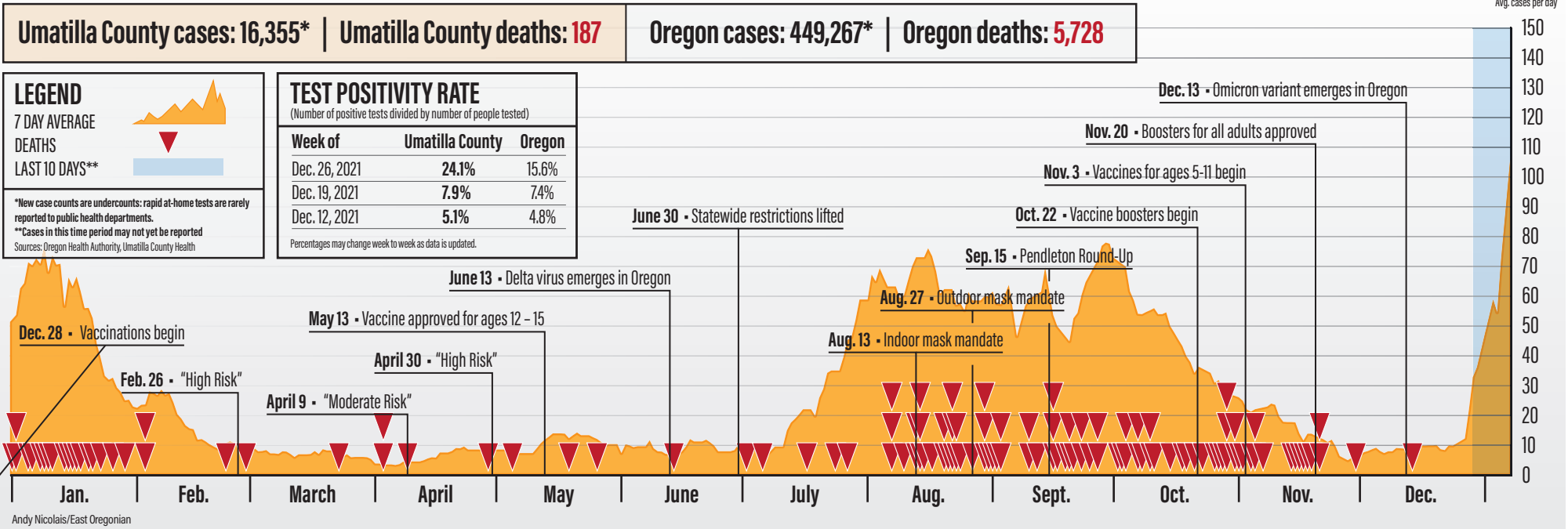


UMATILLA COUNTY COVID-19 TREND - AS OF JAN. 6



City plots course for federal money

By ANTONIO SIERRA
 East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The city of Pendleton has applied four successive times for a massive federal grant that would have allowed the city to reconstruct a congested interchange. Each time, the U.S. Department of Transportation passed over Pendleton for other projects.

But according to Pendleton's lobbyists in Washington, D.C., things are looking up in 2022.

At the city council meeting Tuesday, Jan. 4, a representative from CFM Advocates, the city's lobbying firm, made the case it should be easier for Pendleton to get a slice of the pie because the pie itself is larger. Kirby Garrett, CFM vice president of federal affairs, told the council that what changed between now and the city's previous attempts was the November passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, commonly known as the bipartisan infrastructure bill.

For the past several years, Pendleton has applied for a \$24.4 million grant under DOT's RAISE program (known as BUILD during the Trump administration). The city wants to use the grant money to significantly realign the interchange at Interstate 84 Exit 209, which leads to Southgate. City officials believe the move would alleviate traffic and safety concerns in the area.

Garret explained to the council why the grant appli-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Southgate passes under Interstate 84 as vehicles navigate the Exit 209 interchange Friday, Jan. 7, 2022, in Pendleton. The city has failed four times to secure a federal grant for a realignment of the interchange, but the city's lobbyist in Washington, D.C., say getting the grant could be easier in 2022.

cations failed previously and why the city's application might have a better chance at success in the future.

"There's political dynamics, local match requirements, that type of thing," he said. "Due to all that, we've been coming up just short. But the RAISE grant program is going to be increased by 50% annually for the next five years. So that provides a lot more money for us to try to pursue."

The bill didn't just boost the RAISE grant, it also created new pots of money for the city to look at. Garrett highlighted the Rural Surface Transportation Program. Backed by \$2 billion, Garrett said the grant program only is offered to

rural communities looking to fund large projects, criteria that makes the pool of competition much narrower.

Outside of the Exit 209 interchange, Garrett said CFM also is looking to help the city apply for other federal grants, such as \$2.4 million to build a new bus barn in Pendleton and expand the city's public transportation system, and \$755,135 for the Pendleton Fire Department to buy new defibrillators and fire engines.

Garrett said the city also may be able to find funding through earmarks, appropriations that are attached to specific bills, in addition to grants.

Through this process, Garrett said the city could

seek funding on a number of projects, including \$1.5 million to build a road between Highway 11 and Highway 30 for housing, \$1 million to improve security along the Pendleton River Parkway and \$1.1 million to revitalize the Vert Auditorium.

"Realistically we know that probably not every project is going to get funded, at least in this year, but we think they're all competitive and all worth putting forward," he said.

