

## Benefits:

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federal dollars coming in.”

The letter comes as more than two dozen GOP-led states have ended similar benefits due to slow job growth nationwide, a trend some lawmakers have been quick to blame on federal unemployment benefits, though experts also have said child care and the fear of contracting COVID-19 are playing roles.

“It’s really hurting the economy right now,” said Donna Beverage, a Union County commissioner who signed the letter. “There are some people that need to be on unemployment, certainly if they have to do childcare and that sort of thing. But, it’s really discouraging a lot of people from going back to work when they make more money by being on unemployment.”

From March 2020 to March 2021, Oregonians received \$5.5 billion in federal stimulus money, according to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

In May, payrolls increased nationally by 559,000 workers as the unemployment rate fell below 6% for the first time since the pandemic began. And about 554,000 jobs were added on-average from March through May. At that rate, the labor market will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2022, according to The New York Times.

### Workforce shortages felt across Eastern Oregon

For weeks, Eastern Oregon officials have voiced concerns over the workforce shortage. In a letter to Brown “on behalf of Morrow County employers” in late May, Kalie Davis, director of workforce development for the Port of Morrow, listed 25 employers in the county that had more than 200 job openings total.

The letter from the lawmakers concluded with the exact same language used in Davis’ letter: “The benefit of being unemployed should not outweigh the benefit of working.”

The letter comes as COVID-19 cases decline while vaccinations rise statewide, signaling the pandemic is largely waning. That’s why some officials decided to call for an end to the federal benefits now, even as several Eastern Oregon counties with disproportionately high infection rates have reported some of the lowest vaccination rates in Oregon.

“In a time when vaccination numbers are up,

COVID cases are coming down and hospitalizations, you know, it’s a time that we need to consider” ending supplemental unemployment benefits, said Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said there’s “no question” that federal unemployment relief was “a great deal” during the pandemic’s earlier stages.

“At that point, businesses were closed, people were not going to work, and people were laid off,” he said. “That’s changed. They’re now open, they have jobs and people who are worried about covid have had multiple opportunities to get vaccinated. Our businesses are struggling because so many people don’t want to go back to work.”

### ‘It’s not just poor people’

Mark Gomolski, the executive director of Agape House, a nonprofit food bank in Hermiston, said it was sad that several of the people the organization serves have no incentive to go back to work because they are making more money sitting at home.

“I know if I was a parent, how does that look that we’re just waiting for a paycheck and not going to work and staying home and watching TV?” he said. “Some people are being productive and doing things around their homes or volunteering. But they should get back to work. Our economy’s hurting.”

In May, David Gerstenfeld, acting director of the Oregon Employment Department, announced Oregonians soon will have to actively search for a job to receive unemployment, as required under federal law before Congress waived the requirement early in the pandemic when businesses closed to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Those requirements will resume over the next two months, Gerstenfeld said.

The state, however, did not specify when workers will need to demonstrate they’re looking for work and did not set a timeline for when it will reinstate the job search requirement.

For Gomolski, he questioned whether the government will move quickly to phase in regular requirements to get the economy functioning again, saying, “You can’t trust the government when they have a free spigot going on; it’s kind of hard for them to turn it off.”

He added it was “not just poor people” but a lot of others who are getting the benefits and not returning to their jobs.

“I’m sure you’d hear that across the state,” he said.

## Cemetery: ‘The cemetery will always be a treasure’

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a new grave and find remains, he’d have to stop and find a new spot,” he said.

Zach Mayer heard much of the history of the cemetery as a child, he said, listening to voices from board meetings — including his grandfather’s and father’s — coming from the basement during frequent visits to his McCorkell grandparents.

“And now I live in the same place. I bought my grandparents’ house,” he said with a chuckle.

The past is layered over Weston Cemetery in every way.

McCorkell died in 1966, and his grandson, Donnell “Donnie” Smock, took over sexton duties in 1967 until his retirement in 1997.

Smock’s contributions included making the cemetery a landscaped showcase, caring for about 1,000 tombstones and trimming almost that many trees.

