

Risk: County had 203 cases per 100,000 over a two-week period

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The modifications announced by Gov. Kate Brown allow for a maximum of six people indoors at facilities over 500 square feet in counties classified at extreme risk. One customer and one employee are allowed in smaller indoor facilities. Indoor dining will still be prohibited.

“Most of the state remains in the extreme risk category,” the governor said in a statement Tuesday. “This is an important reminder for all Oregonians to continue to do their part by abiding by the health and safety guidelines in place. Until vaccines are widely available with high participation rates, the surest way to lower our risk and open our businesses and communities is to continue practicing the measures we know are effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19 — wear your mask, keep physical distance from others, avoid gatherings, wash your hands often and stay home when you are sick.

“The science has shown us that outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities when it comes to the spread of COVID 19, which is why we have clearly delineated guidance between indoor and outdoor activities,” Brown said. “We have seen over the last several weeks that Ore-

gonians have largely complied with risk levels to the point that we have not seen a surge in hospitalizations that would have jeopardized hospital capacity. This means we are able to make these adjustments for extreme risk counties, which should assist both businesses and Oregonians as we continue to work to stop the spread of COVID-19.”

Clatsop County, which has been at extreme risk since Jan. 15, is among 25 counties that will be at the highest risk level until Feb. 11, including Columbia County and the rest of the Portland metro area. Tillamook County will be moved from extreme risk to lower risk.

Counties with a population of 30,000 or more are evaluated for risk based on virus cases per 100,000 over two weeks and the test positivity rate for the same period.

Counties at extreme risk have a case rate exceeding 200 or more per 100,000 people, and may have a test positivity rate of 10% or higher.

As of Saturday, Clatsop County had 203 cases per 100,000 over a two-week period. Test positivity was 5.9%.

Restrictions

While indoor dining is still prohibited at bars and restaurants in counties at extreme risk, the governor’s modifications allow outdoor din-

ing pods and an adjustment to tents. A maximum of six people are allowed to use lottery terminals indoors.

For gyms, indoor pools, museums, theaters and other entertainment venues 500 square feet or larger, a maximum of six customers are allowed. For smaller indoor facilities less than 500 square feet, only one customer and one employee are allowed for services like personal training.

‘MOST OF THE STATE REMAINS IN THE EXTREME RISK CATEGORY.’

Gov. Kate Brown

Outdoor dining is allowed for up to 50 people with an 11 p.m. closing time. Tables must be limited to six people from two households.

Outdoor entertainment, recreation and fitness facilities can operate with a maximum capacity of 50 people.

Indoor and outdoor social gatherings will be limited to six people from two households.

Grocery stores, pharmacies, retail shops and shopping malls can operate at 50% of capacity.

Churches can stay open at 25% of capacity or 100 people indoors, whichever is smaller, and 150 people outdoors.

Businesses are required

to have employees work remotely, if able, and close offices to the public.

Only outdoor visits will be allowed at long-term care facilities.

Over the past month, political and business leaders on the North Coast have called on the governor and the Oregon Health Authority to end prohibitions on indoor activity in counties at extreme risk.

Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones sent a letter to the governor on Dec. 31, endorsed by Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer and Seaside Mayor Jay Barber, arguing that the prohibitions are unnecessarily burdensome on businesses, and that capacity should be the same as counties at high risk — 25% or 50 people, whichever is smaller.

David Reid, the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, sent a similar letter to the governor and health authority in early January requesting evidence to support the need for the prohibitions.

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners also sup-

ported eliminating prohibitions in a letter to the governor on Jan. 13.

“The easing of the restrictions does not address the original question that mayors and businesses across the state have been asking: Where’s the data to justify the tightest restrictions — even these new restrictions,” Balensifer said.

“Officials have been and are asking — begging — for the cold, hard data behind the decisions being made about their futures, livelihoods and even their lives. Why does the state scorn officials for seeking information?”

The Oregon Mayors Association Board of Directors, which includes Balensifer, called for the extreme risk category to be eliminated altogether.

“While we fully acknowledge that COVID-19 is a threat and that preventative and protective measures are critical, we respectfully request increased communication and consideration, including data sharing,” the board wrote in a letter to Brown on Tuesday. “We, as a body, request a release of data on the efficacy of the full closures, specifically of eating and drinking establishments, indoor recreation and fitness establishments as required in the ‘extreme risk’ category. To date, no such data or cogent rationale has been forthcoming.

