

School: 'I think gradual approaches are appropriate'

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considering reducing required distancing in schools from 6 feet to 3 feet, which would allow students to get more hours of in-person instruction.

However, Dean Sidelinger, Oregon's epidemiologist, said the state would only do so in a gradual manner, and on Monday, March 15, the Oregon Department of Education's newest guidelines for schools stuck with the 6 foot rule.

"I think gradual approaches are appropriate," said Josh Goller, board chair for the Hermiston School District. "But at the same time, waiting until the fall to get to a full day of school is not appropriate."

Federal officials in recent weeks have urged schools nationally to bring students back to the classroom, citing statistics showing it is safe to do so if health and safety guidelines, like mask wearing and physical distancing, are consistently maintained in both the school and the broader community.

Goller said he believes that, by maintaining health and safety guidelines, schools can be open on a bigger scale



Bryce Dole/East Oregonian

A group of parents, teachers and students hold signs along West Highland Avenue in Hermiston on Saturday, March 13, 2021, during a rally in favor of a full return to in-person schooling.

sooner rather than later.

"Is there potential risk involved? Perhaps," Goller said. "But a slightly reduced physical distancing, combined with masks and cohorts that are perhaps a little bit larger to facilitate more student move-

ment in the building, those sorts of things" can keep schools safe.

Amy Robinson, a teacher in Umatilla who is married to Shane, said several of her students who take care of their siblings are

"failing miserably."

"We're sending kids out into the world who are missing a year to a year and a half of school, and that's just not OK," she said.

Robinson said some of her students struggle with mental

health problems, and when hybrid classes began last week in Umatilla, it was clear that staying at home had made them more socially awkward.

"The reason kids show up is because of the connection with others," said Tricia

Mooney, Hermiston School District Superintendent, who attended the rally. "That's where we're hurting the most is the connection with each other, with the school, with the community."

Last week, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced in a press conference that she was ordering public schools to reopen by mid-April. That announcement, however, didn't change plans for some Umatilla County school districts like Pendleton, where K-5 students had returned to hybrid schooling and plans were already made to bring back middle and high school students soon thereafter.

Hermiston's K-5 students have already started hybrid classes, and middle schoolers and high schoolers will soon join them in the coming weeks. Mooney said the school district has implemented a variety of health and safety protocols and sanitation services that will allow students to return to classes safely.

"For all of our kids, there's a limit to how you can interact on Zoom," she said. "The conversations aren't the same. The kids' interactions aren't the same. The interactions with teachers aren't the same."

Redistricting: 'A robust debate'

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detailed Oregon data by April 1 of the following year. Lawmakers have until the end of their session on July 1 to get maps of 30 Senate, 60 House and either five or six congressional districts to the governor.

If they can't agree on a redistricting plan, the secretary of state takes over the mapmaking with an Aug. 15 deadline.

But these are not normal times.

COVID-19 crippled the census count. The Legislature received no data. No maps are being drawn for the governor. There's no dispute for the secretary of state to resolve.

The census officials in Washington, D.C., have been saying sorry for months. But given all the upheaval in their work, they now say data to draw districts won't get to Oregon until Sept. 30. That is six months late, and well beyond constitutional and statutory deadlines.

To employ an overused term during the current pandemic, the situation is "unprecedented." Translation: Nobody knows what to do because it's never been done before.

Adding to the drama: The official population numbers are expected to earn Oregon a sixth congressional seat, its first in 40 years. The new district will have to be shoe-horned into the existing congressional map.

Proposing a 'back to the future' solution

The Legislature has a "back to the future" solution. It's asking the Oregon Supreme Court to set the deadlines aside, reset the clock, and give lawmakers another shot at redistricting when the data arrives in the fall. A special session of the Legislature would meet to approve the work.

Secretary of State Shemia Fagan supports the idea.

The Legislature wants up to 90 days after the data arrives to create the maps.

Fagan does not support that timeline.

Pushing redistricting into December would be cutting things close, Fagan has said. Any hitch and there could be no maps when candidates are supposed to start filing for the offices in January 2022. As the state's official election referee, she might have to step in.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, filed a petition with the Oregon Supreme Court this week to stop Fagan from drawing her own maps.

Fagan wants the Legislature to draw districts using alternative data to the U.S. Census. The Oregon Constitution doesn't explicitly demand

redistricting be done with the census numbers.

