

Caution: ‘If everyone got vaccinated, we wouldn’t have a problem’

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a week like that. Because of the two-week rolling average, it hurts you for the long run. Hopefully, we can get the numbers down next week, but they would have to go down a lot.”

Due to its population, Umatilla County would need to report fewer than 82 COVID-19 cases between April 18 and May 1 to remain at moderate risk, officials said.

At high risk, restaurants, religious establishments and fitness facilities would remain open but only at 25% indoor capacity. Grocery stores and other retail establishments can also remain open at 50%, according to the state.

“I don’t know how much longer our restaurants and (businesses) can afford a roller coaster,” Murdock said. “They’ve had an awfully long year. If we were to go to a higher (risk) level and cut down on restaurant capacity, I don’t know how many more times they can do it.”

Fourth wave

The spike reflects statewide trends as reported cases and hospitalizations are spiking. New daily cases have increased by approxi-



Vehicles pass through a Umatilla County Public Health COVID-19 mass vaccination site in Pendleton on March 26, 2021. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

mately 55% in the past two weeks and 150% in the past month, and now, more than half of the state’s counties are at high risk for COVID-19 transmission, according to the Oregon Health Authority as of April 20.

The number of Oregonians hospitalized with COVID-19 has also increased by 49% in the past two weeks, topping the national

average of 10%. Over the past month, hospitalizations have increased by roughly 140%, according to *The Oregonian/OregonLive*.

Murdock said contact tracers from the Umatilla County Public Health Department have reported cases predominantly stemming from social gatherings, including weddings and family gatherings. He added

that the majority of cases are being reported from young people between the ages of 20 and 40.

“We simply have to get our numbers back down,” he said. “We’re having too many gatherings. People are kind of letting their guard down, if you will, and up go the numbers. And that’s going to have a long-term impact. So we thought we were escap-

ing what was happening (in Western Oregon), but apparently not.”

What’s at stake

If cases do not begin to decline soon, officials are concerned that major summer events like the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest and the Pendleton Round-Up could be canceled, laying a burden on local businesses that rely heavily on the economic benefit brought by the events.

“These events have to make commitments a long time in advance,” Murdock said. “Round-Up alone is worth about \$65 million to our community. We lost it last year, I don’t think we can afford to lose it this year. That’s my fear.”

Murdock added that Whisky Fest likely has “a matter of weeks” before a decision will have to be made. Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said he sees one solution — the vaccine.

“People are wanting to open up and everything else, and we have a perfect driver for that in getting vaccinations,” he said. “Then we see how many people are coming to the vaccination sites, it kind of surprises me. Everybody wants our county to open up fully and they want to have Round-Up and Whisky Fest

and all these things, and yet there’s not a very big showing at the vaccination sites.”

Murdock said the number of people showing to get vaccinated at county clinics is continuing to decline, describing the choice to do so as “mind boggling.”

“If everyone got vaccinated, we wouldn’t have a problem,” he said. “But we have people not choosing to do so, so this is what our world looks like.”

Shafer said he believes that political beliefs have loomed too large in the decision to get vaccinated.

“It was designed under a Republican administration. And now a Democrat administration is pushing it out,” he said. “I can’t figure out why this is such a polarizing vaccination. You didn’t see this with the flu vaccination. People either got it or they didn’t. There was no big political discussion about it.”

Shafer said he would “highly encourage” that people get vaccinated so that “we can get our numbers back down.”

“There are several events that have already been canceled, and I can’t stand to see any more get canceled because of something that might be preventable with the vaccine,” he said.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Irrigation equipment sprays down a field along Stanfield Meadows Road west of Stanfield on Wednesday, April 21, 2021.

Drought: March was sixth driest month on record for the county

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either extreme or severe drought conditions, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Shafer said he expects even more counties to join Umatilla and declare droughts in the coming weeks.

“As the summer months are coming closer and closer, I think we’re going to see some serious problems for our farmers and I want to do everything we can to protect them,” he said.

Dry conditions

Some areas of the county have recently reported conditions that rival the driest in recorded history, according to Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Other areas, like in the Blue Mountains, are not reporting drought conditions, but Dorran noted that’s mainly due to the county’s complex geography.

Despite the momentary relief brought by winter storms in February, the month of March in Umatilla County was the sixth driest on record in Pendleton and

the second driest in Hermiston, according to Lohman. Since the first of October 2020, precipitation in both Pendleton and Hermiston has been reported lower than normal.

“January was below normal. December was below normal,” Lohman said. “Outside of February, most of our whole winter, and the season where we do normally see precipitation, has been well below normal.”

Lohman added that temperatures in the early winter were also higher than normal, which prevented soil moisture from making a full recovery during the winter months. Then, windy conditions in March “didn’t allow any moisture to soak into the soil and then pulled moisture out too,” she said. Now, the month of April is shaping up to be one of the driest on record, though rain forecast this weekend could shift the county’s fortunes, Lohman said.

“If it starts raining, you’re going to hear the farmers go, ‘That’s a million dollar rain,’” Shafer said. “Because without it, it’s going to cost them a lot of money, but with that rain it’s going to bring in some money.”

Repairs: Completion expected next month

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Last fall, Public Works Superintendent Brian Steadman told the city the old coating had to be stripped completely, new heat pumps added and a thermal cover purchased.

