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NEW YEAR'S EVE

‘We’re going to move forward’

Dozens of people gather at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston to say good riddance to 2020

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Some stood near the warmth of fires in the parking lot of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston, eating, drinking and sharing stories under the light of a nearly full moon on a clear, crisp and windless New Year’s Eve.

Dozens more sat in their cars nearby, waiting for the fireworks that would mark the end of a truly arduous year.

Two men stood perhaps 100 yards away, in the dark beyond the Festival of Lights, preparing nearly 100 fireworks that would “blow out the old (year) and bring in the new one,” pyrotechnician Tom Ramsey said.

Each person had a story of struggle — the struggle of helping their children through online school; the struggle of working in a hospital during the pandemic; the struggle of losing a loved one to COVID-19; the struggle of not seeing friends and family for months.

But each also had their story of hope — the hope from a year spent inside and closer to family; the hope from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine the day before; the hope from the notion that although the next day wouldn’t be any different, maybe the next year would.

“It’s a mixed feeling,” said Al Davis, the general manager of EOTEC, who organized the event as a last-ditch effort to bring some celebration to the community. “You can’t forget 2020 that fast, it’s right there and the scab is still wet. But you know what, it really can’t get much worse. It’s got to get better. So we’re going to move forward.”

The lowlight of Davis’ year came just before Christmas, when his 82-year-old aunt passed away due to COVID-19. She was living in a nursing home in Pennsylvania after breaking her hip and was two weeks from receiving the vaccine when she tested positive for

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2020 YEAR IN REVIEW



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Nate Fuller, left, and Archie Morrow await rescue on the roof of a home in Thorn Hollow on Feb. 6, 2020. The pair was stranded when they attempted to rescue the elderly couple that was stuck in the house as waters from the Umatilla River began to rise. According to a family member of one of those stranded, all four people were rescued by 9:40 p.m. on Feb. 6, 2020

A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Historically, when the *East Oregonian* has compiled top-10 stories of the year lists, it has polled the staff on the top stories and compiled the list based on those results. When we went

down that path, it was apparent that the voting was for stories two through 10, because there is no question what the year’s top story would be — the COVID-19 pandemic.

That left stories like the February flooding that ravaged Umatilla County, summer protests in Hermiston and Pendleton, the sudden death of a Pendleton

city councilor and the permanent closure of the Boardman Generating Station competing for space with COVID-19 stories on the list.

With that in mind, we decided to split the list in two and have top-10 COVID-19 stories and a non-COVID list. There were no shortage of stories to choose from in 2020.

Top 10 COVID-19

1. Umatilla County resident tests presumptive positive for coronavirus

Umatilla County staked its place in the history of the COVID-19 pandemic when it reported Oregon’s third case.

The state announced on March 2 that a man had tested positive for the coronavirus after attending a basketball game at the Weston Middle School gym. The man was also an employee at the Wildhorse Resort & Casino, leading the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation to temporarily close Wildhorse and several other facilities in Mission.

The virus was still new enough to the state that the case spurred an Oregon Health Authority teleconference, where State Health Officer Dean Sidelinger tried to temper the seriousness of the development by adding most people would only experience mild symptoms after contracting COVID-19.

But Sidelinger also cautioned that harder days were coming.

“We anticipate that these case numbers will increase and we may see more serious illnesses and possibly even deaths within Oregon,” he said.

The fact that Umatilla County’s first case wasn’t connected with Oregon’s first two documented cases was a harbinger of how fast the virus would

spread in a short period of time.

Business continued relatively unabated in the initial days following the first case, but the status quo was fleeting.

Within weeks, the state closed schools and businesses weren’t far behind. By the summer, the county was recording dozens of new COVID-19 cases per day.

2. Vaccines arrive in Umatilla County

In a dreary year filled with illness and death, Umatilla County received a glimmer of hope in turning back the tide on COVID-19.

Daily case numbers still remain high, but the rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine meant Umatilla County was administering its first inoculations in mid-December.

Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center on the Umatilla Indian Reservation was the first in the county, and among the first tribes in the Northwest, to begin immunizing locals, prioritizing health care workers before moving on to tribal elders.

“I feel as though this is the first time we have been given a chance to fight back,” a clinic administrator said. “Now, there’s kind of a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Vaccination drives began more than a week later at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton and Good Shepherd Med-

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Top 10

1. Umatilla River overflows its banks

A 100-year flood is an extreme event that only has a 1% chance of happening each year.

In the 1990s, authorities calculated the 100-year flood level on the Umatilla River was 22,500 cubic feet per second, about 7,000 cfs higher than the record high. In early February, a combination of heavy rain and rapidly melting snow in the Blue Mountains pushed the river’s cfs to 28,900, a figure attached to a flood that cost Umatilla County dearly.

Homes in Pendleton, Echo and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were evacuated as the Umatilla’s waters expanded far beyond the floodplain.

The Thorn Hollow Bridge was washed away, necessitating helicopter rescues.

The surging waters breached a Pendleton levee, flooding Keystone RV Co. and Cor-Tek, causing them to suspend or curtail operations.

One woman near Pendleton died.

The floods quickly drew the attention of Salem, eliciting a visit from Gov. Kate Brown, who pledged millions of dollars to replace lost housing and make critical infrastructure repairs.

Many of the evacuees came back to homes covered in mud and in a state beyond repair. While Pendleton is in the midst of working with a developer on

replacement housing, it hasn’t yet broken ground. The Thorn Hollow Bridge is still broken as the county and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation look toward help from the state and federal government to get it replaced.

For Pendleton, the Umatilla River flood was the second year in a row that it experienced a major flood, after McKay Creek flooded in 2019.

Communities across Umatilla County will likely still be rebuilding from the latest flood as winter transitions into spring, keeping an eye on the region’s waterways to make sure they stay within their banks.

2. 200 march through streets of Pendleton in peaceful Black Lives Matter protest

As protests against racial injustice and police brutality took place across the country over the summer, nearly 200 Black Lives Matter demonstrators took to the streets of Pendleton in late August.

The event was overwhelmingly peaceful, as protesters gathered in the park to listen to community speeches. Organizers even worked with Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts weekly to plan out the stages of the protest.

The crowd was young and diverse, with attendees from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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