

Plans for reopening schools face roadblocks

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — School districts in Umatilla County can see a path forward for bringing students back to the classroom, but it will be a slower journey than many parents hoped.

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney said when Gov. Kate Brown announced shortly before Christmas that the state's metrics for reopening schools would become guidelines rather than mandates, many parents and even school staff assumed that would mean a quick return to the classroom. But the governor's announcement didn't give the full picture, she said.

"If you just read the headline, a lot of parents said, 'OK, my kid is going back on Jan. 4,'" she said.

One roadblock, Mooney said, is that school districts have been informed by the Oregon School Board Association's legal counsel that the liability protection passed by the Oregon Legislature does not appear to protect them



A group of roughly two dozen protesters advocating for the reopening of schools gather outside the Hermiston School District office in Hermiston on Jan. 4, 2021.

from lawsuits over COVID-19 outbreaks if they choose to go outside the state's reopening metrics.

Even though schools are not legally mandated to wait until they reach certain benchmarks for COVID-19 cases anymore, they must still follow the Oregon Department of Education's "Ready Schools, Safe Learners"

guidelines, which include a list of 164 different rules for social distancing, cleaning, wearing masks and keeping students and staff separated into small "cohorts" to limit the number of people an infected person would expose to the virus. And to complicate matters, ODE has announced it will release updated guidelines on Jan. 19, meaning planning

school districts do now could be thrown out the window if the rules change significantly.

Those rules, particularly with cohorts and social distancing, also create logistical challenges for the district, which must find enough classroom space and staff to accommodate students.

That being said, Mooney said Hermiston School District

is determined to figure things out, and she hasn't given up hope that all HSD students could be back in the classroom before the end of the school year.

She said they plan to start by bringing back the students in categories like special education, who were participating in two hours a day of "limited in-person instruction" before the holidays. After that, she said they hope to continue adding back more and more groups students across all the district's buildings.

They want to do so safely, however, so she said the biggest thing people can do is avoid gatherings, practice social distancing and other measures to bring Umatilla County's COVID-19 numbers back down. The current safety guidelines from the state say schools shouldn't reopen if their county has more than 200 cases per 100,000 people over a 14-day period, and Mooney said right now Umatilla County is at more than 1,000 cases per 100,000 people.

"Our case count is high — very, very high — so we're

asking people to do their part," she said. "With the numbers we have now, it's not a matter of if we have a case in the schools but when."

Parent responses

Jamie Aga, who has a third grader in Hermiston School District, said her son has really struggled with online learning.

He used to love school and reading, she said, but he has gotten so resentful now of anything to do with school that he won't even sit down and listen anymore when she reads a bedtime story to his younger siblings.

"Sometimes he sits there and cries and says he misses his friends. He misses getting to get up and move around during the day instead of being stuck in front of a computer," she said.

She said she really wants to see schools reopen "sooner rather than later," but as time marches on and Umatilla County's COVID-19 numbers shoot up, she doesn't have much hope for returning by the end of the year.

"I hope so, but I don't see it happening," she said.



Vehicles come to a standstill on Interstate 84 near Exit 216 after the Oregon Department of Transportation closed the interstate due to a pair of truck crashes blocking the westbound lanes near mileposts 270 and 258 on Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2020.

Multiple truck crashes close I-84

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A pair of truck crashes forced the closure of Interstate 84 on Tuesday, Jan. 12, for much of the afternoon and evening.

Oregon Department of Transportation closed the interstate in both directions between Baker City and Pendleton around noon following two separate truck crashes near mileposts 270 and 258.

"The one at (milepost) 258 was stretched across both lanes," said Tom Strandberg, who manages public affairs for ODOT in Northeast Oregon. "The one at (milepost) 270 they were able to get that opened up a little earlier than the other one to get around it."

Oregon State Police reported the first crash

happened about 11:34 a.m. southeast of La Grande, near milepost 270, when Zayne Carter Treasure, 50, of Nampa, Idaho, lost control of his semitruck and two trailers as he was traveling west on Interstate 84.

Treasure told police that he was traveling at a speed of about 50 mph because of the icy road conditions. He said his empty rear trailer lost traction on the highway because of heavy winds.

Treasure said he next lost control of the tractor unit and the front trailer. All three units came to an uncontrolled rest on the freeway blocking both travel lanes.

No injuries were reported and no citations were issued. Police said the guardrail and a portion of the road surface suffered damage in the crash.

Police said the second

crash happened about the same time in the westbound freeway lanes about 2 miles west of La Grande, near Milepost 258.

Police said the driver, Sidney M. Gamble, 69, of Great Falls, Montana, lost control in icy conditions while negotiating a corner. The trailer came to rest on its side and the semitruck rolled over onto its top. The driver was taken to Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande, police said. No information about his condition was available in time for this report.

Police also were called to at least three noninjury crashes between Pendleton and Ontario involving passenger vehicles during the day, according to reports provided by Capt. Timothy Fox, OSP spokesman in Salem.

Strong winds rip through region

Pendleton airport records top speed of 68 miles per hour

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — High winds and strong gusts rocked Eastern Oregon during the early morning hours of Wednesday, Jan. 13.

Property didn't go unscathed. In one instance, the wind significantly damaged a Pendleton apartment complex.

A section of roof lay across the hood of a green Honda sedan in the parking lot of Mary's Mannor in Pendleton on Jan. 13, the remainder of the building's roof sitting across the parking lot as crews worked to clear debris. Crews used crowbars and other tools to dismantle the large chunk of roof.

