

DISTRICTS

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Kretschmer said his department is not keen on making property owners pony up for the service.

“Essentially, it would give fire protection districts the right to annex folks 7 miles from their station into your district,” he said. “It’s not something we really want to do, to force people, right?”

Instead, Kretschmer said his department would focus on using the legislation as a tool to educate residents not covered by the district about their options, and give them the ability to join if they choose to do so.

According to Kretschmer, more than 40,000 acres in Union County is not covered by the fire district.

“We’ve been looking at ways to let people know, because not everybody in the valley knows they don’t have fire protection,” he said. “This would be just another tool that could be used. Now, you never want to force anybody to do anything, so our goal is to let people know that, hey, your house is not protected so there’s a good chance you won’t have a fire department response.”

Kretschmer said dispatch in



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Firefighters respond to a house fire at 25 N. Fifth St., Elgin, on Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Nobody was injured, but only a handful of personal belongings were recovered.

Union County can see whether a house is covered by the district, and whether they pay into the essential fire service. In Umatilla County, it’s not as clear-cut, according to Umatilla Fire District 1 Chief Scott Stanton. That leads to issues when firefighters scramble to fight a fire, leaving little time to discern whether that fire is from a home that is covered.

“Imagine going to a fire scene,” Stanton said, “whether it’s here or Douglas County or wherever, and you go up to a subdivision and you know that there’s two homes maybe

in there that have chosen not to pay the fire district. You may not know in an emergency situation which one is paying and which one isn’t, so you’re just going to do your work and then all of the sudden they find out they’re not paying.”

Stanton also said the discrepancy between who does and doesn’t pay for fire services can create inequities.

“Under current Oregon laws and statutes a property can choose not to be in a rural fire protection district, but they can’t choose to not

pay city or county taxes, and they can’t choose not to pay school, education district taxes,” he said. “Yet, they can choose not to be in a fire district for that really vital, essential public safety service. They can choose not to pay.”

The option to not be in a fire district remains, but for rural homeowners who choose not to pay for fire services, hefty bills can accumulate in the event fire departments respond to a fire on a their property. Enterprise Fire Department runs on a subscription-type service, according to Chief Paul Karvoski. That means property owners can elect to buy in to the fire protection services even if they’re not in the district. Karvoski said the new law could simplify things if it passes.

“We do subscription contracts outside the city limits, so it would benefit us if we could just draw a circle and have a taxing area, like a district,” he said. “It would make it much simpler to respond and everything. It’d probably end up being cheaper for the public that’s out there in the rural part of the county that surrounds the city. Under these subscription deals we got, they pay \$145, and it says we’re gonna show up and then they get

called by the hour, per truck, and it gets very expensive for them. So introducing legislation like this bill is gonna save more money.”

How much money? According to Karvoski, the cost of fire responses to structure fires can accrue rapidly due to billable working hours spent fighting the fire and cleanup work.

“You get these house fires that we’re out there for six, seven hours — you’re pushing a \$5,000 bill pretty quickly,” he said.

The changes in how districts are laid out would bring rural areas more in line with municipalities, making fire services mandatory in the same way that taxes that support schools and county services are rolled into property taxes. Jerry Hampton, fire chief of Haines Fire Protection District, said it’s a matter of fairness.

“It is not fair for the taxpayers in the district to have to pay for the people that are not within the district boundaries that sometimes may need or require some type of fire suppression,” he said. “I have mixed emotions,” he said of the proposed legislation. “In all due respect, it’s probably the right thing.”

MASKS

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and Washington was crucial to having a unified time line for the change in mask policy, Brown said.

“As has been made clear time and again over the last two years, COVID-19 does not stop at state borders or county lines,” Brown said in a statement. “On the West Coast, our communities and economies are linked. Together, as we continue to recover from the omicron surge, we will build resiliency and prepare for the next variant and the next pandemic.”

The move by the three states comes after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention late last week called for new guidelines to determine risk that would

allow for the loosening of restrictions for 70% of the country’s population where coronavirus is posing a low or medium threat to hospitals. However, the map released by the CDC showed much of Eastern, Central and Southwestern Oregon remained in the 30% of population areas that remain at high risk.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee issued similar statements Monday morning with the same date and time for dropping indoor mask mandates.

This is the second time in two weeks health officials have moved up the date for lifting mask mandates.