“As of the date of this letter, a great many elected officials have already requested this information from your office with no substantive response. As we are aware, the vast majority of cities in Oregon have not seen these shuttered sectors contribute more COVID-19 infections than any other workplace.

“We are not suggesting trading public health for commerce. However, cities should be trusted conduits of information supporting state and national efforts, including that which limits the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately, the necessary information has remained inaccessible, making it impossible to inform ourselves and citizens that the great sacrifices they are making are necessary.

“We are fully committed to supporting data-linked measures to keep our residents safe, but we must have data to defend the decisions. What data, for example, suggests that limited indoor dining is more dangerous than extended periods at lottery machines? In today’s digital world, people fill in the gaps when there is insufficient information. This has led to widespread misinformation, contributing to distrust of government at all levels.

“While a small contingent has suggested ignoring the state restrictions, the vast majority have not.”

County reports 11 new virus cases

The Astorian

Clatsop County reported 11 new coronavirus cases over the past few days.

On Wednesday, the county reported four cases.

The cases include a man in his 50s living in the northern part of the county and two men in their 20s and a woman in her 40s living in the southern part of the county.

All four were recovering at home.

On Tuesday, the county reported seven cases.

The cases involve four females ages 10 to 19, a man in his 30s and two women in their 40s living in the northern part of the county.

All seven were recovering at home.

The county has recorded 738 cases since March. According to the county, 16 were hospitalized and five have died.

Cheer: Outdoor practices difficult in winter

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For athletes, places now restricted include gyms, pools and indoor personal training. Most sports take place in all of the above.

But what about some of the other extracurricular activities? Those who support the sports? That would include school bands, dance teams, cheerleaders and halftime performers.

Most are OSAA activities, and fall under the competition guidelines.

Emily Madsen coaches Astoria High School’s cheerleading squad, as well as the dance team Pizazz.

Her teams are facing the same challenges as other sports. And even if the OSAA resumes events in March, Madsen’s cheerleaders and dancers may not be able to perform at games, depending on how many people are allowed at indoor events besides the athletes.

The status of Astoria’s cheerleading team is unknown, but the school’s dance team still held tryouts and will have a 2021 team.

“We were able to hold tryouts at the end of October, while wearing masks and practicing 6-foot social distancing outdoors at CMH field,” Madsen said. “We currently have 13 dancers on the team.

“As of this week (Jan. 10 to Jan 16) we are holding outdoor practices twice a week,” she said, while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Dancers are not allowed to attend if they are sick or have been around anyone who has COVID symptoms or tested positive.”

But the dancers are charging ahead, working on performance routines.

“We are working to put together a routine, choreographed by my assistant coach Caroline Wright, that we can compete with in March,” Madsen said. “Many of the things we are usually working on like stunts and partner tricks, are not allowed at the moment.

“We are keeping our 6-foot distance in all formations and transitions,” she said, while district and state competitions are still up in the air. “We do not know whether the competition will be virtual or if we will have judges in person yet. Our culminating event date has been pushed into May.”

Team practices or meetings take place virtually or outdoors.

“We are looking forward to making the most out of the situation



Emily Gilbertson

Astoria’s school dance team Pizazz works on a routine.

we’re in. The bar is low, but so far we are enjoying being together as a team and working toward a goal of competing.”

Popular show

One of the more popular halftime shows on the North Coast is the one provided by the Tsunami Skippers, Seaside’s team of young jump ropers, ages 8 to 17.

Coach Stacey Dundas has her team in place, and the rope jumpers are ready to jump rope. They’re just waiting for places to perform.

“We have been following the state guidelines and practice in person when we are allowed,” Dundas said. Right now, that’s in Gearhart at a donated indoor space.

The cold temperatures make outdoor practices difficult, “and the surface for us is a problem. The asphalt and cement tear up our ropes.”

She adds, “We are still hopeful to hold our Oregon Coast Classic late spring if we are allowed, and there is talk of a possible in-person nationals.”

Until then, “no shows to speak of, since there is no school, no sporting events, etc. Another bumper year for us so far.”

School pep bands are a bit unique. It’s an OSAA activity, not a contact sport, but sporting events are where a pep band usually plays.

Teaching students music in the coronavirus era has challenges, even at Warrenton, a school which has plenty of students who want to learn music.

The school has one of the most decorated school bands at the 3A level, winning state championships in 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014 and

2015, with second place finishes in 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

In his fifth year as Warrenton band teacher, Michael McClure was back to teaching band students — divided into two classes — in person earlier this month.

