

County expects larger allocations of vaccines

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Clatsop County is expecting to see an increase in its allocation of coronavirus vaccines from the state.

The county's vaccine task force said the county should receive 1,000 first doses every week for the next four weeks.

Seven hundred doses will be distributed to the county Public Health Department each week, and the other 300 will be distributed evenly among pharmacies at Safeway in Astoria and Seaside and Costco in Warrenton.

The pharmacies will follow the

state's phased priority vaccination plan and function separately from the task force.

The pharmacies expect to begin administering the doses next week by appointment. Visit the pharmacies' websites to check eligibility requirements and to register.

The vaccine task force is holding vaccination events weekly. The county is still restricting vaccinations to people 80 years old and older until supplies allow them to open registration to people 75 and older.

The county is also completing the vaccination of teachers and other school personnel, as well as those

receiving second doses.

A vaccination event scheduled for Thursday was canceled due to weather-related disruptions in vaccine delivery. People who were scheduled for the event are being contacted to reschedule.

The county continues to encourage people to fill out an online planning survey. The information will be used to send updates and notify people when they are eligible to register for vaccination.

As of Friday, 6,091 doses have been administered in the county, including 3,934 first doses and 2,157 second doses.

Tourism: 'I think the labor market just got harder'

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"I think we can say we are ready for tourists," Reid said. "We know how to operate our businesses safely — and our clientele, our visitors, know how to visit safely."

Flexibility

A number of businesses told The Astorian they weren't only ready to welcome tourists back, they need them to return. Last year, several businesses closed their doors permanently; others are teetering on the edge.

But businesses said they also need flexibility in how they accommodate visitors.

MacGregor's, a restaurant and whiskey bar in Cannon Beach, asked city leaders to allow them to set up outdoor seating in three parking spots outside of the business. With ever-changing capacity guidelines for indoor seating and no parking lot or deck available, owners Holly and Chip MacGregor faced significant revenue shortfalls and few options for boosting business if they couldn't also provide outdoor seating.

Under state guidelines, restaurants in Clatsop County can only seat up to 25% of their capacity but also must maintain distances between tables. In smaller buildings, some businesses may not even be able to reach the 25% capacity allowance.

The MacGregors feel the city's decision could have come months earlier. Still, they are glad to have a little bit of insurance, though Holly MacGregor feels the benefits may be pretty equal to the harm at this point.

She is concerned about taking away parking options from potential customers in a city already infamous for parking woes. Besides, she noted, outdoor seating on the coast often means contending with the cold, the wet and the wind. She will need to have staff for the extra tables and find tents that don't blow away.

Though the number of reported coronavirus cases is dropping and people are receiving vaccinations, there is no way to predict what the landscape will be like in the spring or summer — or what restrictions will be in place.

In anticipation of continued restrictions, Sarah Lu Heath, the executive director of Astoria's downtown association, hopes to plan other types of experiences for visitors, perhaps outdoor exhibits or installations instead of events.

Both Heath and Reid know the tourist months this year will continue to be very different for visitors and visited alike.

"I don't think anybody has the illusion that they're going to come here and have the same experience they had pre-pandemic," Reid said.

While many tourism-based businesses have suffered, in many ways, tourism never really left the coast, noted Todd Montgomery, who leads the hospitality management program at Oregon State University-Cascades in Bend.

Even as virus cases soared across the state and



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian
TOP: Astoria Brewing Co. opened the back deck for outdoor seating. **ABOVE:** A view of Seaside during government restrictions last April.

public health officials urged people to limit unnecessary travel, visitors continued to flock to the coast on sunny days well into the fall and winter months. The coast provided attractive options for outdoor recreation as, increasingly, everything else was closed.

The Oregon Coast Visitors Association saw fewer national and international travelers, but more Oregonians who came to the coast for overnight stays or on daytrips.

Visitation was not evenly distributed. Instead, it seemed "patchy and somewhat unpredictable," said Marcus Hinz, the executive director of the visitors association.

In September, Seaside saw an increase in quarterly lodging tax revenue collected over the prior year. Meanwhile, Astoria reported a decrease of about 12% from July through December compared to the same period in 2019.

Last year's visits came with challenges, too — challenges that will likely persist as industry leaders predict pent-up demand for travel and recreation will result in a busy summer this year.

Last year, state parks on the coast saw huge numbers of people arrive. They often

left behind piles of trash on beaches and trails.

The visitors association also saw an increase in the number of people seeking out licenses and permits for hunting, fishing and camping for the first time. To Hinz, that indicated that "we need to try harder than ever to insert messages about etiquette and expectations into any communications they receive."

Instead of the inspirational marketing of the past, Hinz said the visitors association is focused on emphasizing instructional messaging about how to visit responsibly.

"We know visitors are coming and all we can really do is manage the situation," he said.

Challenge

For businesses, one challenge with the return of tourism will be the ability to remain adaptable.

Montgomery believes times of disruption can open the door to great opportunities, but many tourism-based businesses on the coast are still recovering from significant setbacks.

The businesses that survived into 2021 have already had to adapt — many times over. Restaurants turned to takeout. Hotels, bars and

restaurants adopted technology to streamline their processes and reduce labor costs. Then they had to stay agile, pivoting quickly with shifting rules and guidelines.

They will need to continue to be nimble, Montgomery said.

He is struck by how differently people have responded to the pandemic. Some longed for indoor dining and when it was offered again, they dove back in without hesitation. For other people, indoor dining continues to feel too risky.

Businesses will need to accommodate this fragmented customer base, perhaps for a long time to come, Montgomery said.

