person during their hospital stay or in the 60 days following discharge and a COVID-19-positive laboratory diagnostic test at any time since 14 days prior to hospitalization; or
- “Death of someone with a COVID-19-specific ICD-10 code listed as a primary or contributing to it.”

 Josh Barnett believes the numbers are inflated, and points to the fact that individuals who die directly from COVID or

die of a different cause (but have COVID) are counted together. “They’ve already admitted there is a difference (between) dying from COVID and dying with COVID,” he said. “I think they’ve been conflating the two on purpose

to make the numbers look as bad as they can. “I don’t believe the state has been giving the right answers for a long time.” As for his family, he said he wants the truth — whatever it ends up being. “I just want the record

straight in terms of being honest,” he said. “...I don’t want my family or anybody else’s to be used, not as a pawn, but as ‘chalk up another line to it.’ ... I know that OHA is saying it’s a COVID death when I was there the whole time. I know that’s 100% false.”

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