

# Hospitals:

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and communications director with Good Shepherd in Hermiston, said the hospital is expecting six guard members to support the hospital.

Wallowa Memorial Hospital welcomed five soldiers on Jan. 17, the day before deadline.

“Wallowa Memorial Hospital was grateful to welcome five National Guard members,” said Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations at Wallowa Memorial Hospital. “We plan to utilize this additional personnel in various departments, from Environmental Services to hospital and clinic screening. The presence of five additional staff members helps ensure that we will continue to provide premier care to the people of Wallowa County in the face of yet another COVID-19 surge.”

“Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics is extremely grateful for the guard members



Maj. W. Chris Clyne/Oregon National Guard Public Affairs

**Staff Sgt. David Seymour, from C Company 3rd Battalion, 116 Cavalry Brigade, Oregon Army National Guard, informs soldiers of mission requirements at the Anderson Readiness Center in Salem on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022.**

we will be receiving here to help us with staffing shortages in several of our key support services that have been severely impacted by the current labor market,” Mardi Ford, director of communi-

cations and marketing, said. “GRH is, and always has been, proud and supportive of our military.”

### Helping where they live

But as to why the Oregon

Medical staff in the Oregon National Guard often hold positions at local hospitals for their non-military job, Clyne said.

“We would basically — if we did that — we’d be robbing Peter to pay Paul,” Clyne said of activating clinical guard members to support hospitals, “because we would take somebody that’s in that position in their civilian job and then just move them to another location.”

Many citizen-soldiers will be deployed to the communities in which they live, according to Clyne.

“One of the efforts that we’ve been making is to try to get (soldiers) in the location where they live,” Clyne said. “One of the things that we pride ourselves in is that we serve in the communities where we live. That’s one of the efforts and priorities that leadership has made, (to give guard members) that chance to serve as close to home as possible.”

The omicron variant has been rapidly spreading across Oregon and the nation, driv-

ing record-breaking infection rates and leading to shortages of testing kits and long lines at drive-thru testing clinics. According to OHA data, it is the prevailing variant in Oregon as of Jan. 2, accounting for nearly all new infections. At least one sequenced infection has been traced to Eastern Oregon, according to the OHA.

Data shows hospitalizations from the new circulating variant are lower, but the higher number of people infected has led to hospitalization levels similar to the previous delta variant.

The number of hospitalized patients at Oregon hospitals due to COVID-19 is 811 and climbing, as of Jan. 14, according to OHA data. The previous peak in hospitalization was on Sept. 1, 2021, with 1,178 patients hospitalized due to the delta variant.

The Oregon National Guard was called in last August to help understaffed hospitals during the delta variant surge. Those soldiers remained at the hospitals until mid-December.

# Plowing:

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In winter, he commands a nearly 30-ton piece of machinery down Interstate 84.

It’s not hard to understand the comparisons between spaceships and the industrialized behemoths ODOT uses to clear roads.

At highway speeds, snow resembles trailing stars after the Millennium Falcon engages hyperdrive. The plow even has wings — blades attached to the side of the vehicle that extend just shy of 24 feet for clearing snow. As it’s pushed away, the snow forms wakes like those of a naval ship pulling into port. A pair of bright green laser pointers — which keep track of where the wings are — pierce through the blanket of night.

Hurd said his job is to drive in the worst weather conditions every night.

On nights when the snow falls unrelentingly, Hurd spends the entire shift behind the wheel. His only communication once his shift starts might be through the CB radio, which has a local channel for ODOT operators in the field and a channel for relaying information to dispatch about road conditions.

The snow was falling fast — though milder than previous nights — as he worked to clear I-84 on Wednesday, Jan. 5.

“When it’s snowing like this, there will be lots of calls for crashes or disabled vehicles,” Hurd said.

He passed a semi that appeared to be disabled and alerted dispatch.

Snowplows are sentries for ODOT capable of calling in stuck or stranded vehicles — or unchained semis.

### Unchained

According to Oregon State Police Capt. Stephanie Bigman, troopers issued

32 violations and warnings between Jan. 1 and Jan. 6 for commercial vehicles that did not carry or use chains when required. A number of those violations occurred along I-84 in Northeastern Oregon, which had been closed on Jan. 5 at one point due to unchained semis blocking the route at Cabbage Hill near milepost 224.

The fine for unchained commercial vehicles is \$880 per occurrence, up from \$440. The change occurred in September 2021.

“Commercial trucks not chaining up when required is a major contributing factor for freeway closure that occur in the mountain passes of Eastern Oregon,” Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT, said. “Once a truck starts sliding or jackknifes it can quickly block lanes and close down the freeway. It can

**“ONCE A TRUCK STARTS SLIDING OR JACKKNIFES IT CAN QUICKLY BLOCK LANES AND CLOSE DOWN THE FREEWAY.”**

— Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT

then take several hours to get the proper tow service providers to respond to the scene and move the disabled vehicle. Depending on the location and duration of the closure, it can impact hundreds or thousands of motorists.”

