

## Truckers:

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out of the lot. As one driver left — a day-route driver without a sleeping rig in the cabin who wanted to find a hotel for the night — space was cleared for her exit. But it was just a hair too late, as I-84 was closed yet again due to unchained semis blocking the route.

A few dogs perked their heads up over the dashboards in the trucks at the parking lot. Some drivers, Holman said, will bring dogs or family along on the routes. Partnering up, she said. It is a lonely profession. None of the truck drivers along the route had known each other, despite some driving along the same route for years. Holman said that she hasn't seen some of her co-workers back in Nebraska for several years.

For brief moments, she and a couple of truck drivers she hadn't met before spoke outside as snow fell, and joked about the closure.

"I think we're stuck here till spring," one of the drivers said.

### Past time

Ken Spriggs, 78, is a



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**Semitrailers fill the parking lot Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022, at the Flying J Travel Center, La Grande. Frequent closures of Interstate 84 and other road due to inclement weather, crashes and unchained semis trapped drivers between Baker and Umatilla counties.**

day-route truck driver. That means he goes home every night — at least when he's not stuck in a road closure spanning several days.

He said he has a daughter in Elgin he was thinking of staying with for the night if the roads didn't soon open up. Working for a company based in Vale, he has been a truck driver for 12 years. Before that, as a police officer with Prairie City for 20 years. Further back,

a veteran stationed in South Korea just after the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. He said he's been shot at in both jobs. He collects two pensions, but continues to work because he enjoys keeping busy and loathes idleness. "I just hate sitting around," Spriggs said, walking toward the Flying J, reminiscing of past days. "I used to come here and eat all the time, years ago. Those were the good days.

Awesome restaurant, we ate — my daughter always met me here, and we'd eat like crazy."

His truck was parked along Highway 30, several hundred feet away from the truck stop. He said he thinks this might be his last season driving the route.

"I thought about quitting these guys, but they said no," Spriggs said, filling up a coffee cup.

He charmed his way into

a cheaper cup of coffee from the counter clerk, said it was a refill. He wasn't interested in watching TV. He sat down at a Subway counter and looked out the window. Rock ballads from the '80s played over the Flying J's sound system. The trucks outside are packed in like sardines.

"I spent a lot of years here," Spriggs said, reminiscing. "I think I might just make this my last run."

### Extended stay

Michael Cruz had been at the Flying J for two days due to closures. He was sitting sideways on a lounge chair in the back watching television. Next to him, Randy Payne, a truck driver of 10 years, was watching the television as well. Payne had been there for two hours. A string of commercials played over the TV. Payne wore a Pittsburgh Steelers beanie, a well-worn and stained reflective vest, and a Bluetooth headset. He was checking his phone, passing the time.

"Other than your CB receiver, you have nobody around you," Payne said. "That's it. It's a mindset. Trucking is a lifestyle, it's not a job, it's a lifestyle. You

are living in a walk-in closet. You live there for two to six weeks at a time. You're away from your family — I don't live here, I live in Albuquerque. It can be a dream job for somebody, but the wife has to sign on for it, the husband has to sign on for it, the kids sign on for it."

Truck drivers are paid per mile. Typically, it's under 50 cents per mile, lower for newer drivers, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics numbers. When the trucks aren't moving, the drivers aren't getting paid, and the companies aren't turning profits. It's a pressure that incentivizes long hours and driving in poor conditions.

"There are some companies that will be 'Go, go, go!' no matter what," Payne said of the pressure to keep the wheels turning. "With my company, I don't really feel that way."

Time is the enemy. If you keep still, you make no money. Boredom creeps in. Some pass time with video games, or movies, or books — or hitting refresh on TripCheck or other news stations for an update on when the roads open back up.

"I was supposed to be in Seattle today," Payne said, "and that's not happening."

## Lawmaker:

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and vaccine requirements, Owens explained in an interview.

Additionally, the legislative concept states that a governor may not retaliate against a county whose governing body has determined not to fully continue a declaration of emergency beyond the initial 30 days of the order. Owens said this includes threats to pull state funding, fines against local businesses and other types of state sanctions.

Under current Oregon law, the governor must review and reevaluate emergency orders every 60 days to determine whether those orders should be continued, modified or rescinded.

Local control emerged as a significant issue for Grant County residents in August after Gov. Kate Brown reversed course on her June 30 executive order handing over public health decisions to counties amid a resurgence of COVID-19.

While the swiftly spreading delta variant sent COVID-19 case counts soaring, Brown issued a barrage of new executive orders mandating masks in K-12 schools, inside state buildings and, finally, in all public indoor spaces in the state. Those actions drew the ire of Grant County leaders.

Parents asked for the county court's support in getting decision-making back to the districts and out of the hands of the state.

County Judge Scott Myers told parents the county does not have the power to take back local control of its school districts from the state. However, the county signed a letter from the Eastern Oregon Counties Association asking for local control of school districts.

"Some people might be mistaken in thinking that the county has power beyond a voice," Myers said. "We don't have the power to make those things happen."

In a Dec. 21 press release, Brown extended the COVID-19 state of emergency through June, saying scientists believed the state was just weeks away from a new wave of hospitalizations due to an anticipated surge of the rapidly spreading omicron variant.

