

Fallout: BMCC classes will continue as normal till spring break

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Other districts put events on hold

Milton-Freewater Unified School District Superintendent Aaron Duff told the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* Thursday morning that his district was taking a proactive approach.

“We will be canceling large, nonessential and group activities,” he said, listing field trips, sporting events, large assemblies, concerts and parent-teacher conferences.

Those steps have been recommended by federal and state health authorities, as a measure to keep schools open but limit nonessential, school-associated gatherings and group activities, the superintendent said.

Duff said his office will continue working with county and other health leaders to make necessary changes to the plan. So far, attendance for staff and students continues to be high, he added, noting the district has a handful of students who are staying home during the pandemic because of other health issues. Parents are encouraged to contact school offices with questions and concerns.

In addition to stopping student field trips, the Athena-Weston School District will be canceling most face-to-face parent-teacher conferences, Superintendent Laure Quaresma told the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* Thursday morning. Instead, phone conferences will be set up, which will greatly limit the flow of traffic in and out of schools, she said.

The district will also be curtailing the public’s use of school facilities for now, she said, noting that while those buildings are owned by taxpayers, the district has to bear the cost of sanitization — including staff time — between events.

Quaresma said she will be seeking guidance from OSAA regarding basketball games and other sports events. Although Brown’s

order says school competitions should be halted for now, Athena and Weston are not Portland, Quaresma said.

“We don’t have the masses of people,” she said.

Virus impacts community college events

Blue Mountain Community College Vice-President of College Relations and Advancement Casey White-Zollman said Thursday that the college hadn’t yet canceled any gatherings. A powwow set for that night in the gym would proceed as would the annual Eastern Oregon EMS Conference scheduled for the weekend. Attendance for either event isn’t expected to top 250 people, the maximum-sized gathering allowed in a recent state edict intended to slow the spread of coronavirus.

By the end of Thursday, however, both events had been canceled at the request of organizers.

Classes are continuing normally, with students set to take finals next week and then go on spring break. Custodial staff is taking extra care to sanitize frequently touched items, such as door handles.

Long list of local events canceled

Once news of the ban on gatherings was out, Eastern Oregon events began to fall in line.

J.D. Kindle, the executive director of the Oregon East Symphony, said the symphony decided Wednesday night to cancel concerts in Pendleton and Hermiston that were schedule for the weekend.

“We had started to hear concerns from the public at the end of last week,” Kindle said.

Kindle said he was texting with other board members as soon as the ban was announced and the decision to cancel was quickly made and posted on the symphony’s Facebook page.

Kindle said they are look-

ing to reschedule and will be offering exchanges for anyone who previously purchased a ticket, and added that the symphony would be honoring all of its contracts with the impacted musicians.

“They’ve already put in a lot of work and set aside the time to be here,” Kindle said. “It’s important to us to fulfill their contracts and help keep those musicians financially solvent.”

At the Pendleton Convention Center, the Pendleton Gun Show will go on, but the city will review the rest of the facility’s events in the coming days.

City Manager Robb Corbett wrote in an email that the three-day gun show, which runs from Friday through Sunday, would proceed as planned because the city did not expect the event to attract 250 people at the same time and the venue was spacious enough to allow people to maintain 3 feet of separation between each other.

Pendleton Convention Center Manager Pat Beard said he was home sick with a cold and directed questions to Corbett, who said in an interview Thursday that once Beard returned to work, the pair would review the convention center schedule and discuss whether they would need to take action.

There are several events scheduled within the governor’s four-week prohibition, including a three-day Jehovah’s Witnesses gathering.

Wildhorse taking additional safety measures

According to an email from Public Relations Manager Mary Liberty-Traugher, Wildhorse Resort & Casino is taking measures to follow the new guidelines issued by the state.

“Wildhorse recognizes the importance of restrictions on social distancing protocol for gatherings,” she wrote. “We are making changes to upcoming events to reduce group sizes and allow more space between individuals

during this critical time.”

These changes included rescheduling a Starship concert featuring Mickey Thomas that was planned for March 21 to a later date and evaluating other upcoming events to see if they can be rearranged or postponed.

The resort and casino first faced the urgency of the coronavirus after an employee became the first Eastern Oregon resident to test positive for it on March 2, and Liberty-Traugher said they’ve implemented a program called “Priority One” since then.

“This program involves methods and timelines for completing a sanitation checklist every four hours,” she said.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation established a COVID-19 Incident Command team to “assertively protect” tribal members from coronavirus and ensure the tribes’ government and commerce operations continue. The Board of Trustees expanded the team’s responsibilities and authority and gave it \$1 million in funding.

