

Juneteenth: ‘Our people meant something, and we should be recognized for it’

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the Emancipation Proclamation. About seven months later, the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the final four states that had yet to do so, was ratified.

Last week, President Joe Biden signed a law that made Juneteenth a federal holiday. It was the first newly established national holiday since President Reagan added Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1983, celebrating his role in the civil rights movement.

“All Americans can feel the power of this day,” Biden said at a ceremony at the White House, “and learn from our history.”

That’s why the event in Hermiston was so special for several Black community members. To them, it was another small step in an ongoing reckoning with the nation’s past.

“At the first Juneteenth, they didn’t have much,” said John Carbage, president of the Hermiston Cultural Awareness Coalition, a nonprofit group that hosted Saturday’s event. “So they took the little bit they had and put it all together, and made it into an event, a festival. So that’s what this is all about. Taking a little and making a lot.”

The day began with a speech from Carbage calling on residents to remember why they were there before they bowed their heads in



Teresa Denaloza, right, and Tina Thomas, center, talk with fellow attendees during a Saturday, June 19, 2021, Juneteenth celebration at McKenzie Park in Hermiston.

Bryce Dole/East Oregonian

prayer. For the rest of the day, residents from across Eastern Oregon and Washington lounged in lawn chairs and chatted at picnic tables as the smell of grilling hamburgers and hot dogs filled the air. A DJ played rap, pop, soul, funk and R&B as children played games nearby.

It was the second time the

coalition held a Juneteenth event. The first was two years ago, before the pandemic halted last year’s festivities. Carbage said he hopes to make the event an annual celebration in Hermiston.

Growing up in Arkansas, Carbage has been celebrating Juneteenth for about 30 years. But none of those

celebrations, he said, were as symbolic as this one.

“This means we’re not going unnoticed,” Earl Wilson, a production manager at Lamb Weston, said of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday. “Our people meant something, and we should be recognized for it. We celebrate the Fourth of

July and Independence Day. And we weren’t free during that time. When we were freed, we should recognize that also.”

Though Juneteenth has garnered increased national attention during the past year amid the protests against racial injustice and police brutality, many Americans

still know little about the holiday, according to a new Gallup survey.

The random survey, released Tuesday, June 15, showed more than 60% of Americans know either “nothing at all” or “a little bit” about Juneteenth. It also showed about 69% of Black respondents said they knew about Juneteenth, compared to 31% of white respondents.

Even Carbage said he knew little about Juneteenth before he went to college. He attributes that to growing up in Arkansas, where his history classes refrained from teaching about race.

That’s why it’s essential to bring people together on days such as Juneteenth, Carbage said, to promote education.

“I understand people would like to steer away from that negative side of America,” said Dexter Hall, a student from Hermiston. “But if we don’t say anything about it, we lose part of our history. That’s my culture, you know?”

For Denise Colbray, whose family has been involved in organizing events centered around Hermiston’s Black community for decades, the event exemplified the city’s growing diversity.

Colbray summed up what Juneteenth meant to her in one word: Freedom.

“This is just the beginning,” she said. “This is the beginning of a long process.”

Lifeguards:

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ages that much more of a burden.

“Staffing is tougher to find and numbers have been up,” Hughes said. “Summer camp is bigger than last year right now.”

In May, the pool offered swim lessons and filled all five instructors’ worth of classes. Hughes estimates they had enough interest to fill twice as many classes.

Hamilton said learn-to-swim classes are especially important this year as many youths may have spent the last year out of the water and moved from an age where they were swimming with their parents to spending time at the pool more independently.

“My fear was that that age that came from hanging out with your parents to maybe swimming by your own was going to be that group that maybe missed a year,” he said.

Hamilton drew comparisons to when the pool first opened in the late 1990s and lifeguards were plucking kids out of the pool with a much higher frequency than today due to lack of experience with water.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Lifeguard Paige Pitner walks through the pool Wednesday, June 16, 2021, at the Pendleton Family Aquatic Center. The aquatic center faced difficulties with staffing early in the season.

“There is going to be a little bit of that gap so we have to be prepared for it,” he said.

In Hermiston, recreation supervisor Brandon Artz said he is finally feeling like he has enough lifeguards to operate the pool after telling the Hermiston Herald just more than a month ago that he had about half of the 100 staff necessary to open the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center.

“It was a real struggle, but we’ve had some good kids get trained and apply

and come through,” he said Monday. “I think we’re pretty much set for the rest of the season.”

Artz said he usually starts recruiting lifeguards in January so they can get trained and hired before summer starts.

“We were kind of running down to the wire,” he said.

Artz said about 86% of the pool’s staff is new this year compared to roughly 40% new staff members in a traditional year.

“We have a lot of people

to train and not very much time to do it,” he said.

Key in trying to fill those spots was reaching out to potential employees through social media and offering incentives to returning staff to bring on their friends or others, said Artz. Among those incentives were items such as sweatshirts or other apparel to help encourage returning staff to find new hires.

