

Art:

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Pendleton Arts Committee to request a series of five bronze medallions representing the various branches of the armed forces.

While the initial request was approved, the committee and Blagg continued to dream of a more significant way to honor military members in the community.

"I started with a smaller concept and then the arts committee got a hold of it and made it even more grand," said Blagg.

Since that initial request, the Pendleton Military Tribute has raised \$25,000 in commemorative brick sales, \$70,500 from the Oregon Heritage Commission's veterans memorial grant and other foundations, including the Johnson Foundation, Pendleton Foundation Trust, Altrusa and the Round-Up Foundation.

The remainder of the project's \$150,000 price tag came from the city of Pendleton public arts fund.

"We're selling like 10-15 (bricks) a week now," Denight said.

Once the bricks have been manufactured, Denight said they will line the wall around the sculpture site. He added he has seen many people purchasing more than one brick as a way of honor-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A crane lifts the pergola for the Beacon of the Sentinels art installation into place Tuesday, July 20, 2021, at the Pendleton Military Tribute in Pendleton.

ing friends or family.

The sculpture, designed by Michael Clapper, of Denver, Colorado, features a 24-foot "beacon" flanked by a series of basalt columns supporting a star-shaped pergola. Five military branch seals were cut through the steel "beacon" to allow light to shine through them at night.

Clapper said he envisions the star-shaped pergola as representative of the United States, while the beacon goes back to the longstanding idea of the torch or beacon as a symbol of freedom.

"I really wanted to use the beacon or the torch as a symbol of strength and protection," he said.

In addition to the beacon, the pergola features a series of glass stars that cast colorful shadows on the concrete below. Clapper said he enjoyed working with members of the committee and VFW Post 922 to create the piece, and hopes it will be enjoyed by the community for years to come.

"I love designing these things so a community can come together and share something creative," he said.

Unlike a traditional veterans or war memorial, Blagg had dreamed up the idea of a broader military tribute from the start.

"This is about everybody," he said "All eras — past, present, future — it's to tribute our military and civil service in the U.S."

While the tribute was officially unveiled at a small ceremony on July 21, Blagg and Denight both said there is more work to be done. There are bricks to be installed, and the landscaping on the site remains in need of attention.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A crane lifts the 24-foot-tall steel "beacon" into place Tuesday, July 20, 2021, for the Beacon of the Sentinels art installation at the Pendleton Military Tribute.

Blagg also said he is working on fine tuning the placement of the bronze medallions he received for the site in 2018 and hopes to have them permanently set up soon, as well as a few

other forms of recognition for other civil services.

"It going to be quite a nice attraction," he said. "It's going to lend something additional to Pendleton as people are coming into town."

Cases:

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day reported 70 new cases in Umatilla County, and a report the OHA released earlier this week shows the county has reported a higher case rate than any other county in Oregon since late June.

"Our numbers are some of the highest in the state, and yet our vaccination rates are some of the lowest in the state, so is there a correlation?" said Shafer. "I'm not a scientist, but if I'm looking at the numbers, I've gotta say it's related. The cases we're seeing are from unvaccinated people."

Emily Smith, a spokesperson for CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, said the hospital has recently seen an uptick in COVID-19 hospitalizations and COVID-19 cases in the emergency department. Over the past few days, she said, between 20-30% of patients tested in the emergency department had COVID-19, after several weeks where the hospital didn't see a single COVID-19 inpatient.

"I know people have heard it a hundred times but please stress the importance of getting vaccinated against COVID-19," Smith said in an email to the East Oregonian.

Officials suspect the highly contagious delta variant, which has been confirmed to be spreading in Umatilla County, is contributing to the case spike. But to what extent is unclear.

Fiumara said health officials are watching closely to see if recent large events, such as the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest, create an increase in cases. If it does, he said, that will be a strong indicator of what could happen when the Pendleton Round-Up brings thousands of people to town.

"If Whisky Fest happens and there's huge case spikes because of it, it doesn't speak well for Round-Up," he said. "I do think there's a risk, I just can't speak to how large that risk is yet."

Gov. Kate Brown said in June the Round-Up would go on after a COVID-19 caused cancellation in 2020.

"Let 'er buck," Brown said, using a popular saying for the event.

But she made the statements when COVID-19 infections were in steep decline and as Oregon pushed toward its 70% vaccination benchmark. Since the state reached that goal in early July, Umatilla County vaccine rate has lagged behind the state.

Delta variant surging

The highly contagious COVID-19 delta variant has



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

Cody DeMoss clings to Shadow Rider during saddle bronc action Sept. 14, 2019, at the Pendleton Round-Up as other cowboys on the infield cheer him on. COVID-19 cases are increasing in Umatilla County, but there is no sign the 2021 Round-Up will take a hiatus like it did last year because of the pandemic.

caused a steep increase in the number of infections in Oregon — but with different impacts across the state.

"Oregon is open, but the pandemic is not over," said OHA Director Pat Allen during a press call Thursday, July 22.

COVID-19 infections by the delta variant have doubled in the past week, leading to a new spike in total numbers. OHA reported the number of delta variant cases had risen 25% between July 21 and 22 alone.

The delta variant now accounts for over half of all COVID-19 cases in Oregon and is likely to rise, mirroring the national average of 80%.