According to the National Weather Service station in Pendleton, the Pendleton airport had some of the highest recorded winds in its coverage area, which includes Eastern Oregon, Central Oregon, and South-eastern Washington. The weather service's instruments at the Pendleton airport captured peak wind speed at 68 miles per hour, while the service also recorded a max wind speed of 59 miles per hour at a different point in Pendleton.



Construction crews work to dismantle the destroyed roof of Mary's Mannor after it was blown from the building on Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021.

The highest recorded speed in the weather service's coverage area was 76 miles per hour in West Richland, Washington, but other areas of Eastern Oregon were hit hard as well.

Hermiston's wind speed high was 60 miles per hour, while the northern part of Umatilla County also experienced high winds.

In Milton-Freewater, some 40 customers were without power after the wind apparently sheared off a power pole on the upper end of South Fork of the Walla Walla River just outside of town, according to the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*.

City Manager Linda Hall said the city, which runs its

own electric utility, got the call out at about 5:30 a.m. Jan. 13 and anticipated having power back online by 10 a.m.

Jim Smith, a meteorologist with the weather service, said the strong wind conditions throughout the inland Northwest were caused by a rapidly moving cold front.

Despite its suddenness, Smith said forecasters don't expect the windy conditions to stick around for long. The weather service anticipates colder temperatures and dry conditions as the week continues but without strong wind conditions.

East Oregonian multimedia reporter Ben Lonergan contributed to this report.

Morrow County moves back to 'extreme risk' category

East Oregonian

SALEM — Four Oregon Counties, including Morrow County, will move into the governor's "extreme risk" designation for spreading COVID-19, according to a press release from Gov. Kate Brown's office.

In addition to Morrow County, Baker, Clatsop and Coos counties will move from the "high risk" category to the "extreme risk" category.

"With four counties moving back to extreme risk, this week we are reminded that health and safety measures continue to be of utmost importance, even when we slow the spread of COVID-19," Brown said in the release. "I want to remind all Oregonians to continue to do their part by abiding by the health and safety guidelines in place."

The updated risk levels go into effect Friday, Jan. 15.

In all, 26 counties are now in the "extreme risk" level, two at "high risk," two at "moderate risk" and six at "lower risk." Umatilla County has been in the "extreme risk"

COUNTY RISK CATEGORIES

Lower Risk (6)	Crook
Gilliam	Deschutes
Grant	Hood River
Harney	Jackson
Sherman	Jefferson
Wallowa	Josephine
Wheeler	Klamath
Moderate Risk (2)	Lane
Curry (Moved from Extreme)	Linn
Lake (Moved from Lower)	Malheur
High Risk (2)	Marion
Douglas	Morrow (Moved from High)
Lincoln	Multnomah
Extreme Risk (26)	Polk
Baker (Moved from High)	Tillamook
Benton	Umatilla
Clackamas	Union
Clatsop (Moved from High)	Wasco
Columbia	Washington
Coos (Moved from High)	Yamhill

category since Brown started the four-tier risk levels. Union County is also in the "extreme risk" category.

"Until vaccines are widely available with high participation rates, the surest way to open our communities is to continue practicing the measures we know are effective in reducing the spread

of COVID-19 — wear your mask, keep physical distance from others, avoid gatherings, wash your hands often, and stay home when you are sick," Brown said in the release.

The levels are reviewed every two weeks. The next assignment of risk levels will be announced Jan. 26 and take effect Jan. 29.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Contractors break ground for Dollar General in M-F

MILTON-FREEWATER — Construction is underway off Highway 11 on a new Dollar General store scheduled to open at the end of May.

Ground has broken on the empty lot at 45 S. Columbia St.

The store will employ six to 10 people, said Angela Petkovic with Dollar General public relations.

Founded in 1939, the Dollar General corporation has grown to include more than 17,000 locations in 46 states.

The closest existing Dollar General is about four hours away in Madras.

Contractor Don Jackson

Excavation LLC is preparing the Milton-Freewater site for Collaborative Construction Solutions, based in Battle Ground, Washington.

Umatilla County reports four more COVID-19 deaths

PENDLETON — Umatilla County Public Health announced three COVID-19-related deaths on Wednesday, Jan. 13, and one death on Tuesday, Jan. 12, bringing the county's total to 64.

Umatilla County's 61st death with COVID-19 is a 63-year-old female who died on Dec. 27, 2020, at her residence in Umatilla County, according to the state. The death certificate listed COVID-19 as a contributing cause of death.

The county's 62nd death with COVID-19 is a 69-year-old male who tested positive Dec. 28, 2020, and died Jan. 1 at Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston. This individual had underly-

ing medical conditions.

The county's 63rd death with COVID-19 is an 89-year-old male who tested positive Dec. 29, 2020, and died Jan. 6 while incarcerated. This individual had underlying medical conditions.

The county's 64th death with COVID-19 is a 72-year-old male who tested positive Jan. 3 and died Sunday, Jan. 10, while incarcerated. This individual had underlying medical conditions.

The announcements come as the county reported 50 new cases on Jan. 13 and 54 new cases of COVID-19 on Jan. 12, bringing the county's total to 6,471 total cases since the pandemic began last year, according to the Umatilla County COVID-19 dashboard.

Morrow County reported nine new cases on Jan. 13 and four new cases on Jan. 12, for a total of 905 since the pandemic began, according to the Morrow County COVID-19 dashboard. Morrow County has nine deaths related to COVID-19.

—EO Media Group