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PENDLETON

Sewer tests show rise in COVID

Sample collection equates to average of 25 new COVID-19 cases per day

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — COVID-19 has shown a resurgence in Umatilla County over the past month, and Pendleton's sewers are reflecting it.

The city of Pendleton has been testing its wastewater treatment plant for COVID-19 since April, and its last couple of tests have shown significant growth in November.

The most recent report from a sample collected on Monday, Nov. 16, not only detected COVID-19 in the city sewer's system, but measured it out at 630,000 genome copies per liter of sewage. According to Biobot Analytics, the Massachusetts lab that processes the city's samples, that's the equivalent of an average of 25 new COVID-19 cases per day. That's a sharp rise from mid-October, when Biobot's projections showed Pendleton was averaging in the single digits.

Pendleton Wastewater Superintendent Mark Milne said he's still skeptical of some of the projections Biobot makes based on its sewage samples. In addition to a case count projection, Biobot also estimated that Pendleton's sewer system, which serves both the city and Mission on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, had higher COVID-19 concentration levels than 88% of all quantifiable samples collected in the past three weeks.

But Biobot's pitch has always been that its analysis can cast a wider net than what testing data shows, especially for a disease where carriers can be largely asymptomatic and access to tests is sometimes limited. According to a Johns Hopkins University study that includes Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, Oregon has the third lowest testing rate in the nation.

Despite his skepticism over some of Biobot's projections,

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Looking for a change in approach

Eastern Oregon officials hope letter will spur reform of COVID-19 handling

By **BRYCE DOLE** and **JADE MCDOWELL**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Elected leaders from Eastern Oregon counties who signed on to a letter asking Gov. Kate Brown for changes to her approach to COVID-19 shutdowns say the letter was not in direct response to the current two-week "freeze," but was crafted over several weeks as an outline of what



they hope to see happen as the state continues to address fluctuations in COVID-19 numbers.

The letter, dated Wednesday, Nov. 18, and signed by 51 county commissioners and state legislators, asks Brown to allow restaurants and bars to stay open throughout the pandemic, to fully reopen schools, to reopen state agencies, such as DMV offices, to the pub-

lic and to allow religious leaders to use their own best judgment in operating their places of worship. It also urges her to allow local elected officials to work with county health departments to come up with their own versions of Phase 1 and Phase 2 for COVID-19 regulations.

"A one-size-fits-all approach to shutting down the state was logical and appropriate in March

when the onset of this pandemic was new and was unknown," the letter states. "Over time, we have learned, adapted, adjusted and improved. Keeping counties and regions in a Phase II for an indefinite period of time is a one size fits all approach that does not work any longer."

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Pendleton Police Department Lt. Tony Nelson walks by the historic Rainbow Cafe on March 17, 2020, to ensure the bar had closed as ordered after throwing a St. Patrick's Day party in lieu of shutting down during the first round of restaurant shutdowns in March.

ENFORCING THE 'FREEZE'

Law enforcement in Umatilla County decline to enforce Gov. Brown's restrictions unless in the case of egregious circumstances

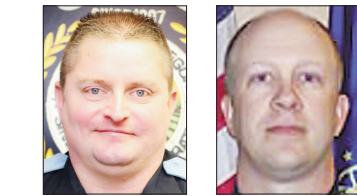
By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Law enforcement officials in Umatilla County are saying they will not be cracking down on social gatherings exceeding six people during Gov. Kate Brown's two-week "freeze" unless the gathering is in a public space or involves blatant disregard for the health and safety of communities.

Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts and Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said they

will be encouraging residents to comply with the measures, but will be leaving enforcement to the discretion of individual officers. Roberts said that circumstances would have to be "fairly egregious" if his officers were to respond with citations or arrests.

"I'm just going to make it clear, if somebody calls in and says, 'My neighbor's got 10 people over at their house,' we're not coming," Roberts said. "It's not something that we're going to waste time and energy and effort on. I can't think of another time in my tenure where we've been asked to take on a regulatory role that has such



political implications."

The governor's mandate, which began Wednesday, Nov. 18, is an attempt to slow the recent record-breaking spike in coronavirus cases statewide. The state has repeatedly set new records in cases, deaths and hospitalizations over the past two weeks, according to health officials.

The Oregon Health Authority reported Friday, Nov. 20, 1,306 new suspected or confirmed cases of the disease as the daily average case count reached 1,000 cases

for the first time since the pandemic began. A record 20 Oregonians were reported on Thursday, Nov. 19, to have died carrying the virus, as hospitalizations reached a record-high 414.

The lockdown measures announced by Brown are the same as those from last March. They restrict social gatherings to no more than six people from two separate households. Violators could receive citations of up to \$1,250 or even 30 days in jail.

"Now, I understand that the baseline of all this is the safety and well-being of our communities and to confine the spread, if not eradicate it to a certain degree, and I'm more than willing to do my part," Roberts said. "But there's some point where it

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COVID-19 NUMBERS IN UMATILLA COUNTY

2 WEEK TOTALS FOR WEEK ENDING 11/20/20



RISK LEVEL HIGH	TOTAL 2 WEEK CASE COUNT 390	TOTAL CASE GOAL 40 OR LESS OVER 2 WEEKS	POSITIVE TEST RATE 25%	POSITIVE TEST GOAL 5%
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