Brown had originally said the mask mandate would end March 31, about when Oregon Health & Science University projected the

state would drop below 400 daily patients in hospitals who were positive for COVID-19.

The decline in omicron-related severe cases accelerated and the date was moved last week to March 19. But on Thursday, OHSU issued a forecast showing Oregon would dip below the 400 mark by March 12. The next OHSU forecast is due March 3.

OHA said the lifting of the mask mandate would not include changes to federal and state rules on masks in health care settings, airline flights, public transit and other specialized settings. Updates will be provided in coming days and weeks.

Brown’s statement on Feb. 28 did not change her plan to lift the state of emergency earlier than April 1, the date she announced last week. The emergency rules

gave Brown wide powers to set public policy during the crisis, including the closing and reopening of in-person classroom instruction, business hours, mask usage and limits on event sizes.

The three West Coast states have sought to coordinate on COVID-19 response throughout the pandemic, though they have gone their own way at times, such as the vaccine priority list in early 2021. Brown said the governors believed the mask mandate change was best done at the same time for the stretch from the Mexican border to the Canadian border.

“Our communities and economies are linked,” Brown said.

Brown underlined that the move did not mean the pandemic was burning out or nearly over.

“We will build resiliency and

prepare for the next variant and the next pandemic,” she said. “As we learn to live with this virus, we must remain vigilant to protect each other and prevent disruption to our schools, businesses, and communities — with a focus on protecting our most vulnerable and the people and communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.”

Oregon officials say they are confident that the move will not replicate the premature lifting of safeguards in July 2021, which came almost simultaneously with the arrival of the virulent delta variant that cause a record 918 deaths in September. Critics said at that time that lifting the ban statewide did not take into effect the wide differences in vaccination rates and prior COVID-19 exposure.

FOSTER

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recruitment tool.”

This “Learn About Foster Care” event is sponsored by Every Child, Oregon Department of Human Services, and Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc.

Those three organizations, Blessing said, represent different parts of the foster system.

GOBHI focuses on “treatment foster care,” while Every Child provides volunteer opportunities to support children in the foster system and families that provide care.

“We’re trying to offer the whole spectrum of what’s available to

MORE INFORMATION

The session, titled “Virtual Explore Fostering — Every Child NE Oregon,” will be Wednesday, March 16, from 6-7:30 p.m. To register, go to <https://everychildneoregon.org/>. Click on “Upcoming Events” and search by county to find the event. To learn more about Every Child, visit everychildneoregon.org/ or follow the page on Facebook.

continue in those six eastern counties to need homes,” she said.

The need is especially great for older children, children who identify as LGBTQIA+ and families for sibling groups.

The numbers

Blessing said District 13 — Baker, Union and Wallowa counties — had a total of 54 children in foster care and 36 resource homes at the end of January.

As of Jan. 1, 2022, there were 5,393 children in foster care in Oregon — the fewest in 16 years, according to the Oregon Child Welfare Division.

The reason for the low number, Blessing said, is “family first” leg-

islation, which has the focus on keeping children with families and providing support.

If foster care is necessary, Blessing said the first step is to look for relatives or close friends who can foster the child.

“We’re trying to maintain relational connections with kids — trying to keep kids connected to people they already know,” she said.

In the case that a relative can’t be found, the child is cared for by a general applicant foster family — but Blessing said work continues to find a relative.

The current recruitment efforts across the state are for general applicant families.

“So we have enough families,

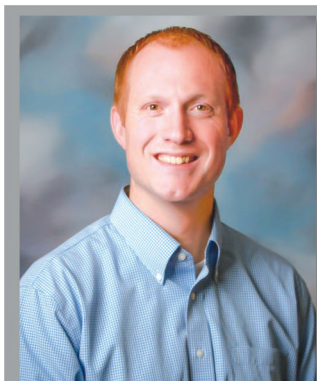
and they’re diverse enough, that we can match children to a family,” she said.

Every Child

Those who aren’t ready to provide full-time care can learn more about foster care by volunteering with Every Child NE Oregon, which works to expand the support system around foster care.

“There are ways to support fostering without taking a child into your home,” Blessing said. “It’s a way to dip your toe in and learn what it’s about.”

She said that a general application family, on average, thinks about becoming a foster family for two to three years before deciding to foster children.



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