“It’s kind of a sigh of relief right now,” he said. “We have the staff we need, let’s get this season rolling.”

Rebound:

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community,” she said.

Hermiston has a few more new developments in the restaurant industry coming up, “new and exciting changes” promised by Ye Olde Pizza Shoppe, a renovation of the city’s food truck pod and a move by Delish Bistro from a space with outdoor dining only to a new, far larger location just south of its current spot.

A smoothie shop called Get Fit Nutrition will open soon in the former Yo Country Yogurt building on the corner of Hurlburt Avenue and Southeast Third Street. Owner Laura Davis said she wanted to open it not only to provide healthy options for the community, but also to provide a “cool place where people can hang out, get distracted and forget about this pandemic that it’s affecting all of us.”

She doesn’t yet know exactly when she will be able to open, because she is waiting on an inspection from the health department.

That’s a common refrain from local restaurant owners who aren’t ready to announce an opening date yet.

Burt said OMG! Burgers is hoping to open their Hermiston location in mid-July, but that will all depend on how quickly they are able to hire enough staff, and how quickly they can get the green light from Umatilla County Public Health. Every day they can’t check off those items is revenue lost, he said.

Health department inspections

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara acknowledged that waits for food service plan reviews have been longer than usual for the past year.

That hasn’t been because of more requests from restaurants than normal, he said, but rather that staff have been far more busy with other things, including vaccinations and reviewing plans for events to see if they meet the criteria for COVID-19 protocols.

“A lot of that fell to the environmental health folks,” Fiumara said.

While Umatilla County was in what was first known

as baseline and later changed to extreme risk — for more days than any other county in the state, thanks to its high spread of COVID-19 — the health department wasn’t allowed by the state to do on-site inspections at all unless responding to a complaint. That not only hindered inspections, but also made it difficult to get a new environmental health staff member trained.

“So many restaurants were forced into new methods of operation, but at the same time, we were not allowed to do inspections,” Fiumara said. Requests for site plan reviews for restaurants, bars, food trucks and other eating establishments actually stayed fairly steady year over year, Fiumara said. In the first half of 2019, there were 21 requests. In the first half of 2020, there were 20. This year so far there have been 22.

He said the number for 2020 might not show the whole picture — several of those were before the pandemic began, and there is no guarantee all of the sites that submitted plans for review actually opened. He also noted that 2020 saw an unusually high percentage of reviews go to mobile units, as some owners tried to pivot away from indoor dining.

Fiumara said the health department is advertising for another environmental health position and also has brought back an environmental health supervisor position previously cut, which, once everything is in place, will boost the number of people able to handle site plan reviews and inspections.

There is other good news for restaurant owners opening now, as well. When the health department has been using environmental health staff for vaccination events and other duties, they have been paying them from a different pool of money than what the county sets aside for environmental health. As a result of those savings to that department budget, Fiumara said, they have temporarily reduced all licensed facility fees by 40%.

“We knew (the fees) wouldn’t be something that will make or break an operation over a year, but it’s something we could do, so we felt we needed it,” he said.

RV:

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shipments projected to reach over 576,000, 18% higher than the 2017 record.

However, not all dealerships are seeing the same sales trends.

“According to the national trend, we should be seeing a huge increase in sales, but we’ve actually seen about 50% less sales this year than normal years,” Thunder RV owner Caleb Samson said. “The demand is just far bigger than the supply, and we can’t replace them at the same rate as we’re selling them.”

According to Samson, the company ordered 80 recreational vehicles several weeks ago, but does not know when they will arrive.

Northwood Manufacturing, which produces most of Thunder RV’s supply, is based in La Grande and works with 66 dealerships in Oregon and surrounding states, nearly all of which also face a shortage.

“We would love to increase the number of RVs that we’re making, but there’s



Carlos Fuentes/The Observer

Thunder RV, the only RV dealer in La Grande, has seen an increase in demand over the last year, but its supply has not been able to keep up.

several mitigating factors,” said Lance Rinker, director of purchasing and marketing for Northwood Manufacturing and Outdoors RV.

According to Rinker, the two biggest factors of the shortage are labor shortages and increased material costs. Both Northwood and Outdoors employ about 215 employees, 68% of the 315 employee capacity. This number has not risen in recent years.

Northwood and Outdoors each manufacture roughly 230 recreational vehicles every month, a number that has not risen with the increased demand. Rinker estimates manufacturing prices have risen nearly 20% since the onset of the pandemic, partially due to higher fuel prices and lumber shortages.

Retail prices have risen with increased manufacturing costs. Weinkauff said

Thunder RV prices have risen 10% in the last year. Prices range from \$25,000 for a basic truck camper to nearly \$100,000 for high-end fifth wheel.

With no end in sight, Weinkauff said he is optimistic that business will continue to stay busy.

“Well, they’re building them as fast as they can, and we’re selling them just as quickly,” he said. “It’s gonna take some time to catch up.”

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