Some are still learning online through a program called SmartMusic, “where they play and can record it, and see what they’re doing right or wrong, and I can review it as well.”

‘A wash’

Band is an OSAA activity, and “there’s still a possibility of us having a season,” he said. “But I know some of the events that we use to qualify for state have already been canceled.

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen,” he said. “This year is probably going to be a wash, and I don’t think competitions will happen. Hopefully we’ll have something at some point.”

In a normal year, the Warrenton band averages 50 students.

“They’re missing playing together,” McClure said. “It’s like a second family to them. They’re getting through it. Once we start up it will be nice to see them here, goofing off together again.”

McClure also teaches choir at Warrenton Grade School and high school, but choir has been canceled for this school year.

“They took away all my grade school bands also, so they have me teaching a K-3 general music class,” he said. “They want to keep the band going, but I’m sad to see choir go — they had been doing really well.”

Seaside: ‘If we don’t keep discussions alive, we won’t get to strategies’

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Viviana Matthews, the executive director of Clatsop Community Action, and Susan Prettyman, the organization’s social services program manager, as Seaside grapples with a homeless population and challenges to the city, law enforcement and social services.

“We are not going to solve homelessness, but we need to come up with a plan when people are ready to be housed,” Matthews said. “We have to be open-minded, an open door for the people who are.”

Matthews said the homeless liaison, which she hopes to hire soon, will work closely with law enforcement.

“We want to make sure that this person is connected with the homeless population in Clatsop County,” she said. “If an agency is having a problem with a homeless person, they would call the homeless liaison before they call in the police. I would love to prevent the police from going to an issue that is happening that could be solved instead of spending so much of our tax dollars on a police call.

“I’m hoping the homeless liaison will spend a lot more time in Seaside than in Astoria. But at the beginning, I want this person to be very familiar with how the Astoria Police Department does it.”

Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman announced last week that his officers will no longer be the first responders to mental health calls unless there is an imminent threat of physical harm to others. The police chief said only when a subject in a mental health crisis is imminently in harm’s way will police respond.

Last year, Clatsop Community Action provided more than 600 services to the homeless population in the county, with about 25% to people who live in the Seaside area.

The organization receives state, federal and local funding through grants to help people meet housing, food and other basic needs. The organization connects people with mental health challenges to Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county’s mental health contractor. Funds are shared with the Astoria Warming Center, Helping Hands and other social service programs.

Project Homeless Connect, an annual event held in January for the homeless at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center, was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic. The event provides information and

referrals, personal care items and haircuts for the homeless.

Prettyman said food and housing referrals can be found at Providence Seaside Hospital.

“It’s a mini-CCA office in Seaside,” Matthews said.

She said bringing additional services to Seaside are within reach.

The Astoria Warming Center is based in the First United Methodist Church and provides overnight shelter during the winter months for people experiencing homelessness.

A warming center open 90 days a year in Seaside would be an “outstanding thing to do,” Matthews said. “We just have to get the right people helping CCA to see if we can open a warming center in Seaside.”

Jason Boyd, the assistant principal for Seaside High School, said many homeless families do not fit common preconceptions.

“Stereotypically we think of homelessness as the tent on the side of the road or people holding up a sign,” he said. “The vast majority of the homeless that we see in our schools is the family of five that’s living in a Suburban that finds a new parking lot every night in the city of Seaside to park.

“Then during the day they get their Chromebooks out and have a hot spot that’s given to them by the school, with the Chromebooks. Their kids go to school and do the best they can and when night falls, they try to find another spot to park. That’s a real issue for a lot of families in our community.”

Boyd works with families to connect them with food, shelter and education.

“A good percentage of the kids classified as homeless are either doubled up in our community or living in a hotel,” he said.

Boyd said Clatsop Community Action provides help to meet those costs. “Without that massive support from CCA, a lot of our student population would go unserved and really, really struggle. And now, with COVID, we’re seeing lots and lots of struggle everywhere for all of our kids,” he said.

A shelter in Seaside would be “super beneficial for our community,” Boyd said. “I know it would fill up really fast if we had one.”

City Councilor Tita Montero said she saw the presentation Monday as part of a continuing dialogue.

“I’m looking for ways to keep the discussion alive,” she said. “If we don’t keep discussions alive, we won’t get to strategies. We want things to improve.”