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## Bentz stance an about-face from Walden

Oregon Republican backs bid to upend presidential vote count

By GARY A. WARNER  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz of Ontario has called for an investigation of the 2020 presidential election, a move that would delay and possibly derail the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory over President Donald

Trump in November's election. Bentz has declined repeated requests since last week to say whether he would join an effort by more than 100 Republican House members to vote against accepting the Electoral College results when Congress makes a usually perfunctory review of the process on Wednesday, Jan. 6.



Bentz

"I have joined many of my colleagues in asking for a congressional investigation and review into what has happened in states where election irregularities have been observed," Bentz said in a statement Dec. 15.

Bentz's accusation of voting irregularities worthy of a congressional investigation is an about-face from the stance of his predecessor, Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River. Walden, who represented the district covering Eastern and Central Oregon for 20 years,

stepped down on Saturday, Jan. 2. Bentz was sworn in on Sunday, Jan. 3.

In a Dec. 1 radio interview with the National Journal, Walden said the election had been fair and "the die is cast" for Trump's departure. At the time he was one of only 27 Republicans in the House and Senate who would say Biden had defeated Trump.

Biden defeated Trump by more than 7 million votes and the Electoral College confirmed his victory on Dec. 14 by a 306-232 margin.

Trump or his surrogates have filed more than 50 lawsuits, with only one procedural request winning. The other cases on his allegations and seeking to stop vote counting or certification of votes have been rejected. The U.S. Supreme Court declined without comment to consider lawsuits by Trump supporters.

Trump has kept up the pressure, switching to a long-shot gamble to get Congress to reject the Electoral

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## County approves sale of Cook Building

Sale aims to facilitate building of new city hall in Hermiston

By JADE MCDOWELL  
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners has approved sale of its annex in Hermiston known as the Cook Building.

The sale is part of a three-way deal with the county, the city of Hermiston and landowners, Douglas and Joyce Barak, to facilitate the building of a new city hall in Hermiston.

The Baraks own the Lanham Building, a small suite of business offices next to city hall. The city needs the Lanham property in order to make its planned new, larger city hall fit on the current city hall property at 180 N.E. Second St. In exchange for selling the Lanham Building to the city for \$400,000, the Baraks will purchase the Cook Building for \$400,000 — essentially, a trade.

The Cook Building, located at 435 E. Newport Ave., currently hosts offices for the county's public health, human services, veteran services and the CARES program. After the county sells the building to the Baraks, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said the county plans to lease the building from them until the new city hall is complete. The terms of the lease are still under negotiation, Murdock said.

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### BACK TO SCHOOL

## Coming into focus

Reopening plans start to take shape for local districts

By ANTONIO SIERRA AND JADE MCDOWELL  
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Gov. Kate Brown's decision to make the school's COVID-19 metrics advisory rather than mandatory moved the reopening goalposts up again, but it's unlikely schools will execute a full-scale reopening by the governor's Feb. 15 deadline.

In an upcoming column in the *Hermiston Herald*, Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney wrote about some of the barriers that remain to returning to school.

"However, creating a 'new normal' isn't as easy as flipping a switch. As a school district we have been planning since March how to safely return our 5,500 students to the classroom while continuing to protect against the spread of COVID-19," she wrote.

Although Mooney's editorial was light on specifics, some students and parents are pushing for swift action.

About 20 students and parents stood on the street corner outside the Hermiston School



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A group of Hermiston High School students join fellow protesters advocating for the reopening of schools outside of the Hermiston School District offices in Hermiston on Monday, Jan. 4, 2021.

District offices on Monday, Jan. 4, holding signs splashed with rainwater encouraging the district to return students to the classroom as quickly as possible. They were soon greeted by Superintendent Mooney, who came outside to thank them for their support and let them know there was "no greater priority" for the district than safely bringing them back.

"We miss you guys more than ever," she told the students in

the group. "We miss seeing your faces."

District administrators were working on a plan, she said, and encouraged them to be on the lookout for surveys regarding reopening. She also encouraged everyone to reach out to her by email with questions, and said she would provide answers as soon as she had them.

Students at the protest said they missed seeing friends and participating in extracurricular

activities, but they were also concerned about what they felt was a reduced quality to their education this year.

Nick Purswell, a sophomore and three-sport athlete at Hermiston High School, said not only was it frustrating to miss out on opportunities to play sports, but he also worries about what the months of online learning will do to students' grade point

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## Brown's goal causes debate

Governor wants students back on campus Feb. 15

By ROB MANNING  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Two days before Christmas, Gov. Kate Brown pressed state agencies and school leaders to prioritize restoring in-person learning for more school children in the first several weeks of 2021. She called reducing the spread of COVID-19 and a safe return to campuses "the greatest gift we can give to Oregon's children this holiday season."

As she spelled out several new policies, including changing mandatory COVID-19 metrics into advice districts could consider rather than adhere to, Brown set a Feb. 15 goal for schools "to return students to in-person instruction, especially elementary students."

But schools that meet that target date will likely reopen before teachers and other key campus staff have been vaccinated against the virus.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Tracy Wart, an infection prevention nurse at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, draws up a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during the hospital's first round of staff vaccinations on Dec. 28, 2020.

That reality is causing debate among educators and local leaders and more uncertainty for parents and students.

In the days leading up to Brown's announcement of loosened regulations, the vast majority of Oregon students were attending class remotely. Just before winter break, less than 10% of Oregon's estimated 580,000 students were receiving

some form of in-person instruction, according to the Oregon Department of Education data.

However, as Oregon leaders like Brown press to bring more students back to the classroom, top officials are also acknowledging the importance of getting teachers and other school staff vaccinated against COVID-19. School employees are now considered part of "Phase 1b" — the

next round of people to receive COVID-19 vaccines. That means they'll be in line for vaccines after health care workers and people at long-term care facilities, ahead of the general public.

But vaccinations have been going more slowly than planned. According to data released by the Oregon Health Authority, 44,415 people had received initial doses of the vaccine as of New Year's Day.

In response to an inquiry from Oregon Public Broadcasting, state health and education officials acknowledged that vaccinations for school staff aren't even expected to begin until after the Feb. 15 target for reopening schools. Essential workers in the Phase 1b category should begin being vaccinated in late February, state officials said in an email to OPB.

### Different districts, different decisions

Some school districts are moving ahead regardless of vaccines. Both school districts in Klamath County have plans to start providing in-person instruc-

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