

## IN BRIEF

## County unemployment dips below 7% in November

Clatsop County's seasonally adjusted unemployment in November was 6.4%, a drop from October but still double the unemployment rate from the same time last year.

Seasonally adjusted figures compare expected with actual changes. State economists expected a drop of 290 jobs in the county in November, but only 260 were lost, leaving nonfarm payroll employment at 17,820.

The county was still down 1,470 jobs in November from the year prior, when unemployment was 3.2%. The leisure and hospitality industry, including restaurants and lodgings, has lost 730 jobs over the past year amid travel and dining restrictions meant to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Food services comprised more than 60% of layoffs in November. Another 23% of job losses came from food manufacturing, primarily seafood. More than 10% of losses came from lodgings, which have reported lower-than-average occupancies related to the slowdown at restaurants and other entertainment.

Over the month of November, the county recorded more than 500 new claims for unemployment benefits, including 325 claims from restaurants and lodgings. Over the first three weeks of December, the county recorded 385 new claims for unemployment, including 225 from restaurants and lodgings.

The county had the ninth-highest unemployment rate in Oregon in November. Statewide unemployment in November was 6%, and the national rate was 6.7%.

## Gearhart to deliver virus relief to 24 small businesses

GEARHART — Earlier this month, Gearhart invited businesses to apply for COVID-19 financial relief, distributing \$2,000 of \$40,000 available to each of the first 20 businesses that qualified.

With 24 applications, the city raised that amount, voting to pull an additional \$8,000 from the city's general fund to distribute \$48,000. Each business will receive \$2,000.

"Since they are all in Gearhart, and all affected by COVID-19 we should accept all 24 and divide the money accordingly," City Councilor Kerry Smith said.

Relief fund money must be used for unbudgeted virus-related expenditures incurred between March 1 and Dec. 30. Businesses must spend the money before year's end.

The money is part of funds delivered to the state by the federal government during the coronavirus pandemic. The CARES Act, signed into law in late March, provides financial assistance to individuals, businesses, community organizations and state and local governments.

In November, the City Council allocated \$40,000 in grant funds to businesses and \$10,000 to the city to pay for personal protective equipment and ventilation upgrades at public buildings.

On Tuesday, the council approved the fund transfer and distribution. City Councilor Dan Jesse abstained as his business was among those to receive grant money.

"Two thousand dollars is better for a small business that's been struggling than \$1,600," City Councilor Brent Warren said. "They've been tightening belts for the last year and we can come up with \$8,000 somewhere in the budget."

— *The Astorian*

## Pandemic blamed for Oregon's 40% increase in drug overdose deaths

Oregon saw a nearly 40% increase in overdose deaths this year, a jump that's similar to the trend nationwide.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention blames the increase on COVID-19. It said the pandemic has hit people already struggling with substance abuse disorders hard.

CDC figures show Oregon reported 580 deaths from drug overdoses between June 2019 to May. For the whole country, there were more than 81,000 deaths. That's equivalent to the entire population of Medford, and it is the highest number of overdose deaths in a one-year span the country has ever seen.

— *Oregon Public Broadcasting*

## DEATHS

Dec. 24, 2020

ODEGARD, Sharette A., 79, of Milnor, North Dakota, formerly of Seaside, died in Lisbon, North Dakota. Dahlstrom Funeral Home of Oakes, North Dakota, is in charge of the arrangements.

## PUBLIC MEETINGS

MONDAY

Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District, 5 p.m., special meeting, (electronic meeting).

TUESDAY

Gearhart City Council, 6 p.m., work session, (electronic meeting).

Astoria City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

## the Astorian

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## Brown changes course on school reopenings

## School districts get flexibility on classes

By TERESA CARSON and KATIE FRANKOWICZ  
Pamplin Media Group and  
The Astorian

Gov. Kate Brown abruptly announced new rules for school reopenings on Wednesday afternoon, making former directives optional and allowing school districts to open if they follow safety precautions against the coronavirus.

In a letter to health and education agencies, the governor said the state's health metrics for returning to in-person instruction will become advisory rather than mandatory effective Jan. 1.

"Moving forward, the decision to resume in-person instruction must be made locally, district by district school by school," Brown said.

In an effort to tamp down the COVID-19 pandemic, most Oregon schools have been closed since mid-March and students have been learning remotely in their homes. Many parents and students had become increasingly frustrated with the situation and the calls for reopening schools had become more strident as the months wore on.

The situation was complicated by resistance from some teachers unions. Some teachers are at high risk for COVID-19 or have high-risk people in their households.

Schools had been closed and the parameters for reopening were complicated and changed several times. They also were more stringent in Oregon than most other states.

The Wednesday announcement was made as school districts were out on winter break and most administrators were not available for comment.

The announcement said the goal of the new policy is putting more school districts on track to return students to in-person instruction, espe-



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Local school districts will have more flexibility to manage through the coronavirus pandemic.

cially elementary students, by Feb. 15.

The Oregon Education Association, the union that represents educators, immediately issued a statement slamming Brown's announcement.

