



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian  
Zack Lipscomb shovels snow Monday, Dec. 20, 2021, at the Heritage Station Museum in Pendleton.

## Snow:

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Strandberg said the most frequent cause of road closures are drivers losing control of their vehicles and he urged local drivers to travel cautiously when navigating Eastern Oregon's roads.

"Everybody needs to be slowing down and drive according to conditions," he said.

When traveling during the holiday season, Strandberg said part of their preparation process should involve checking road conditions on ODOT's Trip Check website. Strandberg said motorists should check images of Interstate 84 to see if there is snow and ice on the portions they will be traveling on. He said travelers should not be fooled if they see a clear stretch of road

on the website's camera because it may be sandwiched between long stretches of freeways covered with snow and ice.

Strandberg recommended drivers store food, water, blankets and cellphone chargers just in case they get stuck during a road closure.

Motorists who see long stretches of bad driving conditions should stay home if at all possible, he said, and he encouraged drivers on I-84 to be very careful when looking for detours if there are closures or bad conditions.

"Don't blindly follow GPS detour routes," he said.

Strandberg said many are county roads not as well maintained as I-84. He also warned drivers to be on alert for motorists who may be operating carelessly.

"They should be mindful that a lot of drivers are anxious and in a hurry," he said.

He also urged motorists to be patient if they get behind snowplows and do not attempt to pass them. He said snowplow operators are aware of traffic behind them.

"They will pull over," he said. And Strandberg said drivers should stay at least four car lengths behind snowplows to avoid being hit by the snow and rocks they kick up.

While weather conditions are expected to warm up and dry out midweek, Solomon said another system is approaching the region at the end of the week. While it should mostly result in a mix of rain and snow in the lower elevations, it could create hazardous conditions for drivers traveling through the Blue Mountain or Cascades.

— Reporter Dick Mason with The Observer in La Grande contributed to this article.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group  
Linda Page looks through boxes of Christmas decorations and goods at the People Helping People secondhand store in La Grande on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. Thrift stores have seen an increase in customers as supply chain issues hamper large chain retailers' stock of Christmas goods.

## Stores:

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She said decorations sold "very well," and sales for the decorations made up half of her sales in recent weeks. Thanks in part to the sale of Christmas decorations, the store was able to pay its rent after only two weeks of being open, Clemons said. She reported being happy about this success, because the store benefits the Outreach Food Pantry.

"The amount of people buying Christmas (decorations) has been a lot bigger in the secondhand stores this year," said Randi Stauffer, a manager at People Helping People, 2635 Bearco Loop, La Grande. "The cool thing about secondhand stores is you're able to find that vintage Christmas, that antique Christmas and that retro Christmas."

The secondhand store's warehouse has aisles and boxes full of ornaments and Christmas supplies, including retro-looking bulbs and ornaments. A discerning eye might catch a personalized snowman ornament engraved with the name John in its base, or a red bulb decoration emblazoned with a family photo from decades past.

Walmarts in La Grande and Pendleton were out of artificial trees on Dec. 16. Christmas lights and decorations that once lined the shelves in Pendleton also took a tremendous hit, with very little supplies remaining. Pendleton, however, had some trees back in stock as of Dec. 20. In Hermiston, the stock of Christmas supplies remains relatively healthy, though the supply of artificial trees was dwindling.

The price for consumer goods — including Christmas decorations — also has increased due to global problems with shipping costs, labor shortages and fuel prices, according to numerous reports from The New York



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group  
Christmas decorations sit on the shelves at the People Helping People secondhand store in La Grande on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. Thrift stores have seen an increase in customers as supply chain issues hamper large chain retailers' stock of Christmas goods.

Times, The Washington Post and Reuters.

Those self-same supply chain woes haven't done much to hurt the inventory of Christmas goods at secondhand stores, however, which stock their shelves primarily through donations by individuals and estates. That means as supplies dwindle at the box chain retail stores, customers of all ages flock to the secondhand stores in search of Christmas goods.

"There are new faces we've never seen before," Stauffer said. "We're having the younger generations come in and get more Christmas stuff too."

A manager with People Helping People in Pendleton corroborated the increase in businesses as seen at the La Grande store, stating the staff has also seen an influx of customers filling the store looking for Christmas deals. That trend has only increased in the run-up toward the holiday.

"And still — people are still getting Christmas trees, they're still getting the supplies — the Christmas lights (sales) have not stopped," Stauffer said. "We've probably sold the most Christmas lights we've ever had over the year, this year."

## 2022:

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As 2022 is about to dawn, there is little swagger that the worst is over. The cornerstone of crisis — the COVID-19 pandemic — began on the last day of 2019 with a trickle of infections in China. It was worldwide — a pandemic — by the end of 2020 with more than 300,000 dead in the United States.

Through 2021, the virus threw off variants — most little more than scientific curiosities. But a few — "Variants of Concern" — would start a roll call of names taken from the Greek alphabet. Delta brought contagion to a new level. Omicron capped the year as the biggest and fastest, though hopefully less lethal, of them all. The cases in one city in one country that could be counted on two hands at the end of 2019 would march into 2022 with a tally of 273 million infections worldwide and 5.4 million deaths — led by more than 800,000 in the United States.