According to an ODOT press release, the estimated cost of delays caused by trucks failing to follow Oregon chain laws is more than \$8 million a year — to the motor carrier industry and other highway users.

“When it comes to chaining, I don’t chain — I don’t want to hurt anybody — I park it,” Samuri Schaffer, a truck driver of more than 15 years, said on Jan. 5 at the Flying J Travel Center outside La Grande when he was waiting out the snowstorm that had closed Interstate 84. “I don’t deal with it until they take off the chain laws. There’s so

much liability on us.”

Schaffer stated the liabilities for truck drivers can be severe if they are involved in any accident, so he avoids the issue entirely by keeping off the road.

If a truck is involved in a crash where failure to use chains is a factor, there could be additional costs for the motor carrier, according to a press release from ODOT.

### A Sisyphean task

Inside, the cockpit of the snowplow is kept blisteringly warm. It isn’t for comfort — Hurd said he sheds jackets and layers and opens the windows even when it is below freezing outside, and getting colder. If it weren’t for the heat, he wouldn’t be able to see out of the windshield.

“You can see the snow on the windshield,” he said. “It

clear. Mostly, they handle I-84, but they also are responsible for plowing La Grande’s Island Avenue. Sometimes, they pair up when conditions are poor, running tandem down the freeway and clearing it all in one fell swoop.

“You can only plow so fast, so you just keep making laps and keep plowing and plowing,” Hurd said of plowing during heavy snowfall. “Hopefully you don’t have to close the freeway down.”

If the road maintenance department was short-staffed, the drivers might not be able to keep up with the snow. The EO Media Group recently reported on a possible shortage of ODOT snowplow operators. Craig Slipp, the manager for ODOT Region 5 — the area encompassing most of Eastern Oregon — told EO Media Group there were 12 open road maintenance positions. Hurd said his department in La Grande was fully staffed, however.

When it’s snowing, the plow operators lay down sand for traction; they use salt in drier conditions. Hurd said he had seen firsthand the immediate impact sand can have when freeing stuck motorists.

ODOT keeps barns full of both materials for plows to refill. The sand and salt also fulfill a secondary purpose of increasing the weight of the snowplow, increasing its individual traction capabilities. It is difficult to extricate a snowplow that has been disabled by the snow.

Hurd said there were a number of reasons why ODOT makes the decision to close the interstate. Recently, unchained semis had closed down the freeway, as did snowdrifts formed by heavy winds and fresh snow, creating whiteout conditions on the interstate — for motorists and snowplow operators.

“If we can’t see and we’re running off the road,” Hurd said, “we’ll make the call to close it.”

# Funding:

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a week later, the agenda item was pulled before the meeting started while the proposal was further refined. The Jan. 18 meeting will include a new proposal from City Manager Robb Corbett and Charles Denight, the associate director of the commission.

The proposal from staff equates to \$80,281 in additional funds. In an interview, Denight said rather than pore over Moto Stuff’s receipts and records, staff met with the city’s community development department to calculate the increase in costs based on the Construction Price Index. Using the index and comparing costs from late 2020 to late 2021, staff concluded that costs rose by 16% and applied it to the original grant amount, leading to the \$80,281 figure.

Although the new proposal is up for consideration, Corbett and Denight’s staff report does not recommend the commission take action one way or another.

After a potential decision on Moto Stuff, the commission will be asked to approve a new contest for new business.

A collaboration between the development commission, the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce, the Pendleton Downtown Association and the Small Business Development Center at Blue Mountain Community College, the Jump Start Committee’s contest would solicit proposals from entrepreneurs to launch new businesses in downtown Pendleton.

The three winners would be provided a \$20,000 forgivable loan, parts of which will be forgiven

in six-month increments over two years provided the winners are able to keep consistent hours of operation, provide examples of their marketing, show evidence of positive financial results or anticipated positive results and stick with their business plan. The winners will be expected to put up \$5,000 of their own money to match the loan, meaning they should start their business with at least \$25,000 in capital.

Denight said the Jump Start Committee chose to offer forgivable loans instead of grants because it gave the committee a way to stay connected with the businesses, ensure they stay the course and offer assistance if needed. Contest winners won’t be prevented from applying to the development commission’s other grant and loan programs, potentially adding more money to the pot.

If the development commission approves the contest, the Jump Start Committee intends to advertise it to students at BMCC and Eastern Oregon University.

After the commission meeting ends, commissioners will switch to their primary role as city councilors and take action on several issues, including the hiring of a planning consultant for a bus barn project and renewing their funding agreement with the Umatilla County Special Library District.

The development commission meeting will be at 6 p.m. at the council chambers in Pendleton City Hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave. The commission meeting will be immediately followed by a city council meeting at 7 p.m. Both meetings can also be accessed virtually via Zoom at bit.ly/3zZlBjB.

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