People flock to McKay Reservoir

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

People congregated on McKay Dam outside of Pendleton on Tuesday afternoon as temperatures reached into the mid-70s.

Umatilla County up to 45 cases after eight announced Tuesday

By ALEX CASTLE East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Umatilla County is up to 45 confirmed cases of COVID-19 after announcing eight new cases Tuesday, its largest single-day jump since the county began tracking the virus March 2.

But while some models indicate Oregon has passed the virus' peak as an entire state, Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said it's unclear where exactly the county is on the timeline of the outbreak.

"Locally, I'm still hesitant to say we're over the peak," he said. "It's not unusual for rural areas to lag behind urban ones when it comes to virus spread."

According to a county press release, the public health department is conducting intensive contact investigations and have identified seven individuals as close contacts of one of the previously confirmed cases. All of the individuals who tested positive Tuesday are self-isolating and recovering at home.

The county is reporting no deaths from COVID-19, 21 recovered patients and 24 active cases. Individuals are considered recovered when they have been free from symptoms, including fever, cough, shortness of breath and diarrhea, for 72 hours. Three individuals remain hospitalized with COVID-19.

Out of the 676 tests conducted in Umatilla County, 45 have come back positive.

Fiumara

Umatilla County Public Health is continuing to not include demographic information with individual cases, but released its latest "locations trend map" on Tuesday.

According to the map, Hermiston remains the local hotspot with more than 15 reported cases now coming from the county's most populous city. More than 10 cases have been reported in Umatilla, and Pendleton now appears on the map with somewhere between five and nine confirmed cases.

The map doesn't provide any information on county ZIP codes that are reporting less than four confirmed cases.

While more data becomes available to identify trends and patterns in the local spread of the virus, Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said the current map has yet to tell much.

"There's nothing that jumps out really big," he said. "It's hard to draw much from the small numbers we have."

Though the dataset is still hindered by limited numbers, the health department also released on its website its first round of information on the age ranges and sex of the 30 residents who had tested positive as of last Thursday.

The available information on age ranges doesn't show a clear trend, though eight residents from age 50-59 have tested positive so far, more than any other age range in the county.

The data as of last Thursday also shows that 57% of the county's confirmed cases are female, and 43% are male, which Fiumara said is "relatively in step with the rest of the state."

One dataset that's less dependent on numbers to show a trend is the "epi curve," which the county will also be releasing each Thursday and will show the number of confirmed cases that began showing symptoms of the virus on a particular date.

According to last Thursday's numbers, 27 of the county's cases began showing symptoms between March 23 and April 19, and there was a 19-day break between when the second confirmed case began showing symptoms on Feb. 27 and the third confirmed case showed symptoms on March 18.

"What it shows is our initial cases were kind of an anomaly," Fiumara said. "And what that suggests is those first individuals were likely infected outside of the county."

It also means that the virus is still spreading among the community. In fact, Fiumara said the health department's recent contact investigations have turned up more instances of people who hadn't been as strict on social distancing and isolating at home.

"There's a lot of talk about reopening and I get it. It's really difficult being cooped up with how nice the weather has been out here recently," he said. "But if we just pull all these things back or stop being careful, all this work to try and limit its spread will have been a waste of time."

"THERE'S A LOT OF TALK ABOUT REOPENING AND I GET IT. IT'S REALLY DIFFICULT BEING COOPED UP WITH HOW NICE THE WEATHER HAS BEEN OUT HERE RECENTLY. BUT IF WE JUST PULL ALL THESE THINGS BACK OR STOP BEING CAREFUL, ALL THIS WORK TO TRY AND LIMIT ITS SPREAD WILL HAVE BEEN A WASTE OF TIME."

Joe Fiumara — *Umatilla County Public Health Director*

City proposes a status quo budget

New budget proposal attempts to patch over the revenue shortfalls

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The city of Pendleton labeled its 2020-21 budget "Progress," but it's as much about holding down the fort as it is about moving forward.

To comply with social distancing guidelines, the city held its budget committee meeting at the Pendleton Convention Center's exhibitor hall instead of the smaller meeting rooms it usually inhabits.

But it was also a fitting relocation. The facility has been closed for more than a month as part of a statewide effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The new budget proposal attempts to patch over the revenue shortfalls for the convention center and other city services affected by the coronavirus shutdown.

On the surface, the proposal shows a city in a strong financial position.

The 2020-21 budget surges past $100 million, more than twice the amount it was two years ago, mostly driven by significant federal grants directed toward the airport. The growth in the general fund — the pot of money that funds police, firefighters and parks — was much more modest, but still apparent. At the moment, the city isn't anticipating making any layoffs.

But Corbett warned the committee that many of the revenue estimates were based on budget history rather than an anticipation of the economic downturn to come.

With no way of knowing how long coronavirus will continue to ravage the economy, Corbett said he's told all of his department heads to create contingency plans that would cut 6% of their costs, if necessary.

"I have no idea what revenues are going to look like," he said. "This is a very fluid environment we're in right now."

One area that may need future revision is the state tax street fund. The city relies on its share of the state gas tax to help fund road maintenance, and officials are projecting the tax to generate $1.3 million for the city next fiscal year.

But after the meeting, Corbett said he's heard chatter from other city managers from across the state that due to less travel and falling gas prices, the state gas tax revenues could fall by about 12%.

Another area of uncertainty is the Pendleton Aquatic Center.

Even in a sound economy, Corbett said the aquatic center operates at a loss of $250,000, and if the state continues to prevent large crowds from gathering over the summer, the pool might not open for the season.

Attracting large crowds is the convention center's modus operandi, but most reopening plans show mass gatherings as one of the final things to return.

As of Tuesday, the budget proposal calls for the convention center fund to be reduced by only $50,000, the revenue shortfall cushioned by a $190,190 interfund loan.

The convention center wasn't the only place where the city shifted money around.

The economic development fund was nearly zeroed out to cover expenses elsewhere in the general fund, while the community development fund is transferring another $225,000 to the fund.

It's not all bad news when it comes to city revenue. While the city doesn't share the exact numbers it expects in marijuana tax revenue, Corbett said that figure could be trending upward.

"One of the revenues that has gone up is marijuana," he said. "Everyone seems to be smoking weed right now, from what I've read."

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