Then there is the labor pool to consider.

Preliminary research conducted through Oregon State shows a high number of workers in the hospitality and travel sectors are not seeking out jobs in those industries. They were discouraged by how their employers responded to the coronavirus and, in some cases, failed to protect workers.

These sectors struggled with a labor shortage even before the pandemic.

Now, Montgomery said, "I think the labor market just got harder."

Doctor: 'His patients will really miss him'

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"The Cockcroft family expresses deep gratitude to Detective Ed Christian and the team at King County search and rescue for their heroic efforts, as well as the team of volunteers from surrounding counties. They endured severe weather during the search and always took time to listen to the family."

Cockcroft is the past president of the Clatsop County Medical Society and a former chief of staff at Providence Seaside.

He attended the University of California, Santa Cruz before earning his medical degree from the University of California, Irvine. He completed an internship in Fresno, California, and a family practice residency at San Pedro Peninsula Hospital before moving to Seaside.

Dr. Dominique Greco, the medical director for primary care at Providence North Coast Clinic, said, "There are no words to express our deep sorrow. Only that he is loved and will be terribly missed."

Colleagues, patients and friends have shared memories and tributes online at Forever Missed, including Dr. Sharyl Magnuson Boyle, who joined the clinic in 2019.

"Practicing with Ben, I got to know his style, and grew to really respect his way of practice," Magnuson Boyle said. "When he decided to go half time, I took on several of his patients. With these patients, my respect for Ben grew. He practiced at a level one rarely sees outside of an academic setting."

"Diagnosing and managing complicated and rare conditions seemed to be no problem for Ben, just taken in stride. He was a gem. I don't think that the practice really realized the quality of physician they had in Dr. Cockcroft because he was a pretty humble guy. Sharing patients with Ben, I do know his quality, and I regret not having had the opportunity to let him know how much I respected his talents and abilities."

"We always think there will be time to thank a colleague, to recognize him, to let him know how he is valued — and then there is no more time. I hope his family will know from me that he was an exceptional physician. He had rare skills and insights. His patients will really miss him. I will miss him."

Janis Cerelli, a longtime patient of Cockcroft's, said she affectionately called him "Dr. Bambino" since meeting him more than 20 years ago.

"My grandmother was in the hospital at Seaside and he walked in and he said 'Hi' to my grandmother and went to the bed next door and drew the curtain," Cerelli said. "And I said in Italian to my grandmother, 'Who is that?' And she said in Italian, 'He's a doctor.'"

"... I said, in Italian, 'But nana, he has a face like a baby.' So then he opened up the curtain and delightedly said, 'Hi, I'm Dr. Bambino.'"

"I mean, he's just a sweetheart, and he was just a great guy," Cerelli said. "I have deep affection for him and I'm so sorry for him and his family."

Dennis Smith, the owner of Seaside Surf Shop, said Cockcroft was a friend and his doctor for 25 years.

"You can't be a surfer in this community and not know the Cockcrofts," he said. "It's going to be hard for a lot of people."

"He lived right there," Smith said, referring to Sunset Boulevard in the Cove, known as the hub of Seaside's surf scene. "He was at the epicenter every day. He saw the comings and goings and everybody knew him."

He said Cockcroft helped clear rocks and sand out of a little trail that goes down to the beach after big winter storms to make it more accessible for older surfers and others who had difficulty getting over the rocks. Smith said it is a big job every year.

"It goes back to his deep love for the beach and this little pocket of the community," he said.

McNickle: Second high-profile departure in county's Public Health Department

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County Public Health and Social Services. He will start on March 15, according to the newspaper.

McNickle could not be reached for comment.

County leaders said the news of McNickle's departure came as a surprise.

"I just learned of Mike's plans to relocate today," County Manager Don Bohn said in a text message Wednesday night. "He has been in charge of county COVID response. The county will be evaluating options for interim leadership until a recruitment process can be completed."

McNickle was hired as the county's environmental health supervisor in 2014. He was named public health director in September 2016. He has been an advocate for a county needle exchange program to reduce the spread of disease among drug users, a tobacco retail license to help ensure tobacco products are not sold to people under 21 and a new household hazardous waste facility near the Astoria Transfer Station.

During the pandemic, McNickle emerged as the focal point of the county's response to the virus. In June, he tested positive for COVID-19, describing it as "a teachable moment because it shows that anybody can get COVID."

He has taken a less visible public role over the past few months. The county has recorded 768 virus cases since last March, with more than 500 since November.

McNickle is the second high-profile departure in the county's Public Health

Department.

Ellen Heinitz, a naturopathic doctor who served as the county's community health project manager and was actively involved in pandemic response, resigned in January for a yearlong medical service trip to Guatemala.

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, said Bohn has assumed more responsibility over the county's response to the pandemic, along with other staffers in the Public Health Department.

"People will pull together and get the job done," he said. "And, at the same time, we'll be out looking to recruit a new public health director."

Kujala said county leaders meet regularly on the pandemic.

"For any public health department across the country, this has been a year like no other," he said. "And I think we've seen a lot of fatigue and stress within a lot of departments all across the country."

"It's just such an unprecedented time that I'm not surprised that people feel like they need a change of scenery or need a break."

The Daily World reported that McNickle was selected as the top candidate for the Grays Harbor County job among about a dozen applicants at a special county commission meeting Feb. 11. The newspaper reported he accepted the county's offer on Tuesday.

Kujala, who said he was "shocked" when he first heard about McNickle's departure, said he appreciates McNickle's service to the county and wishes him the best in Grays Harbor County.