The statistics were rolled out at OHA's first high-profile press briefing since Brown ended statewide COVID-19 restrictions June 30.

Allen demurred, however, on if the state would step in to curb or cancel the Round-Up in September if Umatilla County's infection rates stayed at current levels.

"Two or three months in the future are an eternity" in the pandemic, he said.

The rise in cases as vaccinations in the state have slowed to a trickle. While about 2.4 million residents have received at least one shot of vaccine, Allen said the latest daily number of new inoculations was about 2,000. That's down from a peak of over 50,000 on some days in early April.

Allen said COVID-19

cases are surging, up tenfold in the past week. The delta variant spreads up to 75% faster than the original COVID-19 virus that first appeared in Oregon in February 2020.

The spread of the virus is not evenly spread throughout Oregon as in earlier spikes, OHA reported.

Umatilla County in spotlight

Allen singled out Umatilla County, which has vaccinated just under 43% of eligible adults and had 70 new cases, according to the OHA. Portland State University's Population Research Center estimated the 2020 population of the county at almost 81,500 residents.

In contrast, Washington County, near Portland, had 43 new cases and has vaccinated 75% of eligible adults. It's 2020 population is just more than 620,000.

Statewide, the percentage of positive cases averaged 3.8% through the two-week period ending July 17. But in Umatilla County, the percentage was 12.4% and Morrow County was 14.4%.

In contrast, Multnomah County — which includes Portland — was 2%. Lane County — including Eugene — was 2.9%. And Deschutes County — including Bend — was 3.4%. But OHA reported even these small percentages were increases over the prior two-week periods going back to June 20.

Clatsop County, at 4%,

was one of the few counties to report a drop in infections over the period.

"The pandemic is fading for those that are vaccinated — they can resume activities with relative peace of mind," Allen said.

While significantly more contagious, the delta variant has not been shown to be any more virulent or able to break through vaccines that have been widely available since spring.

While infections and hospitalizations are rising, the number of deaths is expected to be capped well below levels seen last winter when the virus was rampant and no vaccines were available.

Allen said that despite the July 22 press call to publicize the extent of the delta variant, there were no plans for Brown or OHA to step in and exert control over local decisions.

"The state is trying to be hands-off and hand things down to local government," Fiumara said.

While OHA was ready to help with additional vaccine and other support, it is up to county health departments to take a measure of the local impact of the virus and for county commissioners to decide what should be done.

Salem would not issue edicts, but advice.

"Take action now," Allen said of counties with lagging vaccination rates.

Allen pointed to state statistics showing that 15 out

of 36 counties had started vaccinating less than half their adult population. Statewide the number is about 70%.

Unvaccinated most at risk

Dean Sidelinger, the state health officer and chief epidemiologist, said the jump in infections should be a "red alert" for those who have not been vaccinated.

"You are at higher risk now than you were earlier in the pandemic and you are putting the people around you at risk," Sidelinger said.

Not moving to increase vaccination levels would mean the shadow of the pandemic would continue in communities, schools, workplaces and gatherings.

"The virus looms large," Sidelinger said.

OHA again said it was hoping for increased persuasion and for local influential individuals and political leaders to take action. There were no plans for new mandates, or to tell employers they should require vaccinations.

Citing the "highly political" nature of the COVID-19 debate, Allen said efforts to increase vaccinations had to come from trusted local sources, including civic and faith leaders, as well as political officeholders.

Soon after the transfer of responsibility to counties, the governor's office said it would monitor the response.

"Oregon is moving into the next chapter of this

pandemic," Brown spokesperson Charles Boyle said July 7. "While our statewide response will now look different, OHA continues to have an ongoing leadership role working with local public health partners in vaccination efforts, as well as pandemic response and recovery."

Boyle said Brown was aware of the already rising impact of the delta variant in other parts of the nation.

"We will continue to monitor the spread of variants closely," Boyle said.

While transferring daily control of the pandemic response to counties, Brown has not lifted the state emergency order that has been in place since March 2020 and renewed several times.

Allen said getting people to realize the gravity of the pandemic and to make their own choice to get vaccinated was going to work best.

"I don't care what you think, you have to get vaccinated," he said, was a message that wouldn't help anyone.

Allen also said he had conversations with many leaders of all political views and it was up to them to decide their public role when it comes to addressing vaccination.

"Let them speak for themselves," he said, adding, "Who are the right messengers, what is the right message?"

Up until June 30, the state had decided the risk level for infection in each county and what restrictions should be in place. Though Brown officially disconnected the risk analysis from state response, the state still reports the statistics each Monday.

OHA on July 21 posted an update showing the number of confirmed cases of the COVID-19 delta variant had more than doubled, from 43 to 90, between reports on July 10 and July 17.

OHA officials say the prevalence of the delta variant likely is an undercount, as sequencing data can take weeks to be reported and not all coronavirus cases are tested for the variant.

COVID-19 has killed over 610,000 Americans and 4.1 million people worldwide. Many of the variants have had their origins thousands of miles away from Oregon, but in modern times can reach anywhere on the globe in a relatively short time.

Sidelinger said the pandemic has had many turning points for bad and good.

Thinking that it is defeated would "come at a high cost."

"Our fight is not over," he said. "COVID-19 is a stubborn foe."