

Transit district postpones decision on vaccine mandate

Director worries about expanding driver shortage

By **ETHAN MYERS**
The Astorian

The Sunset Empire Transportation District, trying to manage through a bus driver shortage, has postponed a decision on whether to require vaccinations against the coronavirus.

The transit district's board has discussed a vaccine mandate since July. In August, the board decided to push back the decision until this month. At Thursday morning's meeting, they tabled it again.

Jeff Hazen, the transit district's executive direc-

tor, said nine of the district's 26 bus drivers are unvaccinated. After surveying them, Hazen said he expects to lose all nine if vaccinations are required.

The transit district has made cuts and reductions to several routes due to the lack of drivers and an inability to recruit new ones. If they lose the unvaccinated drivers, Hazen said, the district would have to make more cuts.

"We haven't put a pencil to it yet, but it would be as much or more than what we already did," he said. "It would be very significant."

Hazen, who said he would prefer to wait and see if the state mandates vaccinations for transit workers, understands the board has a tough



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

The Sunset Empire Transportation District is weighing a coronavirus vaccine mandate.

decision to make.

"I am concerned about the drivers that are not getting vaccinated, for their health," said Debbie Boothe-Schmidt,

the board chairwoman. "At this point, it is their decision. I would hate to cut services, too, and I am afraid that's what would happen if we did

make it mandatory."

While Hazen is unsure of the feasibility, the board brought up the possibility of frequent COVID-19 testing for the unvaccinated. Several commissioners also added they should, at the very least, be taking drivers' temperatures before they get on buses.

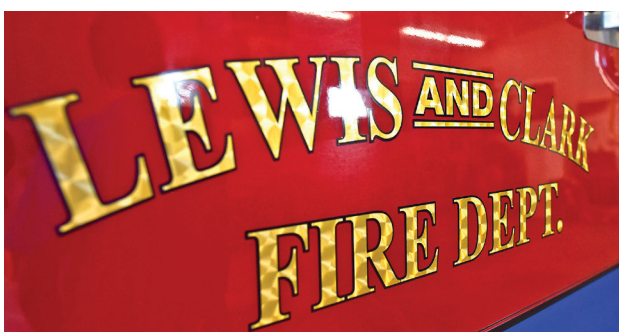
As the board weighs a vaccine mandate, they placed confidence in the protocols on buses.

"So far, we have been doing a very good job at continuously cleaning the buses, having that barrier that separates the drivers from our riders also, they are 6 feet apart," Commissioner Diana Niño said. "There are all of these things that we have already put in place."

Hazen, along with a number of commissioners, noted that while they are vaccinated, they understand that people have their own choices to make.

"Yes, I am vaccinated. I am all for vaccinations but, like the sentiment that has been shared, I don't want to put anyone in the position of having to quit because of this and us losing service, losing drivers and also disrupting this family that Jeff has talked about," Niño said. "We have had such a rough almost two years and this would just continue to bring down morale."

"They have been working six days a week. Our drivers have been trouper and people have choice. We also have to respect that."



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

A number of firefighters on the North Coast are unvaccinated against the coronavirus.

Mandate: Driving much of the crew to refrain

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But at Lewis and Clark, the 31-person fire crew could lose, on the higher end, about half of its people.

"I've been in the business for 30 years, and, I mean, this is just incredible, what they're doing," Lewis and Clark Fire Chief Jeff Golightly said in an interview.

Unvaccinated staff can remain at Lewis and Clark and respond only to fire calls, Golightly said, but the fire department's ability to respond to medical calls during daytime hours will be limited. He is the only paid staff member in the department.

"I think a lot of the folks would actually, probably, get (the vaccine)," he said. But he thinks the state mandate itself is driving much of the crew to refrain.

For a moment, the governor's rules required health care workers to submit to weekly COVID-19 testing if they couldn't show proof of vaccination. Golightly's crew was on board with that, he said, and the department had planned to do testing in house.

"To me, it's a simple solution: Allow the weekly testing, wear the proper (personal protective equipment) like we already do," he said.

