

Reopening Oregon From COVID-19

The State will follow guidelines established by the Trump Administration, with some modifications

By Scott Laird

The State of Oregon has begun to share their plans to slowly reopen the economy and loosen restrictions on social contact. Those plans include expanded testing across the state and a phased reopening with clear benchmarks which would allow regions and counties to open if they can meet established criteria, possibly as soon as May 15.

Oregon Governor Kate Brown took a series of steps to help clarify the COVID-19 situation in Oregon at the beginning of May. On Saturday, May 2, Governor Brown extended the COVID-19 state of emergency until July 6, originally declared on March 8 and set to expire on May 7. Governor Brown's original authority to declare a public health emergency was approved by the Oregon Legislature and allows the Oregon Health Authority and the Office of Emergency Management to respond to the crisis, while also waiving rules or adopting temporary ones. The previous day Governor Brown held a news conference and introduced new plans for COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, two foundational elements of her framework for reopening Oregon safely. In addition, on May 1 Oregon began allowing hospitals, medical offices, veterinary clinics, and dental clinics that meet certain safety requirements to start seeing patients for non-urgent care. Governor Brown's announcements came as the Oregon Legislature continues to finalize plans to reopen the state's economy in phases, as recommended by the White House in their "Opening Up America Again Guidelines," released on April 16. Those plans were discussed in a virtual "Town Hall" meeting hosted by Oregon State Representative Brad Witt on April 28.

While no firm dates have yet been established for the phased reopening, some benchmarks are continuing to be discussed and finalized, using input from local business leaders, state and local health officials, and local elected officials. Columbia County has been placed in Region 1, along with Tillamook, Clatsop, Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties. Counties may apply and qualify individually or in combination with others in their region for reopening. Of-

ficials hope to begin Phase 1 as soon as May 15 in some communities.

"As we look to reopen Oregon, it's critical we understand the prevalence of COVID-19 across the state and use science and data to ensure we can safely take steps forward," said Governor Brown during her May 1 press conference. "A strategy of testing and tracing helps us identify who has the disease and who may be at risk of infection – knowledge that is incredibly powerful as we look to reopen."

Meanwhile, on May 2, as hundreds of protesters descended on Salem to demand Oregon's economy be reopened immediately, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the largest single day death toll since the crisis began, with 2,909 people dying across the country of COVID-19 on Thursday, April 30.

Discussions to reopen the state, are continually evolving, as information and data change daily. In Oregon there were 28,500 new unemployment claims filed during the week ending April 25, bringing the total number of new unemployment claims since the coronavirus outbreak in Oregon to 362,200. Oregon's total number of COVID-19 cases was at 2,817, with 113 deaths on May 5. After a daily high of 100 cases of COVID-19 in Oregon on April 4, the state's number of reported cases has largely fluctuated each day. Columbia County has not had any new cases reported since April 15, and has just 14 cases and no deaths associated from the virus.

Many Senators and Representatives around the state are providing regular email updates to help keep constituents informed, including State Representative Brad Witt.

"The Stay Home, Save Lives order has been working, and Oregon has one of the lower rates of infection, and now people are becoming more eager than ever to drop restrictions and get back into the community," said Witt in his April 29 newsletter. "There is still no vaccine or treatment for the novel coronavirus so even when we are able to reopen, it will not be business as usual."

Another good source of comprehensive information has been a daily update sent out by Oregon Senator Michael Dembrow of Portland. Dembrow updates unemployment numbers, provides health updates and data, and disseminates other pertinent guidance on the

ever-changing situation.

Dembrow's recent newsletters noted that gasoline consumption across Oregon is down about 40%, and SNAP applications are up 400% over last year. On April 28 the state Employment Department announced it is finally able to accept applications for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance. This is for those workers who previously could not apply for Unemployment Insurance benefits because they had not paid into the system – those previously excluded workers include the self-employed, independent contractors, Gig workers, and those who previously lacked enough qualifying work hours.

Oregon's testing plan Governor Brown announced on May 1 includes a program called "Key to Oregon," in partnership with OHSU. The voluntary program will seek to monitor and test up to 100,000 randomly selected Oregonians, with a focus on at-risk communities which have been especially hard-hit by the virus. Invitations to join the study will be sent during the week of May 11. The plan expands Oregon's testing criteria, so that anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 can be tested within 48 to 72 hours. It's estimated that 15,000 tests are needed statewide per week at this time. This includes 30 tests per 10,000 Oregonians (12,250 tests per week), in addition to 2,500 tests per week in clinical and group care settings to follow COVID-19 outbreaks and study the movement of the disease. The plan also puts in place "contact tracing" with a goal of training at least 600 contact tracers, deployed statewide by county.

Representative Brad Witt's Town Hall on April 28 featured a presentation by Brown's Legislative Director Elana Pirtle-Guiney on the "Reopening Oregon: A Public Health Framework for Restarting Public Life and Business" document, released by Governor Brown on April 20, which the state has been using to enhance discussions across the state.

Pirtle-Guiney confirmed that Oregon will most likely reopen on a regional basis, rather than statewide, either by county or groups of counties. She said counties with low numbers of cases would likely be the first to reopen, and said the Portland metro area and Marion County will likely be last. She also expressed concerns that, if communities were to reopen too soon and a surge in cases occurred, there could be a need to shut down again. "We don't want to do that on a

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City Begins Budget Process

The City of Vernonia Budget Committee met on Tuesday, April 28 to review the proposed budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year, and met again on May 5 to continue the budget process.

The Budget Committee is made up of the five current members of the Vernonia City Council – Rick Hobart, Bruce McNair, Susan Wagner, J.R. Allen, and Dale Webb, along with four citizen members – George Tice, Noni Anderson, Donald Normand, and Sam Potter; there is one unfilled citizen seat on the Committee.

The Committee decided to have City Administrator Josette Mitchell serve as Chair of the Budget Committee process while the Committee is meeting by phone conference call. Mitchell will also serve as the Budget Officer. The budget was prepared by Finance Officer Angie Handegard with assistance from department heads. The Budget Committee is tasked with reviewing the proposed budget, making any changes they deem necessary, and

passing on an approved budget to the City Council for adoption.

According to the proposed budget, the General Fund consists of the Administration, Planning/Building, Police, and Library Departments. The main source of income for the General Fund is property tax revenue. 2019/20 estimates came in at \$857,161. This is a 3% increase over last year. There is a 6% decrease in the Administration operating budget, primarily due to the reduction in legal fees line item and the Vernonia Senior Center will not be asking for a donation from the City for their meals program. There is a transfer out budgeted for the Skate Park which will not be transferred if the project is not awarded an Oregon State Parks Grant for which the City has submitted an application. There is an 8% increase in payroll expense in the Police budget as the Chief is hoping to add a fifth officer. There is a 2% increase in payroll expense in the Library budget; staff hours have increased slightly to offer

more programming.

Both Water and Sewer revenue are forecasted to come in slightly over budget. There are no proposed rate increases in these budgets due to large carry forwards and slight increases in rate payers. One staff position was filled, increasing payroll slightly. No major projects are planned in the Water Department for this budget cycle.

Two projects that were proposed in the Sewer Department in this current fiscal year to begin addressing the storm water infiltration problem have been postponed as the City recently discovered they are eligible to receive grant funds to address storm water issues on the west side of town. The City will be applying for this grant in the fall of 2020.

In Sewer Debt Service, Loan R93642 was paid off on July 1, 2019. There was an additional \$101,116 paid toward the principal of Loan R93643 which will result in a three-

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