Pendleton taxi company scoops up rivals' name

Move creates confusion with Let'er Uber

By ANTONIO SIERRA *Oregon Public Broadcasting*

PENDLETON — The owners of Pendleton's only taxi service couldn't stop the city from allowing ride-hailing services to begin operating. But they did claim a business name that was first used by one of their new competitors.

Matthew and Rod Johlke, the owners of Elite Taxi Inc., registered Let'er Uber LLC on Aug. 8 with the Oregon Secretary of State's Office. The father and son team's new limited liability company shares a name with an upstart group of ride-hailing drivers who had hoped technologies such as Uber would increase transportation options in the area.

Whatever the intent, the creation of Let'er Uber LLC is the latest development in the contentious process of bringing ride-hailing services to Pendleton.

The move has confused members of Let'er Uber, and the Johlkes haven't publicly revealed the reason



Antonio Sierra/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Becky Ramirez, left, Alicia Reynen, and Jesse Reynen stand in front of one of the cars Let'er Uber uses in Pendleton. The trio was surprised to learn the owners of Elite Taxi Inc., their business rivals, had registered the group's name with the state.

behind their new company. The owners did not return a message left at their Pendleton office.

All of this is taking place just before the Pendleton Round-Up, the region's biggest tourism event of the year. In mid-September, thousands of tourists from around the world arrive in Pendleton for the festivities, and many of them are going to need rides around town.

In the spring, a group of Pendleton drivers led by couple Alicia and Jesse Reynen lobbied the city to change its taxi code to allow Uber. Uber didn't meet the city's requirements for a taxi cab service, but the group of area residents argued it would expand Pendleton's options and choices for transportation.

The request drew swift opposition from the Johlkes,

who said they needed to maintain their status as the only taxi business offering cash fare rides to survive. Pendleton city government also had a vested interest in keeping Elite Taxi alive.

Pendleton City Councilor
Dale Primmer said Elite holds
contracts with the city to operate its public transportation
services.

"They provide the drivers for the buses, they do the dialarride, they do the medical non-emergency transport," he said. "The fear for people was that if you undermine the fare side of it, would it undermine the sustainability and thus lose some essential services for those who are most vulnerable and most dependent upon those services?"

In late April, Primmer and the rest of the city council agreed to compromise: Uber drivers would get a five-month trial period to prove they could operate without driving Elite out of business.

The Reynens founded Let'er Uber following the council's decision, and Becky Ramirez joined shortly thereafter. Ramirez works as a tour guide and gift shop worker as her day job, but drives for Uber as a "side hustle."

Ramirez said Let'er Uber

started as an informal group to coordinate schedules and promote their services. The group has a core membership of fewer than 20 drivers.

Unlike taxi drivers who work for a company, all Uber drivers are independent contractors that use the Uber app to help book rides and process fares. While Uber has fought efforts to classify drivers as employees, Ramirez said the informal group Let'er Uber didn't draw attention from the San Francisco-based company because it was just a group of locals looking to help each other.

Ramirez said her first few months working for Uber have been good. She'll occasionally hear complaints about the quality of Elite's services from her customers, but she said she doesn't engage and tries to focus on her own job.

That's why Elite's move mystified the members of Let'er Uber.

"I'm not necessarily shocked that they did this," she said. "I just don't understand why you would do that. What is the point of buying that? What are your plans with it? It just doesn't seem just like a good thing. It seems like whatever it is, it's going to be in malice."

COVID-19 risk level at medium in Umatilla County

Morrow County's risk level at high, according to CDC

By JOHN TILLMAN

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The community level of COVID-19 in Umatilla County was medium based on cases and hospitalizations, according to the most recent update from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Aug. 18.

Morrow County's level was one of only two in Oregon rated high. The other was Malheur County.

The Umatilla County Health Department reported 67 new cases on Monday, Aug, 22, bringing the total cases to 24,709, or 30.9% of the county's 2020 population. Deaths with or from COVID-19 stayed the same at 240.

Morrow County reported five new cases Aug. 22, for a total of 3,204. Deaths attributed to COVID-19 remained 37.

The omicron variant surge in late 2021 and early 2022 has settled into a lower rate of new cases, hospitalizations and deaths, but virus season looms in coming months.

"The (Oregon Health Sciences University) forecast is for numbers to continue to drop off," Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said. "But we worry about respiratory diseases in the fall, when people congregate indoors. Flu and COVID could go back up in October and November."

His crystal ball isn't better than anybody else's, Fiumara said.

"Our numbers were a little higher than the week before," he said,"but fluctuations aren't unusual. Hospitalizations are lower than a few weeks ago."

The Hermiston waste water readings are dropping, Fiumara noted.

"In general, they're going

down slowly," he said. "I wish that we had better sequencing data. They're not current. The omicron BA.2 subvariant is dropping. The virus changes faster than we are able to keep up."

Fiumara's recommendations remain the same for keeping yourself and your family out of the hospital.

"I may sound like a stuck record," he said, "but if you're in a high risk category, we still recommend that you stay home if sick, wash your hands and get vaccinated."