Oregon Health and Science University lead data scientist Dr. Peter Graven predicted that the omicron variant could surpass the delta variant in the number of cases due to its extreme transmissibility.

Brown's office said in the press release the emergency declaration provides the necessary framework to access resources in response to the pandemic, which includes the deployment of medical providers to hospitals, flexibility around professional health licensing, and access to federal disaster relief funds.

"As Oregon prepares for what could be our worst surge

in hospitalizations during this pandemic, I know that this is not the beginning of the new year any of us had hoped for," Brown said.

### Constitutional framework

Jim Moore, a professor of political science at Pacific University in Forest Grove, said Oregon's Constitution defines the governor's emergency powers and what types of "catastrophic disasters" can allow them to be used.

The Constitution puts acts of terrorism at the top of the list, along with earthquakes, floods and public health emergencies.

Moore said the catastrophes spelled out within the Constitution are assumed to be relatively short-lived.

"The problem we have right now is that it's going on long term," Moore said. "And so Republicans have decided that is an abuse of emergency power."

Indeed, Moore said, everyone has a partisan take on the debate.

"Republicans say, 'We need to change it.' Why? Because they don't like what Kate Brown is doing. Democrats are saying, 'No, we don't need to change it' because they do like what Kate Brown's doing."

Since the pandemic's beginning, it's become evident that the federal government has minimal power in this situation and the ability to deal with the pandemic rests with the states, Moore said.

That limitation on federal power, he said, is by design as part of the U.S. Constitution. For instance, he said, Oregon was able to pass an assisted suicide law because states have the right and the frontline duty to deal with public health issues.

Almost from the pandemic's beginning, the question of how to respond to the coronavirus has been a hot-button political issue.

That said, Owens' proposed legislation is something of a departure from recently passed legislation in GOP strongholds. For instance, conservative legislators in more than half of U.S. states, spurred on by voters angry about lockdowns and mask mandates, have stripped local officials of the power to protect the public against infectious diseases.

Moore said the conservative ethos has long been that more governing power should be local. However, legislation passed in red states like Florida runs counter to what has traditionally been the GOP ideology.

Thus, he said, this means one's political ideology shapes one's views on emergency powers.

For his part, Owens said his motives are not politically driven.

"Honestly, it's not about partisanship," Owens said. "I by no means think the governor should not have the ability to declare an emergency declaration for 30 days, maybe even longer," Owens said. "That's reasonable."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**Pendleton High School students cheer on the Buckaroos Dec. 10, 2021, during a home game against the Putnam Kingmen in Pendleton.**

## Sports:

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Portland), the report from the sports medicine and aspects committee was how much time they have been spending with student-athletes and mental health. The psychological aspects of school and athletics being a yo-yo. In-person education and athletics are a vital part of maintaining good mental health in our students. We are dedicated to making that happen."

Hermiston High School, which plays in the Mid-Columbia Conference in Washington, follows guidelines set forth by the Washington State Department of Health and the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, which govern high school athletics and activities.

Hermiston AD Larry Usher said a majority of the athletes at the school have been vaccinated, and the school strictly follows the WIAA guidelines, which include COVID-19 testing athletes three times per week, with one test being conducted at least 24 hours



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**The Stanfield bench cheers on their team during the second half. The Stanfield Tigers defeated the Nixyaawii Golden Eagles 52-48 Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, at the Nixyaawii Community School in Mission.**

before a contest, and whenever possible, the day of the event.

"At this time, it's very important that kids stay connected to our schools and programs," Usher said. "We will continue our current health and safety protocols and move forward as we are."

While Eastern Oregon

schools are moving forward, the Portland Public Schools are tightening regulations, requiring athletes to wear masks at all times during sports competitions and practices.

The district also is ending overnight travel for extracurricular activities, shutting down concessions, and will

require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours for anyone over the age of 5 attending an after-school event. The rules will be in place until at least Feb. 4.

Other school districts, mainly in the Portland area, have taken some of the same measures.

## Cases:

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send out to public health authorities, various health care organizations, schools and other relevant groups.

Fiumara said he anticipates Umatilla County getting its own shipment of tests, but was light on details he could share.

"What I know is there are a number of agencies in the county who are going to get some of these (tests)," he said. "I don't know how

many and I don't know when. The only number I've been given so far is us as the health department. We are going to get just over 10,000 of them eventually. But all I know is they're not going to show up all at once and they're going to show up at some point."

While they won't be rapid tests, St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton, recently announced it would offer free drive-thru COVID-19 testing every Wednesday in January from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

While no county in

Oregon has been immune from the effects of the pandemic, Umatilla County has been hit hard by each successive wave of COVID-19. Fiumara said the county has done the best it could with the information it had at the time.

Fiumara has long held the stance that residents shouldn't need to test for COVID-19 if they are asymptomatic, a view he largely maintains today. He said if the county had a larger supply of tests, he might change his mind, but at the moment, he thinks

only people who have been directly exposed or are experiencing symptoms should seek out tests.

"I know you can spread this without symptoms, and I'm not denying that," he said. "I just still believe you don't spread it as efficiently as somebody who does have symptoms."

Even if a resident does have symptoms of COVID-19, Fiumara said they don't necessarily need to get tested as long as their symptoms are mild and they can self-isolate at home when they feel sick.