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Cases climb across county

Umatilla County reports second highest positive test rate in state, hospitals see uptick in patients hospitalized with COVID-19

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Umatilla County continues to report some of the highest COVID-19 infection rates statewide, but county commissioners say they won't step in to reinstate pandemic restrictions.

"I think if we tried to implement any kind of restrictions, I don't think anybody would follow them," Commissioner John Shafer said Monday, July 26.

With almost 80,000 residents, the county saw 8% of Oregon's total COVID-19 cases over the past two weeks, despite accounting for less than 2% of the state's total population. During that same period, the county reported the second highest positive test rate statewide at 17.6%, as hospitals in Pendleton and Hermiston reported an uptick in patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

Only neighboring Morrow County had a higher rate at 17.9%. Wallowa County had the third highest rate, 14.8%

The county in the past two weeks has averaged 32 cases per day, a sharp rise from the nearly 10 cases per day the county was reporting earlier this month. It's a total that tops several densely populated counties in Western Oregon and amounts to a case rate nearly seven times higher than Multnomah and Washington counties, according to the state.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said the county is expecting to report an especially high case count July 27. By noon July 26, the county added up more than 80 new COVID-19 cases from the weekend, and Fiumara expected that number to continue to rise.

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Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

First grader Sebastian Macias receives some help from teacher Yisel Amaya on Thursday, July 22, 2021, to log onto a laptop during summer school at Sunset Elementary, Hermiston.

Making learning fun

Hermiston's School District's summer school a hit with parents, students

By **NICK ROSENBERGER**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Hermiston School District's wildly successful free summer camp program, running from June 21 to July 31, is reintroducing children to the fun of learning after a year of online and hybrid school.

The program, which is broken up into two sessions and open to all students grades K-12 enrolled in the Hermiston School District, has been a smash hit with both parents and students. Along with free meals and childcare, the program offered a more hands-on and experiential learning focus after a year disrupted by COVID-19.

The classes were centered on matter the students don't normally experience and tried to cover more subjects



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Nona Buschke raises her hand Thursday, July 22, 2021, in Yisel Amaya's first grade summer school class at Sunset Elementary, Hermiston.

than the usual slate of academics, such as math and English. Some of their offerings included opportunities to learn about physics by building a rollercoaster or solving a crime scene for a forensic science class.

"So just lots of different activities and learning than the traditional classroom," said Tanya Kennedy, a summer program coordinator and dean of students at Desert View Elementary School.

Student built bridges and catapults for civil engineering and construction, had the chance to try different sports or even take an Ethiopian culture and history class. Some also learned how to code, build solar race

cars and learn about history through simulations to give them a hands-on approach to learning.

One such hands-on activity for third grade had students excavate chocolate chips from soft cookies as if they were digging for fossils during their dinosaur-themed week.

On top of this, the district offered sports camps every other week that high school athletes and coaches run while first through third graders got two weeks of free swim lessons. Additionally, each elementary grade went on two field trips during the six weeks, from places such as Three Mile Canyon Farms in Boardman to Fort Walla Walla.

Fun learning experience

According to Melissa Doherty, the middle school summer program coordinator, the summer school program was "really focusing on making education fun and the learning experience fun."

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The slow goodbye

Methodist congregation calls it quits

By **KATHY ANEY**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A few years ago, the members of Pendleton's United Methodist Church sorrowfully walked away from their 113-year old house of worship.

The elegant stone church had become something of a money pit that consumed the congregation's resources. Moisture had infiltrated a leaky roof into the sanctuary's walls. Asbestos, crumbling mortar, cracked plaster and deferred maintenance

lurked throughout the building. After some agonizing deliberations, the congregation voted to sell its house of worship with stained glass windows, distinctive bell tower and floor-to-ceiling pipe organ intact.

"It was an extremely difficult decision to make," said Wanda Remington, president of the church's administrative council at the time. "But we realized this church is an albatross. It's a beautiful albatross, don't get me wrong, but it's still an albatross."

After Portland developer Craig Clemens purchased the building for \$350,000 in 2019, the tiny band of believers met in the town's Community Room for a time and then at Peace Lutheran, worshipping early before the

Lutherans. Then came the pandemic and the congregation went online. Financially, the church struggled, running a deficit.

This summer, the members decided to disband. They paid the bills, turned off the phone and gave remaining proceeds of the church sale to local nonprofits and two Methodist churches in neighboring towns. Without their weekly worship, some of the church members struggled to find equilibrium.

"I feel kind of adrift," said longtime member John Taylor, the church's head trustee. "I really miss my church family. We have scattered every which way."

The last decade has been a slow goodbye. Possibly, Taylor said, they should have



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

Three worshippers couldn't sing the final hymn at the congregation's last service at the historic Pendleton United Methodist Church.

disbanded when they sold the stone church at 352 S.E. Second St. three years ago.

"The handwriting was on the wall when we sold the building and we just

didn't want to see it," he said. "Maybe we should have pulled the Band-Aid off then."

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