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Counties prevail in challenge of paid sick leave

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

Nine Oregon counties prevailed in a challenge of Oregon's new paid sick leave requirements Thursday when a Linn County judge ruled the 2015 law is an unfunded mandate.

The ruling allows those nine counties to opt out of providing paid sick leave to employees, but counties could use the new case law to challenge other legislatively-approved measures, such as minimum wage increases.

"It was a good day yesterday," said Roger Nyquist, chairman of the Linn County Board of Commissioners who spearheaded the legal challenge.

Linn County Circuit Court Judge Daniel R. Murphy based his ruling on a 1996 amendment to the Oregon Constitution that prohibits the state from forcing local governments to adopt new programs without providing funding. The ruling does not relieve the private sector from the paid sick leave mandate.

The state had argued that the constitutional amendment does not apply to wages and benefits.

It's unclear whether the Department of Justice will appeal the ruling.

"We are still considering our options," said Kristina Edmunson, a DOJ spokeswoman.

See SICK/14A



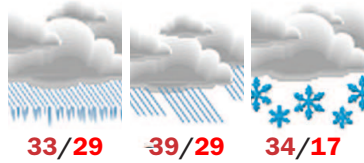
Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Logan Thoma, a fifth-grader at Washington Elementary School, sleds on the sidewalk outside his home during a snow day from school Friday in Pendleton.

SNOW DAY NOT A FREE DAY

New rules mean Pendleton, Hermiston will make up missed hours

Weekend forecast



Saturday: A chance of rain and snow before 10 a.m., then a 20 percent chance of rain after 4 p.m.
Sunday: 40 percent chance of rain and snow through the day and increasing in the evening.
Monday: A chance of snow showers.
National Weather Service. More on 2A.

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Already skating on thin ice, the Pendleton and Hermiston school districts are on the verge of plunging below the state's minimum threshold for instructional hours thanks to this week's winter storm.

Along with most districts across Umatilla County, schools in both towns were closed Friday as snow descended on Eastern Oregon, a move that will require they add an instructional day to their schedules.

Pilot Rock, Stanfield, Echo and Morrow County school districts went ahead with classes as usual, while Milton-Freewater, Umatilla, Athe-

na-Weston and Helix closed their doors. Blue Mountain Community College also shut down its campuses because of the weather.

When Pendleton moved the start of the school year for K-5 students back three weeks to accommodate the new Washington and Sherwood Heights elementary schools' construction schedule, school officials knew the district would struggle to stay above the state's 900-hour instructional minimum for elementary students.

District staff put together a plan that would change April 13, an all-day parent-teacher conference date, into a regular school day.

Brad Bixler, the Pendleton School

District's human resources director, said making that change will be an easy decision, but the district's options if the snow days continue to pile up are much more limited.

Bixler said the district can either extend the school year, an option that would require discussions with teachers and the school board, or apply for a waiver from the Oregon Department of Education, which needs to include a plan from the district of how it will avoid dipping below the minimum in the future.

Bixler wants to avoid the waiver option, but not at the expense of students.

See SCHOOL/14A

HERMISTON



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

CareVan volunteer driver Jim Barton helps Bill Reynolds and his seeing eye dog, Nexus, up the ramp into a van Wednesday in Hermiston.

CareVan for the homebound

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Jean Ruhl broke into a smile Tuesday morning as she detected the loud beep-beep of a vehicle backing into her driveway.

The 80-year-old wheeled her oxygen tank to the door and opened it wide to welcome Dennis Miller, a volunteer driver of Good Shepherd Medical Center's CareVan. Big snowflakes swirled around Miller's ball cap as he greeted

the retired nurse.

Miller loaded Ruhl's neon-pink transfer chair into the vehicle and then assisted her up the ramp to her seat for a ride to Good Shepherd Medical Center where she goes twice a week for cardio/pulmonary therapy. On the way, they chatted like the friends they have become about the weather, family and holiday plans. At the hospital, Miller settled Ruhl into her chair, untroubled some

See CAREVAN/14A

TOLLGATE

Spout Springs shutter slopes

Ski area owner cites safety concerns over snowmobiles in parking lot

By GEORGE PAVLEN
East Oregonian

Spout Springs Ski Area will not open this season after owner John Murray said snowmobiles have commandeered his parking lot and created an unsafe environment for customers.

The announcement comes just a few days after Murray predicted the slopes would open by mid-December. Everything is ready to go, he said, but the parking area has become too hazardous.

"I see snowmobiles turning back and forth in the lot, 24/7, day and night," Murray said. "I'm not going to be responsible for anyone being hurt. We've had some really close calls."

Spout Springs is located along Highway 204 east of Tollgate, with parking on the north side of the road. The ski area operates under a special use permit with the Umatilla National Forest, and is also a designated Sno-Park area, which pays for the Oregon Department of Transportation to do plowing and snow removal.

Walla Walla District Ranger Mike Rassbach

"I'm very unhappy about this. In my opinion, we've just lost control of the parking area."

— John Murray, owner of Spout Springs Ski Area

See SKI/2A

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