

## Astoria Aquatic Center temporarily closes after virus case

The Astorian

The Astoria Aquatic Center will be closed through the weekend after a staffer tested positive for the coronavirus.

The city said Friday it is in the

process of reaching out to staff who may have been in close contact with the person who tested positive.

“All health and safety protocols are being followed at the aquatic center and out of an abun-

dance of caution, the facility will be closed through the weekend to sanitize surfaces and clean common areas,” the city said in a statement. “We plan to reopen the facility with its regular hours on Monday.”

## Back to school: Focus is on the students

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North Coast school districts are beginning the school year amid some now familiar uncertainties. It is a “back to normal” that is still anything but normal.

Masks, social distancing and other pandemic-related requirements remain in place. These are not ideal, but over the last school year, school districts have had time to hone these protocols and students and staff have had time to adjust, superintendents told The Astorian.

At districts where school was in person for much of the last school year, many students have already become used to wearing masks in class.

Superintendents say they are confident about their district’s response plans when there are, inevitably, virus cases among staff and students. Last school year, when some districts began the school year online and others began in person with limited hours, schools saw a smattering of virus cases. No major reported outbreaks were tied to schools.

On Friday, Bill Fritz, superintendent with Knappa School District, announced the district’s new preschool program would shut down until Sept. 20 because of a virus case and a report of a separate close contact case. It is a disappointment, but safety comes first, he told The Astorian.

Fritz said one of the biggest challenges over the course of the school year will be responding to unforeseen mandates from the state and the unpredictability of the course of the virus in communities.



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Students returned to school this week.

“We are also concerned about continuity of instruction for those who may need to quarantine,” he said.

Many school districts had hoped to begin the school year with masks recommended but not required. Superintendents said they knew that any decision either way about masks would be off-putting to some families.

But then in August, Gov. Kate Brown took the issue out of their hands.

She announced that students and school staff would be required to wear masks inside school buildings. She also announced a vaccine mandate for school employees, including teachers, a controversial decision.

At the same time, she urged school districts to return to in-person classes. Both the vaccine mandate and the mask requirement were intended to provide a safe learning environment for children, the governor

said at the time.

Astoria Superintendent Craig Hoppes said his priority is to have students in school buildings. The school district had opted to begin the prior school year online and only began to slowly bring the bulk of students back to in-person classes later in the school year.

Hoppes hopes parents who may have decided to keep students enrolled online again this year will be encouraged as the school year progresses and decide to send their children back for in-person learning.

For North Coast school districts, Brown’s vaccine mandate has so far not resulted in walkouts, protests or staff shortages, but school leaders say they are still waiting to see the full effect of the mandate on employees. Unless they have an approved medical or religious exemption, school staff will need to be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18.

Warrenton Superintendent Tom Rogozinski expects to know more about how the mandate will impact his staff in the next couple of weeks.

For now, the focus is on the students, he said. There have been national concerns about learning loss among students because of the pandemic’s disruption to their education — and Rogozinski shares those concerns.

“But first and foremost,” he said, “we need to make sure our kids are socially and emotionally supported ... It’s been a tough couple years for kids and we need to, I think, honor that they’re going to come in with some of those other areas needing to be addressed first.”

## Preschool: The school district offers virus testing if needed

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“We’re disappointed that it had to happen, but we want to keep kids safe,” Fritz said. “We felt it to be in everybody’s best interest to take a pause.”

The school district has cautioned families to monitor their children for any symptoms. At this point, Fritz said he is not worried about impacts to other grade levels. The preschool program is not located on campus and the two students impacted by the virus do not have siblings in the school district’s system.

The school district offers virus testing if needed.

School leadership opened Knappa Early

Learning to provide an option for families looking for public education-based child care, but primarily to provide these youngest students with an early boost to their education.

The Oregon Health Authority, in a weekly outbreak report, disclosed a virus case for a student at Seaside High School and a virus case for a student at Pacific Ridge Elementary School in late August.

The health authority also reported seven new virus cases for Clatsop County on Friday, 37 new virus cases on Thursday and six new virus cases on Wednesday. Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 1,988 virus cases and 24 deaths as of Friday.

## Broadband: Project would cover majority of Jewell, Elsie families

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During coronavirus shutdowns, the school district has relied on “old-school packets,” not the internet, for distance learning, he said. “And that’s tough for our kids, it’s tough for our teachers, to know that they’re kind of missing out on a better way,” Phillips said.

Under the proposed three-phase plan, a new dedicated fiber-optic cable would connect to Jewell School, which would receive one-gigabit internet. Towers would serve areas north and south.

The first phase would involve a \$500,000 contribution from the county and \$250,000 from Jewell School District.

Phase two would reach northeast into the Fishhawk Lake community. “To be honest, we don’t have a ton of students there,” Phillips said, “but it’s a big community, and they need internet, as well.”

The third phase would push south to U.S. Highway 26 and west toward Camp 18, he said.

The high-end total estimate for all three phases is \$1.8 million, Phillips said.

County Manager Don Bohn said the public contribution would offset the infrastructure costs that would normally be amortized as part of the rate structure. Such costs are a reason rural areas often don’t enjoy internet access, he noted. Subsidies help make these projects pencil out for developers.