That way the pool can be kept filled with water just above freezing level all winter to keep the plaster stable.

Indeed, that’s the way it should have always been, Hall would learn, but that was unknown when the pool was built in 1996.

Nor was that information in the operating manual, council member Ed Chesnut pointed out in September 2020.

The Milton-Freewater pool has been routinely emptied after each swim season.

The resulting freezing and thawing had done the most damage to the plaster, Steadman said. Hall noted the cost of keeping the pool water at above freezing is “pretty minimal,” even in very cold weather.

Keeping the pool filled will preserve a new coating for another 20 years, Steadman predicted.

While council members



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin/Contributed Photo

Anderson Poolworks employees Arnel Macans, left, and Matt Marcantonio blast off the aged and failing coating surface of the Joe Humbert Family Aquatic Center in Milton-Freewater. Project engineer Kevin Palmer said the next step is shooting on the new plaster, which will be shiny white with a blue quartz speckle. “It will be really smooth and feel really good to walk on,” Palmer said.

voiced concern at the cost, they also acknowledged the facility’s importance in the community and called reopening the pool “a highest priority.”

The repair bill will have to come from a loan against already existing tax revenue, they said.

In December 2020, the city council approved a contract of \$149,203 with Anderson Perry & Associates engineering services

for resurfacing work and to replace broken and missing tile.

Last week, Steadman approached the council again, saying inspection had shown the grating around all sides of the pool was weakened and broken in several places. Fixing that required another \$23,491 for an amended total repair contract of \$172,694, to which the council unanimously agreed.

The city will again

contract with the Walla Walla YMCA for staffing, which allows the public pool to open earlier in the season and stay open longer, Hall said.

As well, the facility will be overseen for the 2021 swim season by a certified pool operator. That person is qualified to manage weekly water testing, inspection and maintenance of pumps, filters and chemical levels.

It makes the most sense to let the YMCA make that hire, the city manager said.

The lifeguard and pool operator staffing agreement with the YMCA will total \$81,710 for the season of 102 days.

The labor budget is a savings to the city of about \$6,000 per season, Hall said, and the availability of certified lifeguards means the pool can offer more private rentals, raising more revenue.

If COVID-19 or other issues once again force early closure, the city will not have to pay for services not rendered, she added.

In her report to city council, Hall emphasized that city staff is determined 2021 will be a “full, fun season” and is working to see it becomes a reality.

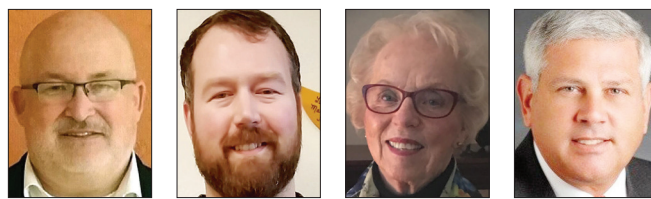
Pool repairs are expected to wrap up in mid-May.

Parks:

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commission meeting, Pendleton Parks and Recreation Director Liam Hughes explained some of the latest setbacks.

Hughes told the commission the department had originally intended to use rubber tiles as the flooring for the two new playgrounds it was installing. But after learning about the difficulty of self-installing the tiles and a glue shortage forcing the tile supplier to cancel its order with the city, Hughes



Corbett

Hughes

Innes

Turner

was now recommending the commission purchase “pour-in-place” rubber flooring instead of the tiles.

The city put the project back out to bid, and the lowest bid is more than \$70,000 higher than the cost of rubber tiles.

Hughes said this latest expenditure would allow the city to finish most of the reno-

valuations, including the new playgrounds and the splash pad, but he was preparing to hold off on building a dog park and downgrading the fencing used throughout the park to keep the project in line with its \$575,000 budget.

The project has already suffered from some financial complications, with some of the costs associated with the

playgrounds and tree removal coming in higher than expected. Hughes said his staff would begin looking into grants and other alternative sources of revenue to fund the park, but City Manager Robb Corbett suggested the commission just cover the \$22,000 cost out of its urban renewal budget.

Mayor John Turner said he wanted to see a proposal before giving it the green light, while Councilor Carole Innes also wanted to see an estimate for retaining the quality of the fencing.

Ultimately, the commission unanimously approved the new flooring bid.

Sponsor List:

- A & G Property Management & Maintenance
- Barton Laser Leveling
- Blue Mountain Community College
- Blue Mountain Diagnostic Imaging
- CHI St. Anthony Hospital
- CMG Financial
- CMG Financial
- Columbia Point Equipment Company
- Corteva Agriscience
- Davita Blue Mountain Kidney Center
- Desire For Healing Inc
- Duchek Construction
- Hill Meat Company
- Jeremy J Larson DMD LLC
- Kirby Nagelhout Construction Co.

- Kopacz Nursery & Florist
- Landmark Tax Services
- McEntire Dental
- McKay Creek Estates
- NW Metal Fabricators Inc
- Pendleton KOA
- Pendleton Roofing LLC
- RE/MAX Cornerstone
- Rob Merriman Plumbing & Heating Inc
- Starvation Ridge Farming, LLC
- Sun Terrace Hermiston
- The RBH Group LLC
- The Saddle Restaurant and Lounge
- Tum-A-Lum Lumber
- Umatilla Electric Cooperative
- Umatilla Electric Cooperative
- WalMart