“We are bringing together the interdisciplinary resources of the Tribal government, Health Services and Economic Enterprises to determine next steps in dealing with this pandemic,” Incident Commander Chuck Sams said in a statement. “We know a comprehensive approach is key to ensure the health of our people and our economy in the coming months.”

Hermiston activities being adjusted

Thursday evening, the city of Hermiston announced several precautions it was taking, including the closure of the Harkenrider Senior Activity Center until April 8.

The usual in-house lunch Monday through Friday will still be available for pick-up, however, if people call 541-567-3582 before 11 a.m. Meals on Wheels will also continue to be delivered on

Tuesdays and Thursdays to people calling before 10 a.m.

The city has also canceled all classes and youth activities at the Hermiston Public Library, as well as parks and recreation activities held in schools, until further notice. People who are exhibiting cold and flu symptoms may be asked to leave public facilities. Anyone scheduled to appear in municipal court as a defendant or juror can ask to reschedule or appear remotely if they are have flu-like symptoms or are in a high-risk category.

According to the city, the HART bus system is still running, but Kayak Public Transit is sanitizing everything regularly, as is the Hermiston Taxi Company, using “medical-grade” cleaning supplies.

The city will still collect utility payments, but will suspend shutting off services for now.

At the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston, manager Al Davis said that the Blue Mountain Friends of the NRA banquet scheduled for Saturday has been postponed to June 6, while the home show scheduled for March 19-21 has been canceled.

One private event coming up will likely be “right up against the barrier” of 250 people, Davis said, but he hasn’t had a chance to discuss plans with the customer. Many other smaller meetings at EOTEC will continue, and Davis said some of the larger events scheduled for after April are outdoors and could continue.

He said 2-1/2 weeks ago staff had already put out additional hand sanitizing stations and signs in the building to encourage safety.

“We were ready,” he said. “We knew something was going to happen. We had hoped it wouldn’t get to this, but it did, and we will play the cards we were dealt and follow the same rules as everyone else.”

In addition to limiting the people infected with the disease, health officials stressed

that the state’s new preventative measures are also essential to reduce the potential for local hospitals and health care systems to become overwhelmed by patients in need.

Local medical facilities stand ready

The Umatilla County Health Department confirmed both COVID-19 patients in the county do not require hospitalization and are quarantining at home for now, but St. Anthony’s Hospital in Pendleton is feeling ready if the outbreak grows in the days or weeks to come.

Emily Smith, the hospital’s director of communications, said all visitors and patients are being screened in the lobby of the hospital, where they’re asked whether they have a sore throat, a cough, nasal congestion, body aches, a fever and if they’ve traveled outside of the country recently.

Those with a cough are mandated to wear masks, Smith said, and hospital staff have emphasized educating the public about the disease using CDC and Oregon Health Authority guidelines.

The state has said it’s hoping commercial labs and local hospitals may soon be able to conduct tests for the virus, which would help the state lab that is currently able to process 80 samples per day.

Smith said the Oregon Hospital Association reached out to St. Anthony’s recently letting them know more labs may be coming online but they haven’t been given official word on whether there’d be one in Pendleton.

But according to an email from Jodi Gavel, infection preventionist with Good Shepherd Hospital in Hermiston, they’ve been told that additional testing will be made available and expect it to begin in the “next few days.”

East Oregonian reporters Antonio Sierra, Jade McDowell and Kathy Aney contributed to this report.

Councilor: ‘He was very careful to study both sides of issues’

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to fill out a term left vacant after the death of his father in August. In assuming Orrin Lyon’s seat on the council, John extends an almost unbroken chain of Lyons serving on the council all the way back to the mid-60s. Orrin, 82, died in August after being thrown from his mule during a trail ride in Harris Park. His uncle Mel, who started serving in 1964, died while in office in 2001 at age 84.

On Monday evening, as John Lyon settled into his place at the table in the Milton-Freewater Public Library’s Albee Room, City Manager Linda Hall beamed at the newbie councilor.

“Mr. Mayor, we have a quorum,” she said.

Lyon, who works for Walla Walla County, Washington, as a mechanic, humbly admits he may or may not have the right stuff for the position. While he loves his city, he never once attended a city council meeting until the one in which he was approved. When people had approached him earlier about the idea of

filling out his father’s term, he said he blew them off. But people, including his brother Nathan, kept bringing it up. Then his 29-year-old daughter Noel Shannon pushed him to do it. He asked her why and she proceeded to list his attributes.

“The person she described would be a really good councilor,” Lyon said.

She fetched him an application from Milton-Freewater City Hall and he filled it out, figuring the council could turn him down and halfway expected they would. But they didn’t. In the back of his mind, he heard his dad’s voice.

“Dad thought a lot of this city,” Lyon said. “Dad wouldn’t want to leave the city council in a tough spot.”