Fiumara cautioned that the data are based on what is reported.

"It's not unusual for numbers to fluctuate," he noted. "It depends on the group. Our long-term care facility outreach means that case numbers may go up. We need information for protection in place of vulnerable people."

The number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients fell in Umatilla County in the CDC's Aug. 18 update. Deaths remained at about the same level as in the prior report.

The test positivity rate of 28.8% in Umatilla County on Aug. 18 was very high, suggesting cases are being significantly under counted. Even so, that rate was down 6.64 points during the prior seven days.

The CDC reported an average of 24 cases per day in Umatilla County, a 19% decrease from two weeks earlier. Since the beginning of the pandemic, reported cases have totaled 24,665, out of a 2020 population of 80,075, for a rate of 30.8%. Oregon's rate on Aug, 22 was 20.4%.

Umatilla County's rate of deaths attributed to COVID-19 was 300 per 100,000 residents, Morrow County's 304, Oregon's 195 and the nation's 316, based on 2020 populations.

Umatilla County set its single-day record for COVID-19 deaths with six reported Nov. 19, 2021.

Feds fine Smith Frozen Foods \$100,000

By DAKOTA CASTETS-DIDIER

East Oregonian

WESTON — The Environmental Protection Agency has announced that Smith Frozen Foods Inc. in Weston has agreed to pay a \$100,000 fine for the violation of seven separate provisions of the Clean Air Act in 2016.

"Our EPA enforcement officer did an inspection in 2016 and they were able to see some of the violations on site," said Meshach Padilla, public affairs specialist with the EPA.

The violations were in regards to Smith Frozen Foods' procedures on the

storage and use of anhydrous ammonia, a refrigerant often employed for use in closed systems.

"It is a dangerous chem-

ical, and an inhalation hazard," said Javier Morales, EPA Region 10 Risk Management Program coordinator. "It is hygroscopic, meaning it's attracted to water. When people inhale it, it's very harmful to the respiratory system and to the eyes."

EPA cited Smith Frozen Foods on seven violations of provisions within the Clean Air Act for operators of gasses such as anhydrous ammonia, being safety information, hazard analysis, operating procedure, training, mechanical integrity, employee participation and contractor requirements. The penalty for these violations totaled \$100,000.

"Facilities that use bazard

"Facilities that use hazardous materials like anhydrous ammonia have an obligation to follow regulations designed to protect our communities and environment from potentially catastrophic consequences of accidents," Ed Kowalski, director of EPA region enforcement and compliance assurance Division, said in an EPA press release on Monday announcing the penalties. "Failure to comply with the law puts first responders and members of the surrounding community in harm's way."

The Clean Air Act is a federal air quality law, intended to reduce pollution and increase nationwide air quality, originally enacted in 1963, but frequently revised. It provides the EPA with regulatory authority to monitor, inspect and penalize operations with potentially harmful gasses and pollutants.

"The EPA has their own enforcement response policy that we follow, we use them to assess the penalties based on the violations that were found," Morales explained, detailing the procedure for how the EPA tabulates and levels penalties.

BMCC hires director of marketing, communications

By ANTONIO ARREDONDO

ARREDONDO East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After one year without the position, Blue Mountain Community College has hired a new director of marketing and communications.

Chief Operating Officer Pat Sisneros confirmed Kaley Cope will be filling

the new position starting on Thursday, Sept. 1. It comes after a year when BMCC had no full-time staff for marketing.

Budget cuts had led to the elimination of marketing and communications positions. Once the school year came to a close, though, Sisneros said the college realized its need for someone to "tell BMCC's story to the public."

Kaley Cope is the communications coordinator for Pendleton Parks & Recreation. Her experience in communications and marketing for the department impressed BMCC. Sisneros said the college is excited for the position to return in full with Cope.

For Cope, a Vale native and Eastern Oregon University graduate, it's a job she said she has wanted for a long time.

"I've always had an interest in higher education," Cope said. "I feel like it's a good opportunity to advance my career."

Cope leaves the position at Parks & Rec after three years. Now, she'll work to tell the college's story to the community, whether good, bad or anything in between.





The Invitation (PG13)
1:10p* 3:50p 6:10p 8:30p
Dragon Ball Super:
Super Hero (PG 13)
(English Dubbed)
6:30p

Dragon Ball Super: Super Hero (PG13) (Japanese Language) 8:50p

Beast (R)
1:20p* 4:00p 6:20p 8:40p

Bullet Train (R)
1:40p* 4:40p 7:40p

DC League of Super-Pets (PG)
1:00p* 4:10p 6:40p 9:10p

Minions: The Rise of Gru (PG)
1:50p* 4:20p

*Extra show time 8/26-8/28 rildhorseresort.com • 541-966-1850 Pendleton, OR I-84 - Exit 216

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The Members-only preview sale is 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. on Thursday, August 25. Purchase or renew your membership at the door or online at *Pendletonfriendsofthelibrary.wordpress.com*

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