In January, some forecasts predicted the virus would be under control by June. It felt that way in July 2021, when Oregon reported 92 deaths — the first monthly total to fall below 100 since June 2020, at the beginning of the crisis. A two-week respite around the Fourth of July gave a glimpse of what could pass for normal life.

Delta quickly crushed the hope. By Labor Day, delta peaked. The spike would bottom out in October. No, Thanksgiving, Christmas, March 2022. The steep line plotted on a graph that took two months to peak became a stretched out slope with bumps back up on the way down.

This time, there would be no hiatus. Delta dropped, then at the beginning of December surged in parts of the nation — driven by crisis fatigue of people who now gathered more often indoors, in larger groups, with varying levels of the official guidelines for masks and social distancing. Delta took two months to jump from where it was first seen in India to all 36 counties in Oregon. Omicron was reported in southern Africa on Nov. 22 and was officially in Oregon by Dec. 13.

Attempts to calculate when the pandemic was slowing or receding have led to futility.

After 612 people died in December 2020, the tally slowly dropped with the arrival of vaccines late that month. The worst seemed over.

When delta broke the record with over 900 reported deaths in September, then slid to 640 in October and 249 in November, the path forward looked much brighter.

### Oregon's infection rate, deaths among nation's lowest

But the virus is a living, morphing, shape-shifter. What it is today, it isn't tomorrow, much less a month

or a year from now.

Today, nearly three out of four people in Oregon are vaccinated — the 12th highest rank among 50 states.

A New York Times survey on Saturday, Dec. 18, of federal, state and local data showed that since the pandemic began, Oregon has had the third lowest rate of infections and sixth lowest rate of deaths of the 50 states.

But forecasts come with more caveats this December. The omicron variant may be less lethal. May be milder in most cases.

But new information can make current information grow old and out-of-date very quickly.

In June, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it was fine for people with two vaccine shots to meet in small groups with others whose status was the same.

Delta was tagged as "the pandemic of the unvaccinated" — and was in the most severe cases. The vaccinated made up less than 5% of the hospitalized and about 1% of the dead.

Omicron could be held at bay in the United States by the dominance of the delta variant. Instead, it is pushing it aside.

"Fully vaccinated" meant two shots of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or one of Johnson & Johnson. Now a booster of the first pair is the marker for maximum protection, while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been shelved amid caution over its effectiveness and side effects.

"Exactly one year ago this week, we came together to celebrate the first COVID vaccinations in Oregon," Brown said Dec. 19. "We watched with excitement, and frankly a huge sigh of relief, as health care workers from across our state received their first dose."

One year later, the New Year opens with omicron.

### Preparing for more illness, death

"A gut punch," said Dr. Renee Edwards, chief medical officer of the Oregon Health & Science University.

On the streets and stores of Oregon, the sign of the pandemic as of late has been, at most, people wearing masks. In some parts of Oregon where going maskless is a sign of skepticism of the science or political belligerence, even that symbol is absent.

But health workers across the state say inside hospitals, exhausted doctors, nurses and other medical and health staff deal with an undulating but never absent stream of sickness and death. Now they must prepare for more.

Cloaked by privacy laws, the state daily issues a ticker of deaths — people reduced to which county they lived in, when they became sick, when and where they died, their gender and age and if they had the catch-all "underlying condi-

tions" that made fatality more likely.

With a few exceptions that attract a public obituary or a level of fame that makes it impossible to conceal their identity, the daily list of names, faces, stories and suffering of the dead remain unknown to all but family and hospital staff who watch as they pass.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's chief epidemiologist gave a mournful soliloquy on Sept. 16 when Oregon passed 3,500 deaths from COVID-19.

Each morning he would look at the internal reports of new deaths coming in from around the state. Some made him cry. Some made him angry. Some made him feel something worse.

"Some mornings I am numb to the pain that the suffering and death that the numbers represent," he said. "A mother, a father, a son or daughter, brother or sister, grandmother or grandfather, a best friend, a neighbor, a beloved co-worker. Every one of them was loved and every one of them leaves behind grieving loved ones."

Sidelinger said he longed for the day the pandemic is over and hoped people would not forget what it had extracted from everyone.

Since he spoke, more than 2,000 more people have died in Oregon.

### Oregon looks to surpass 6,400 deaths

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, a top forecaster of the pandemic at the University of Washington, said Dec. 19 the reports will continue past Jan. 1.

It reports the official worldwide death toll will hit 6.26 million by March 1 — though postmortems in months and years ahead will show deaths at double that number.

In the United States, IHME expects fatalities to reach 880,000 nationwide by that date. When statistics catch up, historians likely will see deaths in the United States topped 1 million in mid-February.

The flow of reports to Sidelinger's desk in Oregon each morning won't stop either. IHME puts the likely official count on March 1 passing 6,400 reported deaths. The real number will eventually be closer to 9,100 after the review of fatalities is done after the pandemic ends.

When that will be, is unknown. The forecast stops at March 1. The list of variants ends for now at omicron.

How many more Greek letters tagged to COVID-19 variants in 2022 is in a future that won't be known until next year this time.

Whether pandemic will die out — or fires burn, smoke billow, political violence flare — won't be known until this time next year.

The past three years show that predicting the future of this era of trouble is difficult and often foolish.

Check back next December to find out.

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