Zach Mayer’s older sister, Becky Betts, made her first land purchase there, choosing the plot where she’d spent many childhood hours reading and doing homework, he said.

### Minding the past

As the family lineage aged, so did the land. Locust trees planted a century ago became hazards to the safety of present and future visitors.

Headstones made of hard materials, such as marble and granite, still stand, but most sandstone markers have crumbled to the toppling point or been lost to the hard winds altogether.

Some stones were centered over a grave, and as the earth settled, those markers have sunk into the ground.

Burial records are kept in a card file, the sort once the staple of every public library. Plots are marked out on painted plywood pieces propped up in the cemetery office, divided up into the “old city” and newer sections.

A few of the five-grave rectangles drawn in Sharpie bear a question mark instead of a name, leaving behind no witness to the occupant.

“It’s a very antiquated system,” said Duane Thul on a recent tour.

“We’re still living in two centuries ago,” he said. “We could have entered the 19th century, maybe.”

Thul, who was re-elected as Weston’s mayor in Novem-



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, File

Some graves at Weston Cemetery are marked as simply as this one, others not at all.

ber, is now the unofficial sexton on an as-needed basis.

On this day, the surrounding hills are softly green with mid-May growth and the oft-wicked wind is gentle for the moment.

Only the scent of processing onions wafting over the town from Smith Frozen Foods speaks of the present on this spot.

As Thul gazed over rows of headstones, both upright and tilted over, he recalled the difficult and unpopular decision to take out dozens of failing trees in recent years.

It was a job that had been ignored for too long, and a tragedy waiting to happen should a limb fall on someone, Thul said.

Locust was a terrible choice for cemetery trees, he said.

“But they brought them up by the wagon loads 100 years ago, and that’s what got planted,” Thul said.

### Ensuring the future

Plans call for new, suitable trees and native plants to go in the ground. The new growth will add shade and provide cooling, which will reduce water use.

Trees are expensive, however, and the cemetery’s budget from taxes is about \$40,000 a year. That has to cover wind damage fixes, irrigation, building upkeep and more. The cost of electricity to run the water pumps rings up at about \$700 a month, Thul said.

As well, the cemetery board has voted to hire an expert with underground imaging equipment to detect old, unmarked graves in the original section — plots can’t be sold there until that’s done.

There is no longer a paid employee, although the mowing and grave digging

tasks are contracted out, Thul said.

The worst part of the small budget is having no paid attendant on the grounds during the day, he said, to the consternation of some residents.

The cemetery’s main gate is kept locked when Thul or another board member can’t be on site to help prevent theft and vandalism.

While he does his best to accommodate those who want to drive inside the locked gates, the timing does not always work out, Thul said, conceding his 82 years of age and mayoral duties dictate his schedule some days.

“It’s just me. Anyone who wants to come and look at a grave or buy a plot, it’s me. And I am getting off the board,” he said, noting the two other board members have full-time jobs.

But his wish list for the Weston Cemetery will live on.

For starters, getting 170 years of burial data uploaded to software is essential for records preservation, but to do so could run \$20,000, Thul said.

Anything that increases accessibility tops Zach Mayer’s hopes for Weston Cemetery.

Small gates allow people to walk into the cemetery, he said, but that isn’t useful for people who use mobility devices or need a car to navigate the 9 acres.

“I hate having that main gate locked ... my goal is to get that open,” Mayer said. “Maybe with an automatic gate or maybe we can hire someone to be there.”

Board members also hope to pave the gravel roads that go past graves bearing names such as Bryson, O’Harra,

Bishop, Stamper, McIntyre, Harder and Sams.

Or Baby Waite, born and died in 1902.

There’s John L. Graham, M.D., who died in 1881 at the age of 35 years, 11 months and eight days.

Myrtle May White was gone less than three months after her birth on Sept. 19, 1880.

The high and hefty tombstone of Charles McMorris, 1837-1893, had been completely cloaked in a lilac bush when he started on the board, Thul said on an exploration of the cemetery.

“No one even knew it was there. I had a concrete base poured for that 5,200 pounds of granite. Just think of the cost of this today. What was our fetish with huge headstones?”

