

Opinions: ‘The only thing that you can control is your response’

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about it in the newspaper, I don’t think anyone would have gotten as concerned about it as they are now,” she said. “But hey, you’ve got to sell papers and keep your numbers up.”

Wright’s claims again ignore reality, considering publications across the country, including the *East Oregonian*, have announced layoffs and cutbacks due to a decrease in revenue during the pandemic.

Wright said she’s “mixed” on whether the coronavirus does pose a public health risk or not, but said she’s refused to change her lifestyle because of the virus.

“I was never totally convinced that we needed to stay home and do nothing, and I’m still not convinced that staying home and doing nothing is the right thing to do,” she said. “I happen to be one of these people that believe if you’re going to get it then you’re going to get it. I may be a fool. I don’t know.”

All three legislative districts in Northeast Oregon — House District 57, House District 58 and Senate District 29 — are unusually competitive this year, with candidates in every Republican and Democratic primary.

All the remaining candidates shared their thoughts on how they’ve been dealing with COVID-19 both as residents and politicians.

Senate District 29

The incumbent in the race for the Oregon Senate’s 29th District, Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, has a unique perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hansell was hospitalized on March 29 at St. Mary’s Hospital in Walla Walla, Washington, after experiencing pain in his left lung while breathing and a slight fever. Though doctors eventually identified blood clots in his lungs as the source, he first had to go through the hospital’s COVID-19 protocols.

“What it did for me

was see the protocols that were in place and gave me a sense of security that our medical professionals have responded appropriately,” he said of his experience in the hospital last week.

After seeing directly how a hospital was responding to the pandemic and state projections now indicating Oregon’s hospitals have enough beds for a surge of cases, Hansell said he’d like to see hospitals be able to accept elective and nonemergency surgery patients once again.

While lifting these restrictions would allow more people to receive medical care again, Hansell was also concerned about the financial impact the current restrictions are having.

“IT DOESN’T MATTER IF WE BECOME HEALTHY AS A SOCIETY IF WE ARE CRIPPLED AS A SYSTEM. I AM CONCERNED WITH OUR ECONOMIC STABILITY IN THE SHORT RUN, LET ALONE THE LONG RUN”

— Roland Ruhe, Oregon House District 57 candidate

“Like any other business they’ve got to have the income to pay the bills,” he said.

Hansell was released from the hospital on April 1 and said he is recovering at home.

Garison Lee Alger, a Pendleton carpenter who is challenging Hansell in the Republican primary, has been checking up on relatives to make sure they get what they need during the stay home order.

Alger said it’s important for the government to take action now to prevent more drastic measures in the future, and the state’s current order tasks residents with slowing the spread.

“It’s on us, to a certain extent, to make sure we’re not passing it to one another,” he said. “I think that it’s a good idea to make sure that large gatherings aren’t taking place and it’s not becoming a widespread thing. I think maybe a little bit of extra panic has set in, but it’s to be expected when something out of the ordinary happens.”

Alger said he still needs to talk to constituents about Eastern Oregon’s specific needs, but he’d like to see a relief package target small business owners and farmers.

Mildred O’Callaghan is the lone Democrat running for Senate District 29. Campaigning has been a bit tough with social distancing in place.

“Well, we haven’t been able to hold anything,” she said. “We’re trying to do virtual meetings.”

O’Callaghan said her campaign also is relying on the tradition of letters to the editor and as a former precinct person, she is making use of voter lists to call Democrats.

O’Callaghan described Gov. Kate Brown’s response to the pandemic as “spot-on.”

“I think she’s been ahead of the game,” O’Callaghan said.

If the Legislature convenes for a special session, she said unemployment funding should be a top priority. Wallowa County relies on tourism spending, but the “stay home, save lives” campaign to curb the spread of the coronavirus means those tourists will be staying home, and local businesses are looking at taking a serious financial hit.

House District 58

Wright will have to advance past an opponent in the Democratic primary and win a general election to share her views in the Legislature.

Not much has changed in the day-to-day life of Bobby Levy since the arrival of COVID-19.