But it always has used the census, lawmakers say. Doing things differently than how it's been done for more than a century would be a surefire way to tangle with federal courts wanting to ensure Oregon was following civil rights and voting rights laws.

While the court sifts through the paperwork, the Legislature is planning/hoping/praying the Oregon Supreme Court will pick its solution. A way to move things along in advance would be to hold the 10 required hearings — two in each of the current five congressional districts.

Which brings things back to COVID-19. The usual "road trip" of lawmakers to districts to hear from voters aren't happening this year because of COVID-19. All 10 redistricting hearings will be virtual.

Congressional District 2 covers a lot of territory

The Wednesday, March 10, hearing was Congressional District 2, a nearly 70,000-square-mile expanse that share borders with California, Nevada, Idaho and Washington. Anyone living east of the Cascades, plus a chunk of the southwest part of the state, lives in the 2nd District.

All four of the other congressional districts are represented by Democrats. The 2nd is solidly Republican, with freshman U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, in the seat.

The hearing would require something of a technical miracle. Video testimony expected from Wallowa County, Bend, Medford, Klamath Falls, and several other spots in the district taxed the Legislature's internet capabilities. Balking phone lines, echoing microphones, stuck mute buttons and more led to frequent silent spots. Many of the people who signed up to testify either couldn't get through or gave up prior to their turn in the queue.

Two who signed up discovered they lived in other congressional districts.

For over an hour, the committee heard three main themes: The district was much too large, it included different communities with different identities and, in the case of Malheur County, a completely different time zone.

Finally, the desires of people in the district were too often ignored in the capitals of Washington and Salem. How they were ignored depended on each testimonial.

In a written statement, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock struck a note between hope and resignation over the likely outcome of the process.

"My greatest concern is that our district could be gerrymandered in order to further diminish representation for a portion of Oregon that reflects ideology, values, and interests much different than the remainder of Oregon," Murdock said.

New districts should make sense geographically

New districts should "geographically make sense" to retain an Eastern Oregon voice in Washington and Salem.

"If Oregon gets a new seat, we are not naive enough to expect more representation for Eastern Oregon, but we would like to retain what we have," Murdock said.

Todd Nash of Enterprise said it would be difficult to draw political maps with so little population to pool into a district.

"We have about 320 acres per person," he said.

Craig Martell, of Baker City, said proximity and high-way connections should guide the grouping of communities in districts.

"Baker City and La Grande, only 44 miles apart on Interstate 84, belong in the same district," he wrote. "As lines are currently drawn, Senate District 30 is a grotesque gerrymandered monstrosity."

'A robust debate'

Resolutions have been introduced in the Legislature to move to a commission like those already used in California and several other states. Several speakers endorsed such a plan. But even if approved by the House and Senate, the change to the state constitution would need voter approval. Any change wouldn't occur until the 2031 redistricting.

Joanne Mina, volunteer coordinator for the Latino Community Association, based in Bend, said it was important for lawmakers to make sure that the census numbers were a complete count.

"The Latinx population has grown from a few thousands in the '90s to over 20,000 strong across all of Central Oregon — our region is united by commerce, culture and values," she said. "Central Oregon is not what it used to be, we are more vibrant, enriched and bold because of all the people that make up our community."

At the end of the evening, Salinas, chair of the House committee, said the hearing of so many people from so many places had been time well spent.

"A robust debate," she said. The committee will hold a second hearing on Saturday, March 20, at 1 p.m.

Data:

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and infection rates based on traits like age, gender, race and ethnicity.

A common trend

Similar disparities have been reported in Morrow County, where Hispanic residents have accounted for nearly 57% of the county's 1,053 total coronavirus cases, according to data provided by county officials on Friday, March 12. And of the county's 14 reported deaths, six were reported from Hispanic residents.

Approximately 38% of Morrow County's population is Hispanic or Latino, according to 2019 U.S. Census data.

Hispanic residents make up a sizable portion of both Umatilla and Morrow counties' essential workforce, officials from both counties say, often working in food factories and other large agricultural industries where they are at increased risk of infection, and in some cases going home to multi-generational households afterward.

"They were hit hard by this," Joe Fiumara, Umatilla County's public health director, said of the pandemic's impact on the Hispanic community. "Whether we didn't get messaging to them, whether they (had to) come into work because they needed a paycheck or couldn't do the work remotely — I think all of those things play into that. And I think this data supports those assumptions."