According to the report Phillips compiled, Olney-Walluski Fire and Rescue also indicated its department will have trouble during business hours responding to motor vehicle crashes and medical incidents. Elsie's department, located in a rural area where the wait time for emergency response is relatively long, has discussed the possibility of "only responding to fire calls." Hamlet Volunteer Fire Department, which shows up to crashes on U.S. Highway 26, said it may lose roughly half of its small department. Warrenton and Gearhart, two better-staffed departments, face an abrupt depletion of firefighters.

"We were heroes that worked through all of this and did everything, and now it feels like we're the enemy," said Golightly, who got vaccinated early on and said that just over half of his department is vaccinated.

At the Board of Commissioners meeting on Wednesday night, Phillips said, "Personally, if I was suddenly critically ill or

seriously injured, I wouldn't care what someone's vaccination status was if they were coming to save my life or help me."

Emergency declarations

County Manager Don Bohn noted that the concern about potential EMS shortfalls is felt in rural counties statewide. Some counties, such as Malheur and Baker, have declared emergencies over the vaccine mandate.

"What is particularly problematic for many of us is the fact that we rely upon volunteer-centric services," he said, "and so those volunteers — they're not making the same choice that folks are if this is a livelihood decision."

"And it's not something that they're making lightly, either," he continued, "because they know their services are critical for their communities. And so I think that there's a number of options that the county can be looking at, and certainly declaring an emergency is an option."

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the Board of Commissioners, who serves as director of the Columbia Memorial Hospital Foundation, acknowledged the difficulties the vaccine mandate has created throughout Oregon.

But he also said it's wrong to say the debate about vaccines is balanced.

He pointed to a letter the board received from a constituent "basically telling us that COVID isn't killing anybody, and vaccines are responsible for deaths ... that we're feeding everybody lies, it's a big conspiracy about health care and government," he summarized at the meeting.

"I just think that the facts on one side are wrong," he said, "and I don't mind saying that. I think that we need to be able to say that."

Kujala said in a text message after the meeting that it's unfortunate that it takes mandates to get people vaccinated.

"But the pervasive misinformation out there is no longer an excuse," he wrote. "Unvaccinated people are getting sick and are dying in this community. We need to give public health and health care systems a break and that means doing your part and protecting yourself and those around you by getting vaccinated."

Infant: Kashton is 'always happy, always smiling'

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Terrified of a recurrence, they realized they were going to have to advocate and fight for answers.

They invested heavily to keep Kashton monitored at all times and alert them if he stopped breathing or his heart rate was abnormal, Childress said.

"Doc and I have spent every day together since the first day he stopped breathing fearing that it may happen again — and it did, an overall of five times in three months," she said.

They searched for answers, doing research, joining groups, reading forums and seeking second and third opinions.

An ultrasound showed abnormalities to Kashton's spinal cord.

"This meant we had to put our not even 8-week-old under anesthesia for an MRI," Childress said. "Handing our baby over to that doctor was one of the hardest things we've done and the MRI was the longest 45 minutes we have experienced."

At Randall Children's Hospital at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland, they found Dr. Monica Wehby, someone "who not only saw what they saw, but knew how to fix it," Childress said.

This month, Wehby recommended surgery — but she was moving to Indianapolis to be closer to family.

Shaw and Childress followed their doctor's trail. Kashton's worsening symptoms, including severe constipation, hyperreflexia, hip spasticity and bladder retention issues, made the surgery even more urgent.

During surgery, doctors make a small incision in the back and another small incision to the muscle, Shaw said. They make another incision through the spinal canal to clip the tethered cord and relieve the pressure on the back, and hopefully stop any long-term effects.

The recuperation time is up to Kashton and how he tolerates pain, anesthesia and medications, Childress said.

"It has been a struggle to travel, even being in a motor

home," she said.

Kashton was in the car seat about eight to 10 hours a day. "We have had to stop because of meltdowns because we don't want him to be suffering."

Despite his symptoms, Kashton is "always happy, always smiling," Shaw said. "Out of nowhere people stop and say our baby looks like an angel from heaven. When he comes to the shop he is just the happiest little guy."

'Day-and-night effort'

During all this, Childress and Shaw struggled to maintain operations at Doc's Auto Repair, their business in Seaside.

"It was just super hard on us because we want to be there for our community, but we haven't been," Shaw said.

