

Poll: Oregonians split on Greater Idaho

By DYLAN JEFFERIES
The Bulletin

BEND — Imagine Bend being Oregon's eastern-most city, a short drive from Redmond, Idaho.

"Greater Idaho," the concept of transferring parts of Southern and Eastern Oregon to Idaho — making Redmond, Idaho, a reality — is gaining traction in some rural areas.

According to Mike McCarter, the chief petitioner of Move Oregon's Border, a nonprofit advocating for Greater Idaho, the change would give rural Oregon counties a longed-for Republican-led legislature by leaving liberal strongholds like Portland and Eugene — and even Bend and Sisters — behind in Oregon.

In May, voters in Baker, Grant, Lake, Malheur and Sherman counties approved ballot initiatives that require county officials to study joining Idaho. Union and Jefferson counties passed similar initiatives in November 2020.

Despite those initiatives, a slim majority of Oregonians do not think rural Oregon counties should be able to leave Oregon and join Idaho, even with voter approval. And two-thirds of Oregonians think it is unlikely the move will occur.

That's according to recent polling from the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, which asked respondents if they think Idaho absorbing Eastern and Southern Oregon would be positive or negative, if they think it is likely to happen and whether or not it should be allowed with voter approval.

The center conducted the statewide survey of 1,400 Oregon residents, selected to be demographically representative of the state, between June 8 and June 14. The margin of error ranges from 1.6% to 2.6% per question.

Survey responses

Survey responses reveal a deep rift between Oregonians on the issue.

OREGON VALUES AND BELIEFS CENTER

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center is committed to the highest level of public opinion research. To obtain that, the non-profit is building the largest online research panel of Oregonians in history to ensure that all voices are represented in discussions of public policy in a valid and statistically reliable way. Selected panelists earn points for their participation, which can be redeemed for cash or donated to a charity. To learn more, visit oregonvbc.org.

According to Clackamas County resident Patti Shanek, the move would promote separatism, discourage political discourse and raise the cost of living for rural residents.

"The main tax base comes from primarily Democrat counties," she said. "If the red counties became part of Idaho, those forming the new Idaho would have an increasingly high cost of living and limited access to state programs."

But according to Deschutes County resident Amanda Wallace, the move would give rural Oregon

conservatives political power, which they currently lack in Oregon's legislature.

"Conservatives don't feel like their voices are heard in Oregon, nor do they feel like their vote counts," she said. "Sadly, Portland, Salem and Eugene make all of the decisions."

Some respondents who oppose the move cited concerns that breaking up the state would discourage a diversity of opinions, setting a dangerous precedent for other states.

"This sets a precedent for reshaping other states along color lines and harming the

health of our democracy," said Multnomah County resident Margarette Puckette.

Many argued that unsatisfied Oregonians already have the option of moving to Idaho.

"If members of these counties want to become part of Idaho, then let them move there," said Marion County resident Janis Sabatula. "Why mess with state borders that have been there for more than 160 years?"

Supporters and opponents of the move raised concerns that being a part of Idaho would entail higher state taxes and a loss of significant tax dollars from Western Oregon and its metropolitan counties, plus a loss of revenue and jobs from Oregon's booming cannabis industry, which remains illegal in Idaho.

Polling highlights

Overall, 38% of Oregonians believe Southern and Eastern Oregon should be able to join Idaho with voter

approval, and 34% believe the move would be positive.

Among Oregonians living outside of Portland and the Willamette Valley, 44% support counties being able to join Idaho with voter approval, while only 37% of residents living in the greater Portland area support counties' ability to do so.

Oregonians older than 75 are the most likely to say that Southern and Eastern Oregon counties joining Idaho would be negative (55%), and respondents ages 45 to 54 are the most likely to say the move would be positive (40%).

More than half of Oregonians with six-figure incomes believe the move would be negative, while some 40% of people with lower incomes believe it would be positive.

Compared to urban and suburban residents, rural residents are the most likely to say voters should be able to approve a county's move to Idaho (43%), and that a move to Idaho is likely (32%) and would be positive (40%).

Mask:

Continued from Page A1

city's staple tourist attractions, was closed for six months due to the state's pandemic restrictions for indoor entertainment facilities. Armstrong, whose family has been running the tours since she was a little girl, said the business took a huge hit, had significant layoffs and survived mostly off of Payment Protection Program loans.

Umatilla County joined Oregon in removing masking and social distancing mandates. With the change in restrictions, Armstrong said she's glad to see customers traveling to Pendleton to support community businesses, many of which rely heavily on tourism and large events that were canceled for months. Even though some say that June 30 felt like the end of the pandemic in Oregon, it doesn't feel that way to Armstrong.

"For me, I'm wondering what's going to be next," she said.

Pendleton residents and downtown businesses are grappling with the local post-pandemic circumstances.

Some expressed relief the day after the restrictions ended, sharing meals with friends and family at breweries as business owners opened their doors and took masking signs off their windows.

Others, however, are remaining cautious, as new COVID-19 variants are on



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Unmasked tour participants enter the Pendleton Underground Thursday, July 1, 2021, a day after Gov. Kate Brown lifted COVID-19 guidelines.

the rise and the majority of Umatilla County residents have yet to be vaccinated, leaving the county a possible hotbed for infection, county health officials say.

Once a graveyard

Vicky Pearce, the owner of Antiques and Art on Main, said she was grateful pandemic restrictions were finally over. From her shop, which she has owned for nine years, she watched the normally bustling downtown area empty out. To her, it felt tragic.

"A graveyard," she said. "That's what it really was."