Since the early months of the pandemic, national data has shown that Black and Latino people are infected, hospitalized and die from COVID-19 at especially high rates. The disparities spanned across the country in hundreds of urban, suburban and rural areas and counties, and in all age groups, according to the New York Times.

Researchers point to socioeconomic status, unequal access to health care, and workplace exposures in frontline, essential and critical infrastructure jobs as factors contributing to such disparities.

In September 2020, Hispanic and Latino people had a disproportionate rate of infection in 45 states and the District of Columbia, according to an analysis of national coronavirus data from NPR.

Today, Hispanics and Latinos are 1.3 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than White or non-Hispanic people, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The population is also more than twice as likely to be hospitalized and more than three times more likely to die from COVID-19 than White or non-His-

panic people, according to the C.D.C.

Hispanic Oregonians have accounted for 34% of all coronavirus cases since the pandemic began, despite making up just 13% of the state's population, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority as of March 10, 2021.

In Umatilla County, Hispanic residents were hospitalized with COVID-19 at a higher rate than non-Hispanic residents, but reported fewer hospitalizations overall in 2020, the data shows.

For reported COVID-related deaths in 2020, 10 were from Hispanic residents in Umatilla County, seven less than non-Hispanic residents, though 36 reported deaths came from residents whose ethnicity was unknown, the data shows.

Working conditions drive summer surge

The new data shows that residents reporting their ethnicity as Hispanic had the greatest number of Umatilla County's cases in every month from April through August 2020.

The greatest disparity came in July, when the county reported 1,435 cases, more than any month in 2020. In that month — a month where Umatilla County became the epicenter of high infection rates in Oregon — Hispanic residents accounted for more than half of the county's cases.

Working conditions were a major part of what drove the summer COVID-19 surge in the county, Fiumara said, adding that many of the cases were traced back to outbreaks in workplaces like food processing plants.

In July, Hispanic residents tested positive at a rate nearly four-and-a-half times higher than non-Hispanic residents, the data shows.

Many of those cases were reported in the 97838 ZIP code that encompasses the city of Hermiston, Fiumara said. The area reported the most COVID-19 cases in 2020, and more than twice as many as Pendleton's ZIP code, which had the second most, according to the report.

"When we look at where a lot of our industry that was hit hard by this is at, a lot of our food processing, a lot of our agricultural workers, a lot of that falls into that ZIP code," Fiumara said.

Cases declined in the late summer and early fall, but rose again through November and December 2020. At that time, more cases were coming from social gatherings around the holidays rather than workplace outbreaks, and many of those cases were reported in the Pendleton area, Fiumara said.

"It was really (spreading) in different circles," he said. "The summer wave seems to

have heavily hit the frontline agricultural food processing worker. The November time frame was more about the family gathering piece."

In October through December, residents reporting non-Hispanic ethnicity had the greatest number of total COVID-19 cases, though in every month of 2020, the county's Hispanic population tested positive at a higher rate, the data shows.

Disclosing the data

County officials and leadership have for months said that Umatilla County's Hispanic and Latino population had been hit especially hard by the pandemic, but were reluctant to publish data showing this, fearing the totals would create a stigma, even as counties across Oregon and the U.S. had already begun doing so. Morrow County released data showing the pandemic's toll on its Hispanic community in a public meeting in January.

"There was already some east county versus west county finger pointing, and if some of these numbers were put out and it was so black and white like this, it was really going to do more to inflate that as opposed to helping solve anything," Fiumara said of the health department's initial reluctance to publish the data.

The health department chose to release the data now in an in-depth report to allow residents to see for themselves how the pandemic impacted the county, officials said. The report can be found on the county health department's website.

Garcia said he remains concerned that the data is now public.

"Think about all the hate crimes we're seeing against Asian" people, Garcia said. In some areas of the country, Asian Americans have experienced higher rates of violence during the pandemic, which some critics say was fueled by racist comments from former President Donald J. Trump, who called the coronavirus "the China virus" or the "Kung Flu."

"It might get to that point here in Umatilla, where people are pointing the finger at you," Garcia said.

Regardless, Garcia said he is glad the data has been published. He hopes that, with the information out there, it could encourage people or organizations to reach out and help his community.

"It serves two ways," Garcia said of the new data. "We might have some people with racial biases, like a stigma, but at the same time, it'll be good for the experts to say, 'Let's focus our resources on Umatilla County and let's get it done.'"