When one of their top auto techs was out sick, "it was a snowball effect for our customers," Shaw said. "We love our business and we've tried really hard to make it great for the community. And since we've been gone it's been difficult. When they come to

Doc's Auto Repair everybody's looking for Doc.

"We've just been kind of out of the loop for things for several months because it was a day-and-night effort by both of us."

A GoFundMe page, "Cure for Kashton," invites people to help the family with medical costs.

Their first estimate for the surgery was \$80,000, Shaw said. That was later revised upward to \$134,000. Added to that are travel costs from driving across the country.

"It's been devastating on us," Shaw said. "It's been devastating financially. We don't know how we're going to get through this, but we will manage. We'll do whatever we've got to do. We'll sell everything we have."

"I didn't expect anybody would even come to our side, to be honest with you. The community has really been stepping up. It's taken me to my knees more than once on this trip how many people have just reached out. I just have to say 'thanks.' It's been amazing."

Schools: 'I feel like things are going really well'

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"In schools, they are doing a great job of social distancing and putting protocols in place. All the problems with kids getting too close are on buses and I can't control that."

Four virus cases were reported in the Knappa School District. Three were students from Hilda Lahti Elementary School and the fourth was a student from Knappa High School.

Knappa Superintendent Bill Fritz said all four came from an event outside of school property.

The weekly outbreak report also showed five virus cases from the Seaside School District. Four were students from Pacific Ridge Elementary School and one was a student from Seaside



Katherine Lacaze/For The Astorian

Schools are taking precautions against the coronavirus.

High School.

Seaside Superintendent Susan Penrod said all recorded virus cases up to

this point were tied to events outside of school.

Penrod said she is confident in the job schools are doing.

Ridge: Land will continue to be used for forestry

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The Clatsop-Nehalem, like the Chinook Indian Nation tribes based around the mouth of the Columbia River, are not federally recognized. Access to traditional gathering and hunting areas is not guaranteed. The allowance to harvest and gather plants and native foods at Clatsop Ridge may be a small portion of the conservation easement, but for Dick Basch, the Clatsop-Nehalem vice chairman, it was an important inclusion.

"To have this is recognition that we're still here," he said.

The Clatsop Ridge property has been logged routinely over the years and many older tree stands were knocked down during the 2007 windstorms that raked through the region. But the smells and the sounds Basch's ancestors would have experienced and

that he experienced as a child remain: the sweet, earthy smell of moss and ferns, the salty tang of the ocean below. You can hear the sounds of the forest and the ocean waves crashing, Basch said.

"It provides us the opportunity to go where our families, our ancestors, would go to harvest items," Basch said. "To breathe the same air."

'Seed effort'

Columbia Land Trust's purchase of the conservation easement was funded through more than \$2 million obtained by the North Coast Land Conservancy. The land conservancy, already involved in a major funding campaign for its Rainforest Reserve project farther south, invited Columbia Land Trust to the Clatsop Ridge project.

GreenWood has collaborated frequently with the North Coast Land Conservancy on other types of land

conservation projects in the past and sees this new conservation easement as an invitation to other landowners to consider similar partnerships.

"I see this almost as a seed effort," said Mark Morgans, director of North American forest operations for GreenWood. "Where else can we do this, not only us at GreenWood, on our footprint of the forest?"

The easement also nods to goals finalized earlier this month by the Clatsop Plains Elk Collaborative.

That group, with the support of Gov. Kate Brown and state Sen. Betsy Johnson, signed off on a unified approach to dealing with growing urban elk herds on the North Coast.

Increased development was identified as one of the drivers for an uptick in undesirable elk and human interactions in the Clatsop Plains area. One of the action items

identified by the group was to look at establishing wildlife habitat buffers and transition areas and, through partnerships, keep some land undeveloped.

While it isn't the same as conserving land for habitat or old growth trees, the easement at Clatsop Ridge does ensure the land will only continue to be used for forestry, not development, said Katie Voelke, the executive director of the North Coast Land Conservancy.

"No highway is going to be built through the middle of it," Voelke said. "No gated community is going to be built on top of it."

The additional protections that come with the easement — like increased stream buffers — are important considerations as land stewards consider climate change and a landscape's resiliency in the face of major climate shifts, Voelke and Roix said.