

Pierce says 2022 promising for GOP

Gubernatorial candidate sees 'pathway to victory'

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Bud Pierce figures 2022 is the best time in the past four decades



Pierce

for a Republican to run for Oregon governor in the general election. And he'd like to be that Republican. Pierce, one of a dozen Republicans seeking his party's nomination in the May 17 primary, visited Baker City on Wednesday, Jan. 12. He hosted a meet-and-greet that evening at the Baker County Events Center. It was his third campaign event of the day, following appearances in Ontario and John Day.

An airplane made the hectic day possible, said Pierce, an oncologist who started the day at his home in Salem.

Pierce knows firsthand how challenging it is for a Republican seeking to become Oregon governor. He was the party's nominee in the 2016 election, losing to incumbent Kate Brown, who had almost 51% of the vote compared with Pierce's 43.5%.

Pierce, 65, was the latest in a series of eight Republicans who tried to break a string of Democratic victories dating to 1986.

Vic Atiyeh, who was elected to his second four-year term in 1982, is the last Republican to hold that office.

Brown can't run this year due to the state's term limits law.

The absence of an incumbent is one of the factors Pierce believes makes 2022 such an auspicious year for Republicans.

"Incumbency is worth a lot," he said during an interview with the Baker City Herald the afternoon of Jan. 12.

Another difference this year is who's likely to be on the general election ballot.

Betsy Johnson, a former Democratic state legislator, resigned her position last fall to run for governor, but as an independent, not a Democrat.

Several prominent Democrats, including House Speaker Tina Kotek, who is resigning from the Legislature Jan. 21, and Tobias Read, Oregon state treasurer, are seeking their party's nomination.

Pierce said he believes with two Democrats on the general election ballot — Johnson and the party's nominee — votes from Democrats, who outnumber registered Republicans by about 34%, could be divided enough to give the Republican candidate "a pathway to victory."

Pierce acknowledged that Johnson, who is generally considered more moderate than the leading Democratic candidates, could also attract Republican votes.

But overall, Pierce believes a general election with both Johnson and a Democratic nominee on the ballot benefits the Republican candidate.

"Republican voters tend to back the Republican candidate," he said.

Pierce said he also has noticed during his campaigning that, unlike in 2016, Oregon voters don't seem satisfied with the current political leadership.

He describes this is a "roiled electorate."

Pierce said he senses that many voters, including Democrats, in effect want to "punish" the party in charge, and in Oregon that's been the Democratic Party for many years, with its supermajorities in the Legislature.

"People rightfully feel that their government isn't responsive to them," he said.

Oregon gasps as it nears pinnacle of omicron

1,200 National Guard members to help to hospitals with non-medical support duties

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon on Thursday, Jan. 13, had the unhappy distinction of having the fastest rising rate of new COVID-19 infections of all 50 states, new data showed.

The sixth and biggest wave of the two-year COVID-19 pandemic has at least two more weeks to go before infections crest.

"The omicron variant continues to tighten its grip on Oregon," said Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority, during a press call Jan. 13.

Oregon posted a worst-in-the-nation 486% rise in infections over the past two weeks, an analysis of national and state health records by the New York Times reported Thursday.

Oregon reported 47,272 new COVID-19 cases during the week of Jan. 6.

That's three times higher than the previous pandemic record and six times higher than just two weeks ago, Allen said.

Allen and officials from state health, education, social services and other agencies said the worst was still to come.

Oregon reported 777 patients who tested positive for COVID-19 were in state hospitals Thursday, up 21 from the day before. Oregon has less than 6% of its intensive care unit beds available.

Colt Gill, director of the Oregon Department of Education, said keeping children in school remains the state's top goal. It also would like to have extracurricular activities like sports whenever possible.

But Gill said local school officials will be the best barometer on how much pressure is weighing on maintaining classroom instruction.

"The current situation is pushing a stressed system to its limits," Gill said.

Whether that was attainable was up to each district and health authorities. If too many teachers get ill or too many students are absent because of positive tests, some districts may consider going back to a short period of distance learning.

The Oregon Health Authority said 1,200 National Guard members would be sent to hospitals around the state to aid with non-medical support duties. The agency hopes to hire 600 out-of-state contract nurses to fill gaps at hospitals strapped by staff illness or fatigue.

Oregon still hopes to get six million COVID-19 "fast test" kits. Each comes with two tests that can show a positive or negative result in 15 minutes.

No matter how many arrive, the mass contagion of omicron will outstrip supply.

"We are prioritizing the six million we've purchased for organizations serving people who are most exposed or most vulnerable to COVID-19, or people who have less access to a test," Allen said.

The U.S. Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention is asking people who either have no symptoms or are experiencing mild illness to act as if they are infected and stay isolated for five days. That would leave the tests available for acute cases or front-line workers.

Efforts paying off

Despite its top spot in growth of new infections, Oregon ranks just 24th for the rise in the hospitalization rate for COVID-19, with a rise of just 62%.

"Those numbers tell me that masks work," Allen said. "We're able to minimize our negative outcomes because we have a relatively high vaccination rate, a relatively high booster rate and one of the highest rates for mask usage in the country."

The Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation, a top pandemic forecasting group at the University of Washington, says public health agencies are finding less than 20% of actual new cases.

The institute's primary forecast says the omicron wave already peaked nationwide, with its model projected 6.2 million cases per day on Jan. 6. The count of cases reported by authorities on Jan. 13 was just under 800,000.

IHME projects hospitalizations nationwide will top out on Jan. 25 at 273,000. The reported level on Jan. 13 was 145,505.

A new forecast Oregon Health & Science University released late Jan. 13 showed the omicron wave was shaping public behavior, with the percentage of people who were wear-

ing masks going up, while social gatherings, going to restaurants, indoor events and travel were declining.

The OHSU report said it believed reported hospitalizations in Oregon would hit a peak at 1,650 on Jan. 26, one day earlier than last week. Hospitalizations would fall to below 100 by March 13.

But OHSU presented two alternative timelines depending on how well the public sticks to its current patterns of lowered risk-taking.

The most optimistic version would have the wave crest earlier and lower, with 1,159 hospitalizations on about Jan. 23, with hospital daily counts falling under 100 just before Feb. 27.

But if the public loses its fear of omicron and grows fatigued by steps necessary to keep contagion lower, the peak could hit 2,133 daily hospitalizations on Jan. 28 and not dip below 100 until March 6.

Flipping expectations

The omicron variant is extraordinarily contagious, leading to the skyrocketing number of cases.

But each individual case is likely to be less severe, especially for those vaccinated and who have received a booster shot. About one-third of new infections have been in vaccinated people. But among that group who test positive, about 5% need hospital care and about 1% die, with the average age of fatalities 81.

The hospitals and morgues are populated primarily by those who are not vaccinated or had no

booster shot.

Though each case is likely to be less severe, the sheer crush of omicron infections is driving hospitalizations beyond previous high points set during early waves.

The Oregon Health Authority weekly report issued Jan. 12 grasped for extreme adjectives to describe the state's situation. Omicron had created a "a record-smashing total of daily cases, surging hospitalizations, a sharp rise in deaths and a staggering percent positivity."

While the Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation projects higher total numbers of people needing hospitalization at the peak of the wave than OHSU, projections are just guesses informed by statistics and trends.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top epidemiologist, said Oregon officials looked at all the possibilities, then err toward the worse case scenario.

The best course was to plan for the worst case scenario and be grateful if the numbers come in lower or sooner than they could have been.

"We'd rather be overprepared than underprepared," Sidelinger said.

According to Johns Hopkins University, as of Jan. 13, is has been 744 days since the first COVID-19 infections were reported in Wuhan, China on Dec. 31, 2019.

Worldwide, there have been 319,042,646 reported cases and 5,518,767 deaths.

In the United States, there have been 63,744,198 cases and 845,899 deaths.

Johnson: Elgin comment 'pulled out of thin air'

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

ELGIN — A remark from an Oregon gubernatorial candidate regarding a local Union County city likely meant no harm, despite its connotation.



Johnson

Betsy Johnson, running as an independent candidate, commented on her thoughts about a lack of safety across Oregon in an interview with Willamette Week on Wednesday, Jan. 5 — the quote tied in Elgin, a small town at the northern end of the Grande Ronde Valley.

When asked when Oregon "lost its way," Johnson stated that Oregon citizens are not safe on the streets, regardless of what town you live in.

"We really lost our way with the advent of COVID. It seems to be a kind of collision of catastrophes. We've got 13 counties, a third of our land mass, wanting to flee to Idaho. We've got people not safe on this streets, whether you're in Elgin or Laurelhurst," Johnson told the Willamette Week.

Johnson later cleared the air, noting that Elgin was the first city on the east side of the state that she could think of at the time.

"I just pulled it out of the air," she said. "I was just thinking about a small



Hallgarth

Bowen

town somewhere in Eastern Oregon."

Johnson explained that the quote was not intended as a dig to Elgin, stating that she has visited the Northeastern Oregon town in the past.

"I've been to Elgin and I had Elgin on the brain," she said. "I just purely picked it out of the air, there was nothing specific."

Elgin Mayor Risa Hallgarth weighed in on the quote, stating she has no idea why Johnson would

mention Elgin by name in that context.

"Everybody has their problems, but I don't feel unsafe at all here and I've lived here all my life," she said. "I don't know why she would have said Elgin, maybe because it's small in comparison to other towns."

Hallgarth said that while crime occurs in every city, she disagrees with tying in Elgin as unsafe.

"We don't have gang issues or drive-by shootings. We don't have a lot of this stuff that the larger towns have," she said. "I walk a lot, at night sometimes."

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen stated there is no recent criminal activity that would give credence to a specific reference to Elgin

as an unsafe city.

"I don't know what she would be referring to, other than reaching out to the furthest part of the state," he said.

Johnson, a former state senator for District 16, resigned Dec. 15 from the Oregon Legislature to focus full-time on her statewide run. She represented a swath of Northwestern Oregon since 2001 that included Clatsop, Tillamook, Columbia, Multnomah and Washington counties.

Johnson is aiming to be the first independent candidate to become Oregon governor since Julius L. Meier did so in 1931. She will need to collect approximately 24,000 signatures to make it on the 2022 November ballot.

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