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Local governments cautiously optimistic on infrastructure bill

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — With Congress passing a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill the first week of November, the Oregon Department of Transportation already is projecting to take home \$1.2 billion for transportation projects across the state. But local officials are taking a wait-and-

see approach to figure out how that money may trickle down to cities in Eastern Oregon.

“This is good news,” Pendleton Public Works Director Bob Patterson said.

But questions remain over how and when rural communities will see money from the bill.

Patterson said the city hoped the bill would include money for a new

road connecting Highway 11 and Highway 30 on the South Hill to open up new land for housing. The appropriation didn’t make the cut, but the city still is exploring funding options for the road.

Funding a realignment of the Interstate 84 Exit 209 interchange has been something of a white whale for Pendleton city officials. The city has applied for a grant from the U.S.

Department of Transportation three times and come up short each time.

The city is making a fourth attempt at securing \$24.4 million through the grant, which was known as BUILD under the Trump administration and is known as RAISE now. Patterson said the city plans to stay the course in obtaining money for Exit 209 through the grant rather than through the infrastructure bill.

Patterson said the city should know by Thanksgiving if it locked down the award.

But like every other city and county in Oregon, there are plenty of other projects Pendleton could fund with extra money from the federal government. Patterson said the city is waiting for word from the

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Yellowhawk clinic brings first COVID-19 vaccines to children

Health care workers and families remark on pandemic’s toll as children get their shots

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

MISSION — Luka Worden sat between her parents in the waiting area at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, eager to become one of the first children vaccinated against COVID-19 on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

At least 50 children ages 5 to 11 were scheduled for the shot at the mass vaccination clinic on Saturday, Nov. 13 — the first day tribal health officials offered vaccines for youths.

“I wanna be safe and I don’t want to get COVID and I want a lot of people to get the vaccine so this will go away,” said Luka, a 10-year-old enrolled member of the Coeur d’Alene Tribe in Idaho.

Health care workers and families said they were thrilled to see children vaccinated at the clinic, noting the day as yet another milestone in the fight against the ongoing pandemic.

“We’ve seen the outbreaks that do occur in schools or buses,” said Yellowhawk Interim Chief Executive Officer Aaron Hines. “I think this affords a level of protection for another age group.”

For Luka’s family, the day brought relief after a difficult few months.

Luka’s mother, Dara Williams Worden, was the first family member to contract the virus in August as the delta variant spread rapidly on the reservation, infecting more tribal members than any previous surge. Worden struggled in isolation for days, suffering from body aches, muscle cramps and stomach pains.

By the time Luka contracted COVID-19, the whole family was ill. Luka had been trying to distance herself from her mom. On the day she tested positive, Luka went into her mother’s room and hugged her. There was no use isolating anymore, Worden said.

“It was scary for her, seeing mom like that,” said Worden, an enrolled CTUIR member.



Luka Worden, 10, receives a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine from registered nurse Adam White during a youth vaccine clinic Saturday, Nov. 13, 2021, at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center in Mission.

Worden was vaccinated, and although she fell seriously ill, she said she believes it would have been worse if she hadn’t gotten the shot. In October, her father contracted COVID-19. He was unvaccinated, Worden said.

“I wish he had been,” Worden added.

He wanted to wait and see how well the vaccines worked and what side effects there might be, Worden said. He died at the age of 67, she said.

Native Americans hit hardest by pandemic

A robust and growing body of research indicates the pandemic has disproportionately affected Native Americans. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Native Americans are more likely to be hospitalized and die with COVID-19 than any other race or ethnicity in America.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation largely has been successful at curbing the spread of infection throughout the pandemic, which health officials attribute to the tribes’ quick and strict precautions. Yellowhawk health officials have reported 681 COVID-19 cases and five deaths since the pandemic started, according to data as of Nov. 8.

But that hasn’t stopped the pandemic from touching the lives of tribal members and health care workers alike.

Summer Bryan, a Yellowhawk public

health nurse and enrolled CTUIR member who organized the clinic, said “a couple” of her family members died from COVID-19. She, too, tested positive during the delta crisis and fell seriously ill. She’s vaccinated but immunocompromised. If she hadn’t gotten the shot, she likely would have been hospitalized, she said.

Bryan said her experiences have empowered her to inform family members and her community about the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines. As a nurse, she said it’s important to her to help keep the community safe and protect tribal elders. She said organizing the clinic was one way she could help bring life back to normal on the reservation.

“It makes me feel I have a responsibility,” she said, adding: “I try to be that vessel, most definitely.”

Thelma Eagleheart, whose daughter Samarah got vaccinated at the clinic, said she and her husband contracted COVID-19 in March 2020. For 17 days, she struggled to breathe and eventually got pneumonia. Back then, the tribes didn’t have COVID-19 tests. She was scared and didn’t know what to think. She watched CNN in fear as the world closed down.

More than a year-and-a-half later, Eagleheart said she still can’t sleep on her back. She said she feels a heaviness she didn’t before, and when she falls ill, it’s grueling.

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State to test for toxic ‘forever chemicals’

City of Pendleton is 1 of 17 sites for PFAS testing in Eastern Oregon

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — The state of Oregon plans to test 150 drinking water systems across the state for the presence of PFAS, or per- and poly-fluorinated substances.

PFAS are a family of chemicals that do not break down in the environment or in human bodies. These “forever chemicals” are linked to cancer, reduced fertility in women and delayed development in infants and children, among other adverse health effects. The chemicals have been used since the 1940s and are found in thousands of household and commercial items, such as nonstick pots and pans, waterproof clothing and firefighting foam agents.

Of those 150 sites to be tested, 17 are in Eastern Oregon, including 11 in Umatilla County and two in Union County. Baker, Grant, Morrow and Wallowa counties each have one testing site.

“We took a look at all the small public water systems, those that serve fewer than 10,000 because the big ones have already been sampled, and we looked at places where there might have been potential — and I’m underlying potential — PFAS sources,” said Harry Esteve, communication manager for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. “We overlaid those on the maps of water systems and selected that list of 150.”

The Northeastern Oregon testing sites include the cities of Irrigon, Pendleton, Milton-Freewater, Elgin, John Day and Joseph. Also among the sites are the Ash Grove cement manufacturing site in Baker City, the Amazon data center in Hermiston and the Sacajawea Mobile Home

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Warming stations face volunteer shortage

Hermiston station delays opening, Pendleton’s to offer motel vouchers

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — A lack of volunteers may be a setback for a Umatilla County warming station, according to one of the station’s volunteers and board members.

Brodie Messenger of the Hermiston Warming Station, 1075 S. Highway 395, Hermiston, said the facility usually opens the Monday before Thanksgiving, which this year is Nov. 22, but only if the station can attract

CONTACT INFORMATION

Anyone who would like to volunteer to the Hermiston Warming Station can email hws1075@gmail.com for more information.

enough volunteers. Otherwise the station’s opening will be postponed until enough helpers sign on to serve.

Messenger, one of eight board members, said this year’s delay in opening could be “a week or two,” based on the current numbers. The warming stations board plans to determine the schedule at an upcoming meeting.

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Volunteer and board member Brodie Messenger stands at the door of the Hermiston Warming Station on Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021.

Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