"Today's decision by Gov. Brown will only result in an increasingly disparate patchwork of return plans throughout the state's public education system — creating uncertainty in a moment when clarity has never been more crucial," the association wrote.

The timing of the announcement caught local school district leaders by surprise. Though some said they anticipated such changes to current rules and guidance could be coming, they did not expect an announcement until January.

The superintendents The Astorian spoke to had not yet had a chance to touch base with their leadership teams or school boards to discuss the long and short-term implications of Brown's decision.

Craig Hoppes, the superintendent of the Astoria School District, expects to discuss the changes at the January school board meeting. The board recently approved a reopening timeline and had been working with staff on how to bring students back in a gradual

way. The district decided in the summer that it would begin the school year online only. Any changes to this plan have unfolded slowly and cautiously.

"We will continue to review the metrics as we go," Hoppes said.

He pointed out that Clatsop County in the last month has seen higher numbers of new virus cases.

"The hard part of this whole thing — what weighs on me all the time — is we've got these health and safety standards that we need to meet and we really need to take them seriously and really be sure that when we let kids and staff in we can keep them safe," he said.

But on the other hand, he added, there are very real concerns about students' education and well-being with prolonged remote learning.

Bill Fritz, the superintendent of the Knappa School District, said the governor's decision will give smaller, rural districts more flexibility and allow them to better consider their communities' specific needs.

Under previous guidelines, the Knappa School District, which has sought to bring grades back to in-classroom instruction when metrics allow, sometimes had the youngest grades and old-

est grades in class but could not bring back the middle grades. This was tough on families, who might have children across grade levels.

The school district plans to review the metrics and make a decision by Tuesday about how to proceed going into January.

Even as the governor's announcement gives school districts the power to decide when children return to school, local metrics remain an important factor to consider, said Tom Rogozinski, the superintendent of the Warrenton-Hammond School District. He plans to continue considering the local caseload ahead of any decisions.

The school district has had to shift operations several times in response to changing local caseloads, including a major outbreak at a Warrenton seafood plant and a positive case within school buildings.

For the first few weeks following winter break, Rogozinski expects the district will stick with its current plan to allow kindergarten-through-third grade students in buildings full time with limited in-person instruction for grades four through 12.

"Then we will start that work collectively of figuring out what's possible," he said.

## County reports six new virus cases

The Astorian

Clatsop County on Thursday reported six new coronavirus cases.

The cases include a woman in her 70s and a woman in her 50s who live in the northern part of the county. A woman in her 70s, a woman in her 50s, a man in his 40s and a man in his 50s living in

the southern part of the county also tested positive.

All six were recovering at home, according to the county.

The county has recorded 529 virus cases since March. Nine were hospitalized and three have died.

The Oregon Health Authority reported 106,821 cases and 1,415 deaths from the virus statewide as

of Thursday morning.

The health authority described Clatsop County's third death from the virus — announced by the county on Wednesday — as a 55-year-old man who tested positive on Dec. 17 and died on Wednesday at Providence Seaside Hospital.

The health authority said the man had no underlying conditions.

## Washington state completes Kalama methanol project study

By KATIE FAIRBANKS  
The Daily News

The proposed \$2 billion Kalama methanol plant could result in less global greenhouse gas emissions, but levels would still be significant even after mitigation efforts, according to the Washington State Department of Ecology's final analysis released Monday.

The final study's overall conclusions are the same as a September draft, which found the project could cause a lower net reduction in emissions than previous studies had concluded.

Ecology made several revisions to the report in its final version, including increasing the estimated rate of how much natural gas would leak during extracting, processing and transporting it to the Kalama plant.

Northwest Innovation Works wants to build the \$2 billion plant on land leased from the Port of Kalama.



Bill Wagner/The Daily News

A vacant property at Port of Kalama is the site of a proposed \$2 billion methanol plant.

The proposed plant would convert natural gas into methanol for use in plastics manufacturing in China and would employ about 200 people, according to the company.

Ecology began the second supplemental greenhouse gas study about a year ago after it determined the analysis provided by Northwest Innovation Works and the Port of Kalama had been inadequate.

According to the new

study, the proposed plant could reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by 5.5 to 6 million metric tons per year, compared to the 10 million metric tons concluded by the earlier environmental study by the Port of Kalama and Cowlitz County.

The plant would produce about 1 million metric tons of emissions in-state, making it one of Washington's top 10 emitters, according to the study.

The final study confirmed the draft finding that Northwest Innovation Works' plan to mitigate all in-state emissions with environmentally-friendly projects is feasible but emissions would still be deemed significant.

Although some numbers have been tweaked, the big picture of a net-decrease remains the same, said Michael Mann, consultant and former director of Seattle's Office of Sustainability and Environment.

"This greenhouse gas issue is a global issue, it doesn't respect borders. So when we have this type of massive positive benefit in the state of Washington or that's realized anywhere else or caused anywhere else, there's a global benefit," said Kent Caputo, Northwest Innovation Work's chief commercial officer.

Opponents contend that Ecology's report shows the plant will significantly increase greenhouse gas emissions.