

EAST OREGONIAN

FEBRUARY 19 – 20, 2022

146th Year, No. 51

WINNER OF 16 ONPA AWARDS IN 2021

\$1.50

State could be 'masks off' by March 20

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The first day of spring could be a new beginning in the COVID-19 pandemic, with the likely lifting of indoor masking mandates, a state report forecast on Thursday, Feb. 17.

The drop in daily hospitalizations from the omicron wave of the pandemic is accelerating and will pass below 400 per day by March 20, according to the latest pandemic forecast by the Oregon Health & Science University.

Gov. Kate Brown on Feb. 7 said she would lift the state's indoor masking mandate when hospitalizations fell below 400 or no later than March 31. At the time, the OHSU forecast put the hospitalization goal at the far end of the timeline.

But the incredibly rapid rise of the omicron variant to record numbers of cases is now being matched by its decline. Hospitalizations could go below 100 per day by the first week of May, the OHSU forecast showed.

The number of people with COVID-19 in Oregon hospitals dropped from the omicron wave peak of 1,130 on Jan. 27 to 788 as of Feb. 17.

"Oregonians are doing the right thing, and it's paying off," said Dr. Peter Graven, OHSU's lead forecaster.

The OHSU report cautioned Oregonians to not get ahead of current public health recommendations. The new forecast date still is more than a month away, not today.

"It will be important to keep it up if we're going to have a more manageable impact on our health system," Graven said.

Dropping safeguards early could slow the decline of omicron and push the end of the mask mandate closer to the March 31 date.

"This doesn't mean that we're out of the woods," Graven said. "The number of cases are still significantly higher than they have been for most of the pandemic, but the decline over the past week provides relief for hospitals operating under severe strain."

Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington said on Feb. 17 he would order indoor mask mandates dropped March 21, a day after Oregon's projected date. Inslee said his order would include schools.

New Mexico dropped indoor mask mandates immediately on Feb. 17. California announced plans to move COVID-19 from pandemic to endemic status, meaning it would be handled as a major but manageable ongoing risk.

"We're going to live with this," California Gov. Gavin Newsom

See Masks, Page A9



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Mark Morgan, Hermiston assistant city manager, indicates infrastructure improvements on a map Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022, at the South Hermiston Industrial Park.

SHIP takes shape

Expansion adds paved road, other infrastructure to make site shovel-ready

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Hermiston's SHIP is a lot like the Millennium Falcon from Star Wars — it might not look like much right now, but it's got it where it counts.

That was the gist Wednesday, Feb. 16, from Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan, who said the expansion of the South Hermiston Industrial Park will mean a great deal to Hermiston.

The \$2 million expansion extended paved road, water and sewer lines and upgraded electrical power to the site west of Highway 395 near the Walmart Distribution Center, making the park shovel-ready.

Parcels range from 1.5-20 acres, depending on market demand.

Morgan said this is the kind of development businesses are looking for when they consider moving to Hermiston. They want ground, lots of it, he said. Sometimes, they even want land for their suppliers to locate — and this land should include infrastructure.

"As a healthy economic region, we want to make sure that we can accommodate large-scale industrial development as well as smaller stuff," he said, and SHIP sets the stage for such accommodation.

Early success

The city is holding a grand opening of the expansion complete with ribbon cutting March 4 at 12:15 p.m. at Cook Avenue off Southeast 10th Street.

Though the SHIP expansion started with a groundbreaking July 7, 2021, planning for the project took place in 2017 and work began in 2018.

Morgan pulled out a map of the area and described the planning. He said the city had taken notice of development in the area.

"Nothing gangbusters," Morgan said of the area, historically. "But it was starting to fill up."

The city, then, was looking for ways to

accommodate small light industrial-type operations in the future, he said. Paving Southeast 10th Street and bringing in utilities creates access to the parcels within the area.

SHIP already shows signs of success, beginning with Meyer Distributing.

The distribution company purchased 40 acres on SHIP. Its warehouse, which recently began operations with around 70 employees, takes up about a third of the total Meyer property, Morgan said. Meyer plans to expand in the future, eventually making full use of the property.

Additionally, A-1 Industrial Hose and Supply is building a 30,000-square foot building at the park.

"They're a good, local, small light industrial business that has just been expanding and expanding," Morgan said. "They don't need 40 acres, but they just need a couple of acres at a time. This was kind of tailor made for an operation like that."

Creating employment diversity

Morgan said he envisions a future in which several more businesses like A-1 set up shop at the industrial park and help create

See SHIP, Page A9

'Get out of your car'

Hermiston couple recounts their experience of a hold up at gunpoint following bank robbery

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Amanda West remembers Dec. 17, 2021, as a day that started off well. She had an office party, then closed shop midday. The weather was nice, she said, and she was feeling good.

After closing their business, Columbia Orthodontics, she and her husband, Jim West, went home but returned to their office to toss some cardboard in the trash. The day would take a terrible turn for them at that point.

They pulled up to the dumpster at nearly 3 p.m. and were getting out of their car when they saw a man was parked nearby.

"He came out from the car," she said. "He came right up to the hood of our car, and he pointed a gun straight at us and said, 'Get out of your car.'"

Amanda West stated she and her husband were taken aback, confused by the situation. Hermiston, she said, is generally a safe place, where things like this are unexpected. The Wests have lived

in Hermiston for 10 years.

"It was surreal," Jim West added. "I couldn't believe this was happening."

As the Wests attempted to make sense of what was happening, the man continued to demand they leave their car.

Jim West, having never been in this type of situation before, said his instinct was to drive into the man. Amanda West, too, said this was something she wanted. What kept them from running him over was a safety mechanism in their vehicle. Their 2019 Dodge Ram, ironically, will stop automatically when an object is in its way.

"Now, we know how to turn that off, but we didn't know at the time," Amanda West said.

As Jim West attempted to plow forward, the suspect stepped toward his side of the vehicle. According to the Wests, the gunman held his weapon to Jim West's head and said, "Don't make me shoot you."

"I got out of my side of the car, and I started screaming," Amanda West said.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Amanda and Jim West pose for a photo Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, in front of their business alongside the vehicle where they were held up at gunpoint exactly two months earlier in Hermiston.

She said there were people at nearby businesses and school was letting out.

As the man continued his threats, the Wests heard the sirens of emergency vehicles. Unknown to them at the time, a nearby bank, Umpqua Bank, 450 N. First St., Hermiston, had been robbed, and police were on their way to the bank.

The man kept shouting, "Why don't you get out of the car?" Amanda West said.

That is when Jim West claimed

they had children in the backseat. He also said he had tossed \$15,000 in cash out of his vehicle in an attempt to hide it.

People were starting to take notice, the Wests said. The gunman rushed to his own vehicle, Amanda West said, and did something else she did not expect.

"He put the gun up to his head, like he was going to shoot himself," she said. "For some reason, he didn't."

See Robbery, Page A9



7 2946710002 2