While the council didn't take any action after Garrett's presentation, members did vote on several different issues.

- The council unanimously approved a resolution that will raise a number of service fees throughout the city. While most fee hikes were small, there were a few significant changes. The airport revamped its fee structure to include the quality of existing structures when determining lease rates. The park also changed its fee structure that superficially looks like a decrease, but is actually a net increase because of some tweaks to the reservation system.

- The council also approved a \$10.6 million bid from Rotschy Inc. of Pasco to build a new 2-million-gallon reservoir and booster station at the airport. The bid came in nearly \$2 million less than the engineer's estimate and will be paid for by the remaining money from a state revolving fund loan that will be paid back from customer water bill revenue.

HERMISTON

Moving on up

Assistant city manager says \$9M city hall project on track

By ERICK PETERSON
 East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan fields a lot of questions every day. Nowadays, he is receiving many inquiries into his city's ongoing city hall and public safety center project at 180 N.E. Second St.

Morgan stood across the street from the project Wednesday, Jan. 5, in the rain, to discuss progress on the facility.

Construction is on track, he said, for opening city hall at the end of 2022. Recently, roofing went up on the building. These days, workers are wiring and plumbing the structure. Much of their work is not visible from the outside as they recently started installing walls.

"From here on out, it's going to seem to be moving very slowly," Morgan said, as workers fill out the building's "guts."

The weather, though, he added, is not causing delays. Workers are protected inside the newly roofed and walled structure. In addition, there are not material concerns, which was a worry last year; Morgan said materials have been acquired as needed.

Finding value

"The biggest thing that folks always are curious about is the cost," Morgan said.

To many people, Morgan said, the \$9 million price of the project is high, especially when considering it will be a building "for a bunch of bureaucrats sitting there and pushing paper around."

He stated, though, it is important to remember this project combines multiple city departments under one roof, which will be cost efficient in terms of staffing. It also will, he said, free up space for the police department at the public safety center.

Morgan provided an example of efficiency with the new building. The city council chambers in

the old building was used for council meetings and otherwise went unused for 99% of the time, he said. Meanwhile, in the police building, a municipal courtroom sits vacant nearly all the time.

"What this project is doing is bringing the court function into city hall, so we will be able to combine the city council chambers function along with the courtroom function," he said. "Now, we won't have two big spaces that go unused all the time."

The police department will be able to expand once the court relocates, which Morgan called a benefit "from an operational standpoint."

Also, the move of the court, as well as the Hermiston Building Department, to the new city hall will be a "long-term cost-savings," he said. This will reduce the number of front desks, thereby cutting back the need for additional staff when added employees might otherwise be needed.

"This will allow us to absorb more community growth and absorb more demand for walk-up services," he said.

Morgan said he could not put an exact dollar amount on the savings, though he expressed confidence this was the right move, fiscally. Likewise, he said he found it difficult to quantify another of the city hall's likely values — the message the new building sends.

"This is a big signal to everyone in the community and future development interests that (the city is) committed to being downtown, and we're committing to investing in the downtown a significant amount of resources," he said. Downtown businesses, current and prospective, should be encouraged that this project brings more people to the shops and restaurants around it.

All this goes to say, Morgan is feeling optimistic about this project and the value it will have to the community.

He added that once people see the new building with its planned red brick facade, they will be as excited as he is about it.

"It's all coming together," he said, "and I think it will work really well."

Morrow County superintendent announces retirement

By ANTONIO SIERRA
 East Oregonian

MORROW COUNTY — Superintendent Dirk Dirksen recently announced his retirement from the Morrow County School District, a decision he almost made 11 years ago.

In an interview Dec. 29, Dirksen said he considered retiring back in 2011 when he still was a principal at Riverside Junior/Senior High School in Boardman. But when the superintendent position opened up, he ended up adding more than a decade to a 41-career in Morrow County as a teacher, coach, administrator and chief executive.

Dirksen said the retirement was planned and he felt that it was the right

time to step down.

"I'm not getting any younger at this point," he said.

During his time as superintendent, he said he was proud of the district's improved graduation rates and the partnerships it had established with organizations to improve the district's "wraparound" services for students, such as mental health and career technical education.

Dirksen has come a long way from his days as a teacher at Columbia Middle School, which eventually became Irrigon Junior/Senior High School. But he will stay busy through the end of his tenure in July as the district readies itself to seek a new bond in May.

Dirksen said the district

will release more details on the bond in the months ahead, but the school board has committed to putting a bond proposal in front of Morrow County voters in the spring.

Dirksen said all schools in Heppner, Boardman and Irrigon will get some sort of infrastructure or security upgrade if the bond passes in 2022. He added that they will also focus on specific areas, like renovating the aging exterior of A.C. Houghton Elementary School in Irrigon.

In the meantime, the Morrow County School Board is preparing for a post-Dirksen future. On Dec. 17, the board announced it was working with the Oregon School Boards Association to iden-

tify and hire the district's next superintendent.

The district also formed a superintendent screening committee that will review applications and even could observe some of the opening interviews. Interested community members had until Thursday, Jan. 6, to apply, and the board will select committee members by Jan. 10.

The superintendent position closes on Feb. 16. Morrow County joins the Pendleton School District in looking for a new leader. Pendleton Superintendent Chris Fritsch also recently announced his intent to retire after nearly five years in Pendleton. The Pendleton School Board already started its own search.