He described his father and uncle with obvious respect.

Orrin, he said, grew up on a family farm, the youngest of six brothers. Those who knew him described him as a quiet, wise and conservative man, who was involved with FFA and his church. He worked in his older brother Mel’s custom harvest business until 1979 until he got a job with the



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
John Lyon takes the oath of office as Milton-Freewater’s newest city councilor. Lyon with fill out the remainder of the term of his father Mel who died in a riding accident. Administering the oath is City Recorder Leanne Steadman. John’s brother Nathan Lyon holds the Bible.

Rogers Canning Company in Walla Walla, Washington, where he worked until 2002.

Parkinson’s disease, a disorder that limits and slows movement, took its toll in recent years. Orrin gave up riding his motorcycle after his balance deteriorated, Lyon said. On the day of his accident, Orrin and a friend rode along the South Fork of the Walla Walla River. They were almost back when Orrin fell off the mule and down a

60-foot cliff.

A helicopter rushed him to Walla Walla with multiple broken bones. He was later flown to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle where he died of complications.

Hall, who started with the city as executive secretary to the city manager in 1993, knew both brothers. She said Orrin reluctantly took office after Mel’s death in 2001 and almost immediately got comfortable in council chambers.

“Orrin said he was just filling out his brother’s term and that was it,” Hall said. “But he kept filing to run. He served as council president almost from the beginning.”

Mel, say those who knew him, proved himself to be a no-nonsense problem solver in life who sent his combine crews out with a prayer and worked endless hours during harvest season and brought the same work ethic to City Hall. Hall recalled that Mel, a polio survivor, made his way up the steep City Hall steps each week to talk with the city manager about agenda items.

“He was super-intelligent and super committed,” she said. “He was very careful to study both sides of issues.”

Mel resigned in 1994, citing health problems, but won reelection again in 1999 after getting fired up about an issue, Lyon said. He died in 2001 before completing his term.

Key met Mel after winning his race for mayor earlier that year.

“It was a contentious time when I became mayor,” Key said. “Two-thirds of the way

through my first meeting, we fired the city manager.”

Mel had advocated for the city manager, while Key voted to remove him. Despite the rough start, Key developed a trusting working relationship with Mel, whom he described as tough and conservative.

Key said Orrin started filling out his brother’s term with trepidation, but eased into the job quickly.

On Monday night, Mel’s nephew and Orrin’s son joined with Key and councilors Steve Irving, Jose Garcia and Vern Pressnall to discuss a slate of issues. The newcomer quietly registered his votes, asking a couple of questions along the way.

Lyon said he plans to fill out his father’s term until it ends on Dec. 31, 2022, and go from there.

“I’m intrigued,” he said. “This is a new experience.”

Lyon said he begins this adventure with some regrets.

“My dad served 18 years and I never once went to a city council meeting,” he said. “I never once saw him in action. I’m beating myself up about that.”

Visits: ‘They know we have to protect our residents’

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to limit as many visitors as possible.”

So far, he said, family members are being understanding.

“They know we have to protect our residents,” Crisman said. “We’ll get through it.”

Malhia Lieuallen, executive director at McKay Creek Estates, said residents, employees and visitors are disappointed, but compliant.

“This executive order trumps everything,” Lieuallen said. “We’re just being cautious.”

Both facilities have

ceased taking groups of residents to movies, concerts and other events in the community, everything except medical appointments. Similarly, musical groups and other community visitors won’t be allowed to come in.

“We’re doing a lot of bingo and planning a St. Paddy’s Day party,” Lieuallen said. “We’re trying to keep them busy.”

Crisman said Willowbrook residents will have movies and popcorn on-site, instead of going to a theater.

If residents choose to leave on their own, they can do so.

“This isn’t a jail,” Cris-

man said. “We advise them to wash their hands when they go out and wash their hands when they come in.”

Tests to determine whether someone is infected are conducted through medical swabs sent to the state’s central health laboratory.

Pakseresht said Oregon officials are taking every step they can to avoid “the tragic situation developing in Washington,” where deaths have mounted among those in a Kirkland, Washington, long-term care facility.

State officials said they urged those caring for elderly relatives or friends to follow similar guidance. They also

recommend that the elderly should stay home as much as possible and when in public avoid close contact with others. The elderly should stock up on food, medications and other supplies to minimize their risk of infection from going out.

Allen said Oregonians need to take the situation “incredibly seriously” by abiding the state’s restrictions and guidance.

“We’re asking people to do some really hard stuff,” Allen said.

The Oregon Capital Bureau contributed to this report.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Crystal King, charge nurse at Willowbrook Terrace, takes the temperature of Amber Rice on Thursday morning. Rice, deemed an essential visitor, had come to visit her grandmother.