The Republican candidate for District 58 has started avoiding the crowds at grocery stores, but

it’s easy for Levy to stay socially distant when her days are spent delivering lambs on her family farm near Echo.

“I think everyone should take it serious,” she said. “My personal opinion is I believe that everyone in Eastern Oregon is taking it serious.”

Levy said she would like to see the Legislature meet sooner rather than later to approve an economic relief package for Oregonians. She wanted the package to include delays on the corporate activities tax and an increase to the gas tax for at least a year.

“We have people who are basically running their businesses on a shoestring, and

then they have to be hit with the CAT tax,” she said. “And they have to pay it whether they’re doing well or not.”

A second Republican in the race, Mike Nelson of Elgin, dropped out.

The other Democrat in the District 58 race, Portland State University student Nolan Bylenga, made an early return home to Pendleton once the university moved all its classes online.

Bylenga said he disagrees with people who say residents should continue going about their daily lives despite the stay home order.

“When all the legislators, both Republicans and Democrats, the president, as well as our Democratic governor, are taking steps to protect people’s lives, we shouldn’t oppose that,” he said.

Bylenga said he’s been thinking about the government’s economic relief lately, especially since the federal stimulus package’s direct payments to residents excludes dependents and college students like him.

He would like the state to

look at relief for those caught in the loophole as well as for small businesses, noting that Barreto Manufacturing, the company owned by outgoing state Rep. Greg Barreto, recently laid off two-thirds of its workforce.

House District 57

The incumbent in the race for the Oregon House’s 57th District, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, commended the governor on her handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in the state and said while the pair don’t always agree, his support was behind her at this point in time.

“As of right now I have no criticism of the governor — I would throw her accolades for the heavy lifting that she is doing and we need to sustain her at this point in time as she’s making those decisions,” said Smith. “I can share with you why I don’t always agree with her on certain policy issues, but she has Oregon’s best interest in mind and she would never make decisions to knowingly hurt the state of Oregon.”

Smith stressed the importance of social distancing and, when possible, supporting local businesses so that the framework for Oregon’s economy continues to exist when things get moving again. Smith said that he has been reaching out to local businesses and talking to neighbors and friends about how they are being impacted by the virus.

“I think, right now, people understand that this is a pandemic, we need to take it serious. No one person caused this, and we’re all in this together,” he said.

Smith said one of the primary goals of the special session will be determining exactly how money flows into the state as well as complying with any strings or regulations on how money is used. Smith cited his experience in past recessions and special sessions saying that the key is to be as informed as possible in order to react as appropriately as possible.

“Right now, there is a tremendous amount of infor-

mation on the virus floating around and some of it is accurate and some of it is inaccurate,” he said. “What we need to be doing as a Legislature is making sure that the right messages are being sent out and we are taking the right actions.”

Roland Ruhe, a contender from Irrigon for the Oregon House District 57 seat, said he agrees with the decisions the governor has made, but acknowledged that they cause hardship for many people, including himself and his family.

Ruhe, a Democrat, said he has seen a drop in his construction business, as well as that of his wife, who works as a beautician.

“I agree with the efforts and the steps that are being made,” he said. “It’s such a fine line that is being walked here that there is never going to be a perfect solution that is going to be equal amongst everybody.”

Despite his agreement with the steps being taken to counteract the spread of the novel coronavirus, Ruhe said he is worried about the impacts of closures and shutdowns on the economy both now and in the future, something he hopes that a special session will help resolve.

“It doesn’t matter if we become healthy as a society if we are crippled as a system” he said. “I am concerned with our economic stability in the short run, let alone the long run, and I would hope that would be a high concern for our officials at that special session.”

Ruhe said he doesn’t necessarily see a better solution to what has been done, but hopes people are able to take the issue seriously and react accordingly so recovery can begin sooner rather than later.

“I think people need to take this serious and do their part,” he said, “the only thing that you can control is your response.”

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East Oregonian reporter Ben Lonergan and La Grande Observer editor Phil Wright contributed to this report.

