

Testing: Turnaround time averages 24 to 48 hours

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“Three months into this, we have yet to do a single test,” he said. Now, “we will be able to do upwards of 20 tests a day — maybe 30.”

St. Anthony’s emergency department will also be able to obtain 30 tests a day, according to ED Manager Steven Hardin. Both the hospital and clinic will test only symptomatic patients and will closely follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Symptoms include cough, shortness of breath, fever greater than 100 degrees, difficulty breathing, shaking and chills, headache, loss of taste or smell and sore throat. Blanket testing and drive-thru clinics aren’t yet possible, Townsley said, but at least things are loosening up.

“The only way we can conquer this is to test and do contact tracing,” he said. “The real breakthrough is going to happen when we can test.”

St. Anthony Hospital has done 29 tests with three positive results. Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston, which has the bulk of the county’s COVID cases, has done more testing. Last Thursday, during an *East Oregonian* “Behind the News” video, CEO Dennis Burke said the hospital had at that point done 248 tests, with 14 testing positive.

In Pendleton, Interpath Marketing Director Judy



A sign on the door of the laboratory at Interpath Laboratory advises that personal protective equipment is required. The laboratory will begin processing coronavirus tests on May 1.

Kennedy said the laboratory is primed to do 1,000 tests per day, but only if the reagent stays in good supply. She said the company is working to reach capacity.

“I would safely say we could consistently perform 200 to 300 per day at this point,” Kennedy wrote in an email on Monday.

So far, turnaround time averages 24 to 48 hours, but

it can take up to four days if the weekend is involved. The company serves a wide area.

“We also have clients throughout Oregon, Washington and Idaho requesting testing, so this is a difficult high wire act,” Kennedy wrote. “We are committed to fulfill what our local communities are requesting first and foremost, and again we

are very appreciative of the local providers following the CDC guidelines for testing. We want to be able to provide for their needs.”

Hitzman, as the county’s health officer, participates in regular caucus calls with officers from the state’s other 35 counties. As they strategize, they keep an eye on Oregon’s so far incredibly flat curve, one that defied

earlier modeling. Hitzman gives kudos to the collective efforts of Oregonians who are staying home and practicing social distancing.

“We are on the backside of the curve,” he said. “The stay-at-home order is still important, it’s what got us past the peak. We’ve done a good job of staying at home. If we had continued business as usual, it would have been

a whole different picture.”

Hitzman said he hopes physicians will ramp up their testing.

“I’m encouraging our providers to test more frequently because we can and we should,” he said. “Our threshold for testing needs to be lower.”

Hitzman said he worries about people in health care facilities, senior living, prisons, grocery stores and other high-risk settings.

“We don’t see prison inmates, but we do see prison employees,” he said. “We would want to test quickly. The same with health care workers, grocery store employees. Anyone considered a high risk individual by virtue of their occupation.”

He said recent data shows that the Portland metro area is testing at a rate of 22.5 tests per 10,000 people. Region 9, which includes Umatilla, Morrow and most other Eastern Oregon counties, performs tests at a rate of 11.9 per 10,000 people. That’s going up, he said. Not long ago, the number was six. During the health directors’ frequent caucus calls, they talk about what might be the optimal testing rate.

“A frequency of 10,000 of 10,000 will never happen, but how many would we like to see?” he said. “The number we’d like to see is 30 or more per 10,000, but quite frankly, if we could test 1% of the population, that would be wonderful.”

Reopening: Spike in cases is expected upon reopening

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only park, which suffered severe damage in February’s flooding, has been restored and could reopen for day use as early as May 1.

The business closures and restrictions from Brown’s stay-at-home order, which has been in place since March 23, have wreaked havoc on Oregon’s economy. According to data released Thursday from the Oregon Employment Department, more than 330,000 Oregonians — about 1 in 6 people — filed new unemployment claims during the first five weeks of the pandemic.

“We are already hearing that while some businesses are beginning to prepare themselves for reopening, others are working on plans to close permanently,” Murdock wrote in an email to public officials in the county Tuesday. “This is tragic and we need to press for ways of reopening in a matter of weeks, if we can clear critical public safety hurdles, which we believe we can.”

The board of commissioners is awaiting word from the governor’s office about its proposed guidelines, but are planning to officially adopt them at a meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. Wednesday.

According to a copy of



Salon owner Cherice Clayton trims a customer’s hair at Ellig’ance Hair Salon in Hermiston on March 23, 2020, the same day Gov. Kate Brown issued her stay home executive order closing hair salons, barbershops and other personal services.

the proposed guidelines, the county won’t authorize any reopening or lifting of restrictions without the blessing of the state and won’t take any action that conflicts with the state’s protocols.

In a meeting with business leaders on April 22, Brown detailed her “Reopening Oregon” framework, which includes criteria in regard to case numbers, testing capa-

bilities and hospital capacity that local communities must meet in order to start lifting restrictions.

“We’ve received assurances that we’ve met the gating criteria that make it reasonable for us to do that,” Murdock said.