The hardest part, she said, was closing her shop for more than three months — the first of three times they closed down. She estimates she lost up to \$75,000 last year.

Pearce said she's gearing up for the surge of business that comes with summer tourism and events, including the Pendleton Round-Up. And she's glad to see people maskless, smiling without fear.

"I'm grateful for Pendleton for hanging in there and

doing the best they can," she said, adding, "I think people are ready for a change."

'Cautiously optimistic'

But not all businesses in downtown Pendleton are immediately returning to normal.

The Pendleton Music Company does not plan to change its masking and distancing policy, according to employee Charlie Herrington. To keep employees and customers safe from falling ill, the Main Street music shop will continue

allowing only seven customers in at a time. All must wear masks.

After hearing the state was lifting restrictions, Herrington said he felt "cautiously optimistic." With the delta variant beginning to ramp up nationally, infecting large swaths of unvaccinated people, Herrington said the business prefers to wait and see how things pan out.

"I'm just as anxious to be rid of (COVID-19) as anybody," said Herrington, 67, who said he's been vaccinated against the disease.

Bustling over lunch

By noon on July 1, Great Pacific Wine & Coffee Co. was bustling. More than 30 people chatted over meals in the restaurant as employees rushed to get out orders. Practically none wore masks.

Among the customers was Carole Wachsmuth, a 73-year-old Portland resident just returning from a cross-country road trip to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons national parks with her husband of 52 years. She said the trip renewed her love of the road after months of isolation and fear.

Wachsmuth has had to be cautious throughout the pandemic. Her sister endured six rounds of chemotherapy for ovarian cancer this year, but her body was resistant, which means she will never be cured, Wachsmuth said.

In addition, she said one of her daughters-in-law was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis this year. Another has diabetes and had a child during the pandemic.

"I've had a lot of people I've had to be careful for," she said. "I was really careful for all of them — careful where I went, careful to wear a mask. I didn't go a lot of places at all."

Now that she's fully vaccinated against COVID-19, she said she feels like a new person. It's given her a way to protect her family. Now she's looking forward to spending time with her nine grandchildren.

She echoed a sentiment held among many people downtown that day: "It just feels good to be normal again."

COVID-19:

Continued from Page A1

said unvaccinated residents would need to adopt precautions from the early days of the pandemic, before the virus infected more than 8,700 residents and killed 87: wash hands frequently and stay home when sick.

Even as many counties see their daily number of daily cases drastically shrink as vaccinations rise, COVID-19 has proven resilient in Umatilla County. While nowhere near the peaks of last summer and winter, Umatilla County has frequently reported double-digit daily COVID-19 case counts. On Wednesday, June 30, the 21 cases Umatilla County reported represented the largest case count of any county in the state, exceeding even the Portland metro counties.

Lundgren said the county was dealing with "fluctuating" COVID-19 case rates, with some daily counts the accumulation of several days.

Oregon on July 2 passed the 70% vaccination rate for residents 18 and older, but Umatilla County is below average in building immu-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Susan Hilliard, left, receives her second dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during a drive-thru clinic operated by the Umatilla County Public Health Department in Pendleton on March 26, 2021. While Oregon on Thursday, July 1, lifted most COVID-19 restrictions, Umatilla County needs to keep its contact tracing center open for another two years.

nity to the virus. The share of county residents who have received at least one dose of the vaccine ranges from 40-42%, the variance in numbers due to different statistics from the Oregon Health Authority and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC shows some

positive trends when focusing on certain age groups. When isolating residents 12 years and older — no vaccine has been approved for children age 0-11 — the vaccination rate edges up to 53%. Furthermore, nearly 4 in 5 residents age 65 and older are vaccinated against COVID-19, insulating a population

especially vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

In an email, Murdock said the commissioner's happy to see the restrictions lift after many local businesses "suffered mightily" over the past 18 months.

But Murdock also was concerned about the increased risk of spread as residents

start to mingle and gather, especially as the delta variant, a more contagious strain of COVID-19, continues to grow.

"The whole matter is very frustrating because we believe there remains a serious risk and yet we need to respect the fact this is an individual choice," he wrote. "In the end, there is basically nothing the County can do about the problem except continue to spread the message and assure that vaccines are readily available all over the county — which they have been for months."

While the county has mostly ceded the responsibility of vaccinating residents to local pharmacies and clinics, Umatilla County Public Health is partnering with OHA to offer a mobile vaccination clinic in Milton-Freewater at the Blue Mountain Community College parking lot from July 5-18. Lundgren said the county targeted Milton-Freewater because it had a lot fewer vaccination venues than Pendleton or Hermiston did.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on July 2 announced it was changing its COVID-19 rules, largely aligning its guidelines with the state.

Aaron Hines, the interim CEO of Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, said the reservation still was dealing with some COVID-19 cases of its own, mostly tied to an exposure on a school bus.

Even though it's lifting many of its rules, Hines said the tribes continue to take the virus seriously. Hines said 41% of Yellowhawk-eligible patients are vaccinated, a number that may not include tribal members or non-tribal reservation residents who got their vaccines elsewhere.

In an attempt to increase its vaccination rate, the tribes is instituting a vaccination lottery, similar to the ones Oregon and other states have started. Hines said it was a good chance to provide one more incentive to tribal members and CTUIR employees as the mask mandate lifts.

"We need to do one more push to get shots in arms," he said.

In the county, Murdock said further incentives were unlikely to entice further vaccinations. Lundgren said public health was hoping positive word of mouth would boost vaccinations in addition to students returning back to school.