Phillips advised that the county should see how the first phase goes, and make sure Oregon Coast Wireless can replicate what it

*‘THIS MAY NOT BE THE 20-YEAR SOLUTION, BUT WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR IS: WHAT IS THE HERE-AND-NOW SOLUTION?’*

Don Bohn | Clatsop County manager

did in Tillamook, before signing off on phases two and three.

The project would cover the majority of Jewell and Elsie families, but not all of them — an economy-of-scale problem, Phillips said.

Bohn said the county will also use the towers — which the school district will own, with the rest of the broadband infrastructure — for public purposes, such as beefing up communications systems for emergency responders. The area has 911 dead spots, he said.

“This may not be the 20-year solution, but what we were looking for is: What is the here-and-now solution?” Bohn said, adding that, hopefully, the project will bring at least 10 years of suitable internet.

## Deaths: County recorded 14 virus deaths since July

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County leaders said in August that the Public Health Department was focusing resources on the most vulnerable, including residents of nursing homes and other congregate care facilities, as virus case counts and hospitalizations surged because of the delta variant. But the county declined to provide details about the factors driving local outbreaks or why care homes were at particular risk at the time.

The virus deaths at care homes were disclosed Thursday night by the Oregon Health Authority in a weekly outbreak report.

Hannah Olson, the administrator at Clatsop Care Memory Community, which is part of the Clatsop Care Health District, said four of the five deaths involved residents who were unvaccinated against the virus.

Of the virus cases, she said, 26 involved residents and 11 were staff. She said the majority of residents and staff were vaccinated.

It is unclear how people were exposed, Olson said, but the facility’s awareness of the outbreak began when a resident and staff member tested positive at the same time.

At the moment, she said, “everyone is doing very well, and we’ll continue to do our best to keep these people safe in their home.”

At Neawanna By The Sea, the resident who died from the virus was vaccinated. The assisted living facility said the three other virus cases involved staff — two were vaccinated, one was unvaccinated.

*‘IT’S JUST THIS REALLY AWFUL SENSE OF DÉJÀ VU.’*

Clarissa Johnson | an administrator at Clatsop Care Health & Rehabilitation

Gov. Kate Brown has required health care workers, including nursing home staff, to get vaccinated by Oct. 18.

“Many long-term care and nursing facilities still have a proportion of staff who are not vaccinated — an issue seen nationwide,” Margo Lulich, the county’s interim public health director, and Tom Bennett, a county spokesman, said in an email. “Residents of these facilities, even if vaccinated, are more vulnerable to serious illness from COVID-19 ‘breakthrough’ cases because of the underlying conditions that often come with advanced age.

“Also, these individuals would likely have been vaccinated early on, and their immunity may have waned. Unvaccinated visitors also put residents at risk. Visitors may or may not be family.”

Clatsop County has recorded 24 virus deaths during the pandemic — 14 since July.

### Vulnerable

Since the start of the pandemic, care homes were identified as vulnerable to COVID-19. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the communal nature of nursing homes and long-term care facilities and the fact that they serve older adults who often have underlying medical conditions put people at increased

risk of infection and severe illness from the virus.

In Oregon, the state restricted visitor access to care homes for much of the pandemic as a precaution.

In January, the health authority disclosed an outbreak involving six virus cases at Clatsop Retirement Village, an assisted living facility which operates under the umbrella of Clatsop Care Health District. But local care homes did not otherwise emerge in outbreak reports until this summer.

The state discloses outbreaks at care homes after three virus cases or one death. In the outbreak report released Thursday night, the health authority said there had been 17,432 virus cases and 1,468 deaths tied to congregate care settings statewide.

The weekly outbreak report also disclosed three virus cases at the Suzanne Elise Assisted Living Facility in Seaside since August. Administrators at the care home could not be reached for comment.

The state also listed an outbreak this summer at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria at 10 virus cases, down from 12 cases, as the state initially reported.

### ‘A difficult situation’

Clatsop Care Health & Rehabilitation, which is also part of the Clatsop Care Health District, continues to

dispute the health authority’s figure of 10 virus cases since August.

“That number’s not correct,” said Clarissa Johnson, an administrator at the Astoria facility, adding that the outbreak should be six — one resident and five staff — as previously reported.

The facility has been trying to resolve the discrepancy with the health authority, Johnson said.

The state conducted a survey at the facility and identified no issues with infection control measures, she said.

The resident who tested positive for the virus was vaccinated, she said. Of the five infected staff, two were vaccinated and two were unvaccinated.

There is a high vaccination rate among residents and staff, she said. But the county’s virus case count is such that her facility can’t allow visitors into the building. “It’s just this really awful sense of déjà vu,” Johnson said.

When the pandemic started, outbreaks among vulnerable populations at nursing homes were a focus of news coverage around the world. Now, she said, Clatsop Care Health & Rehabilitation is “very quietly dealing with a difficult situation here that I think has largely been forgotten about in the last year.”

Over the past month, the staff have had to ask residents to stay in their rooms for a stretch, and tell them, “We’re really sorry, but I know a month ago you were able to visit with your family member and hug them, but we have to tell you now that you can’t.”

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