The board of commissioners have consulted Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara and Health Officer Dr. Jon Hitz-

man in developing their plans, and both have signed off on the proposal.

“At some point, we’ve got to pick a date,” Fiumara said. “The idea is to have something to aim for and something to give the community some hope that it’s not going to be like this all the way into the summer.”

The health department announced eight new confirmed cases Tuesday, bring-

ing the county total to 45. Though eight cases is the largest single-day jump the county has seen since its first case was announced March 2, Fiumara said the day cases are announced isn’t as important as when the individual first began showing symptoms.

That data will be provided in the county’s weekly “epi curve” release on Thursday, which shows the number of confirmed cases that began showing symptoms of the virus on a particular date. For now, Fiumara said more spikes in confirmed cases throughout the week could require him to reevaluate the May 15 target date.

“The data is going to tell us where to go,” he said.

But with a number of Umatilla County cases already linked to out-of-county or out-of-state travel, Fiumara said the possibility of businesses reopening locally before elsewhere in the region and bringing a rush of travelers needs to be considered. Unfortunately, there’s only so much that county officials can do about it.

“It’s a factor, and it’s one that we don’t have much control over,” Fiumara said.

Under Brown’s multi-phase plan, Umatilla County would monitor the impact of

initially lifting some restrictions for at least 14 days to observe if there’s a surge in local cases before going any further. According to the county’s proposal, the board of commissioners expect it would take longer than the two weeks and the next phase of reopening would likely begin in June.

“We do understand that when we begin to reopen there will be a spike of some kind, but one that we hope will be minor,” Murdock said.

The second phase would include opening schools, gyms and playgrounds, allowing gatherings up to 50 people, and resuming non-essential travel. The third phase, which would increase gathering sizes to 250 people and allow restaurants to offer more seating, isn’t expected to begin until late June or early July, according to the county’s proposal.

But as the plan comes together for gradually reopening the county, the fate of events like Pendleton Whisky Fest, the Umatilla County Fair and Pendleton Round-Up looms large as the summer draws closer.

“We’re bearing down on a time, maybe in a matter of days, where there’s going to have to be decisions made about those major events,” Murdock said.

Ward 3: Primmer moved to Pendleton for law enforcement career

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making a second attempt at joining the council by running for Ward 3, which covers nearly everything south of Interstate 84, including Southgate, Tutuilla Road and McKay Creek.

Anderson said he’s running because he wants to keep city taxes and fees down, and he’s started to look at the budget to see where costs could be cut.

He singled out the Pendleton Fire Department, saying it paid too much in overtime and housing costs for its interns. He said the department would be better served if it hired another employee instead of paying overtime and moving interns to one of the other fire stations so the city could lease or sell the housing.

In contrast, Primmer didn’t think there were

many budget cuts that could be made that wouldn’t affect the quality of the city’s services.

“I know that there’s a lot of people that believe every government budget has a giant line item called ‘Waste,’ and you could go to that line item and fix every problem that God ever created, but the fact of the matter is that it’s simply not true,” he said.

A Hermiston native who moved to Pendleton to start a career in law enforcement, Primmer said he’s running again because he still finds himself with the time and



Anderson

LARRY ANDERSON

Age: 70
Occupation: Retired, former owner of Main Street Diner
Birthplace: Spokane, Washington
Years in Pendleton: 42
Highest level of Education: Associate’s degree, Kinman Business University
Family: Married, four children and eight grandchildren



Primmer

DALE PRIMMER

Age: 47
Occupation: Umatilla County director of community justice
Birthplace: Everett, Washington
Years in Pendleton: 17
Highest Level of Education: Bachelor’s degree, Western Oregon University
Family: Married, two children

ability to do the job.

Although there’s been progress made toward new housing, Primmer said the council will need to continue focusing on the issue, specifically the need for starter homes and

low-income housing.

Primmer and Anderson found themselves on opposite sides of the 4-cent gas tax for road maintenance, which will be on the May ballot but has no official supporters following

the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anderson thought the tax would hurt gas station owners and was a steep price to pay for Pendletonians.

“Why do we manage by crisis?” he said. “Why hasn’t something been done 10, 15 years (ago), a little at a time? If you need something done in your home, you do what you can, and you try to keep ahead of it. The same should be done at the city level.”

Primmer said he understood the issue was polarizing, and he unsuccessfully pushed to sunset the gas tax after five years instead of 10 as an accountability measure.

But he supported it because he understood that if the city doesn’t boost its funding further within the next few years, the problem will only get larger and more

expensive in the future.

The political opponents also disagreed on the value of the Pendleton UAS Range, which recently lost high profile customers like Airbus and PAE.

While Anderson would prefer the airport focus on bringing in bigger non-UAS customers, Primmer said the turnover at the range was a feature, not a bug.

“Turnover is something you expect at a test range,” he said. “People come in, they develop a product, they run it through their prototypes, they move it into manufacturing, and then they move on. And then somebody tests a new product, and they move in. That’s the nature of the beast.”

Umatilla County will begin mailing out ballots for the Ward 3 election on April 29 while Election Day is May 19.