There is no doubt this cemetery is dear to the people of Weston, whether they live in town or elsewhere, Amy McCorkell Mayer said.

“We all feel a personal responsibility to care for it,” she said of the McCorkell descendants. “I’ve spent hours in that cemetery. I used to go up there to go see ‘my friends.’”

Delph agreed, noting the townspeople in general have a deep sense of ownership of this special place. Many families will have spent time cleaning up family headstones in preparation for Memorial Day, he predicted.

This spot is where the stories of Weston can be heard through dates carved in stone, in rows of small headstones, in names both familiar and forgotten. It’s here the past meets the future of the community, McCorkell Mayer said.

“The cemetery will always be a treasure,” she said. “To all of us.”



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, listens Monday, June 7, 2021, to members of the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors during a meeting in Pendleton.

## Bentz:

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commission and against the certification were consistent because both followed the Constitution. Bentz said Pennsylvania didn’t follow the Constitution when it bypassed its state legislature to extend absentee deadlines.

As he gets settled into Washington, D.C., Bentz also is working on lower profile issues related to water and natural resources.

Bentz said he’s work-

ing on passing a federal aid package to assist those affected by the drought in the Klamath Basin. More broadly, he’s also seeking to require more neutral testimony from experts when it comes to changing laws and rules around endangered species. An attorney by trade, Bentz said the process often resembles a courtroom, where both sides bring in dueling experts to make their case. Bentz wants to make expert testimony more neutral so the federal government can make more informed decisions.

## Civics:

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focusing on STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — Johnson said he was glad to see civics getting a similar amount of attention.

“It’s our job to educate them on being a good citizen,” he said.

Johnson said Pendleton’s civics curriculum doesn’t just cover government history and the mechanics of how the federal government works, but also the Oregon Constitution and the Treaty of 1855, the agreement that created the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Johnson said many students often come into his class disengaged with government and politics, not only because they don’t understand it but also because it seems like politics is angry and filled with conflict. He said it’s his and fellow civics teacher Kiana Rickman’s job to show students that government is worth engaging in.

Scott Depew, the Hermiston School District’s director of secondary instruction, said Hermiston has considered dropping civics in favor of offering personal finance classes, but the Legislature made the decision for them.

Hermiston social studies teacher Josh Walker said he has students take the United States citizenship test at the beginning of his course, which usually doesn’t produce encouraging results.

Although students tend to perform much better once they retake the test later in the year, Walker said it’s indica-



East Oregonian, File

Then Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown answers questions from students on Sept. 27, 2013, in Brian Johnson’s advanced placement government class at Pendleton High School. Gov. Brown on June 3, 2021, signed Senate Bill 513 to add a half-credit of civics education to the list of the state’s graduation requirements.

tive of a world where surveys show that many Americans can’t even name the three branches of U.S. government. Civics could help fill those knowledge gaps and help turn students into active citizens.

Umatilla County could certainly use a boost in democratic participation. The county frequently finds itself at the bottom or near the bottom in terms of election turnout, a fact Johnson discusses in his classes.

### Legislature scrutinizing other graduation requirements

Civics classes may not be the only change coming to the state’s high school requirements.

Senate Bill 744 — a bill that would suspend the essen-

tial learning skills requirement in 2023-24 and directs the Oregon Department of Education to review the requirement — already has passed the Senate and is on track for a vote in the House.

Since 2008, Oregon high school students have needed to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing and math. While those requirements have been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, the bill would suspend them further and would prohibit the state from requiring them for graduation if a student has met their credit requirements.

Depew, the Hermiston administrator, said he wouldn’t miss them if they went away permanently. He added that essential learning skills haven’t been a hindrance

to students graduating, but it is another hoop they need to jump through to get to graduation.

Matt Yoshioka, Pendleton’s director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, said he understands the value of essential learning skills, but fulfilling those requirements sometimes creates equity issues for students who struggle with tests.

While eliminating essential learning skills is a start, Yoshioka said he would prefer the state take a wider view of its graduation requirements. He said the state puts a lot of pressure on districts to graduate their students in four years, but districts should not be penalized if some students take a little longer to gain their diploma.