Arbitration: ‘I gave Adair ample opportunities to correct’

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Contracts signed by purchasers specify and require the use of a Texas-based construction arbitration service. The arbitrator, John Bradoch Sr., awarded the amount of \$36,389.29 plus the cost of legal fees to the Brookses.

But that award is to be applied directly to the \$174,439 the couple still owes to Adair Homes for the house. In addition, the arbitrator awarded an allowance of \$15,000 for the impact on the residual reasonable value of Adair’s unpaid work. The couple remains on the hook for \$123,049.71 to the company, with the defamation lawsuit pending.

“I don’t feel the results are justified at all,” Wes Brooks said.

After living in the home for more than a year, he said,

they have many of the same issues and repair needs, plus more. Windows do not properly shut, he said, and siding blows off the home if there is a strong wind.

“I gave Adair ample opportunities to correct,” Brooks said.

Adair Homes, a Washington-based organization, proclaims, “It is our privilege to help our customers build the homes they’ve always dreamed of.” The company has built more than 20,000 homes since inception in 1969 and does business in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Arizona.

“We are not able to comment specifically on the arbitration or any other legal matters,” Adair homes said in a statement. “However, our goal has been to resolve the construction items in question and are hopeful that

the completion of the arbitration process will happen for Mr. Brooks.”

Umatilla County Circuit Judge Eva Temple set a trial date in the defamation case, but that has been postponed indefinitely due to an anti-SLAPP motion progressing to appeals court after failed mediation. The motion was moved to the appeals court in early March.

Quality of Adair Homes Review Facebook page is active and has more than 1,800 members.

Brooks has posted the full arbitration resolution to the page. Members of the group have shared similar experiences and their struggles with resolution.

The entire process, Brooks said, has been like “seeing all the money we have spent blow away in the wind.”



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, File
Wes Brooks uses a level in 2019 to demonstrate the curvature in the wall of his home built by Adair Homes. Brooks prevailed in arbitration over Adair Homes, the builder of his home near Pendleton.

Masks: EOCI has so far managed to keep coronavirus outside its walls

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Friday, but most of the crew volunteered to work last Saturday, too. So far, the sewers average as many as 3,500 masks a day, using light blue chambray material in a 50-50 cotton-polyester blend.

The idea of prisons as mask producers came from Maria Rodriguez, OCE production coordinator at Snake River Correctional Institution. Dr. Christopher DiGiulio, the chief of medicine for the Oregon Department of Corrections, inspected a prototype while at EOCI and approved a mask design

that would provide proper filtration.

Bartholomew said the masks aren’t medical grade — yet.

“They are utility masks. They are not certified,” he said. “We’re trying to source medical-grade material. We’d like to be able to achieve that certification to be more useful to the medical community.”

Bartholomew is spending part of each workweek looking for materials to keep the operation flowing, especially trying to locate medical-grade materials at a reasonable price.

“I’ve been spending an



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
The garment factory at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution is temporarily producing one product only — masks.

inordinate amount of time procuring materials to put in the pipeline to feed this pro-

gram,” he said. “Right now, we’re looking at 65,000 or 75,000 masks we have

to produce.”

EOCI doesn’t yet have a case of coronavirus within its prison walls. So far, an inmate at the Santiam Correctional Institution and a staff member at the Oregon State Penitentiary, both in Salem, have tested positive for COVID-19. EOCI may have a good shot at escaping the virus given that the prison was already in lockdown mode because of a flu outbreak in late February. Hand sanitizer and masks were distributed and those with symptoms were quarantined. Visitation and activities, downsized during the flu epidemic, became

further restricted as the pandemic revved up.

“We already had things well in place,” Bartholomew said. “The institution did a superb job in minimizing the spread of infection.”

He said the prison’s foray into mask production could possibly continue down the road as they master medical-grade masks.

Mask production isn’t the only DOC contribution in this time of pandemic. Eleven Snake River inmates man a 211 call center to disseminate information about COVID-19. In the future, the prison system may also manufacture hand sanitizer.