

# ed operations temporarily

end of the pandemic bubble around the Grand Ronde community as more cases would be detected and the Tribal convenience store adjacent to Spirit Mountain Casino closed in late August because contact tracing uncovered positive COVID-19 connections to the facility.

As summer came to a close and smoke from western Oregon wildfires inundated the Grand Ronde valley and turned the day sky orange, one couldn't help but wonder if it was a harbinger of an ominous fall as the weather grew colder and rainier, and people were forced back inside.

## Cases increase in the fall

The Tribal Health & Wellness Center detected positive cases with ties to the Grand Ronde community in late August and positives continued into September.

Tribal students, hankering to return to school, couldn't because of the virus and were forced to distance learning on computers. The Tribe offered Tribal members a technology grant to purchase computers on which they could attend school or connect with the Tribal government, which was 100 percent virtual at this point.

Four behind-the-scenes casino employees tested positive for the coronavirus in October and the Tribe self-reported to the Oregon Health Authority.

"As unfortunate as these recent cases are, it is also a reminder of the seriousness of this situation," Kennedy said, as she continued to encourage hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing.

In another unprecedented move, the annual Restoration Celebration moved to an online format. Large crowds in an indoor setting was still highly discouraged as the Tribe remained in the State of Emergency announced earlier in the year.

In early November, two positive tests of Tribal governmental employees prompted Fullerton to limit access to the Governance Center for three days to only essential

## Tribal Council thoughts on living a year with COVID

*"I am very proud of how our Tribe has responded to COVID-19. I think we have worked hard to prioritize taking care of our people. ... I think we have been reminded that big sickness can come to our Tribe today just as it did so often for our ancestors."*

~ Kathleen George

*"Our staff really did a good job of handling all the different things that they had to handle, especially with keeping essential services still in place. ... It has made everyone aware of how well we work together."*

~ Steve Bobb Sr.

*"I think we handled it as well as we could, but the proof will be in how we are prepared for the future and how we handle the next pandemic. ... We really just let our Tribal values guide us and I think that's really pulled people together."*

~ Michael Langley

*"I feel like we recognized the severity of what this issue could become from the get-go and we took it very seriously. ... The Grand Ronde community took it very seriously and we recognize that now, more than any, is a time for unity."*

~ Chris Mercier

To watch a video of Tribal Council members discuss the Tribe's one-year anniversary of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, visit Smoke Signals' YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCMDXdTzfGjzJ\\_j3NPpCrtcw](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMDXdTzfGjzJ_j3NPpCrtcw)



employees. Other staff members worked from home or were granted administrative leave.

As numbers skyrocketed to more than a 1,000 cases daily across Oregon, Brown announced a "freeze" to combat the spread of COVID-19. However, the Tribe maintained its current scaled-back Tribal governmental operations and Spirit Mountain Casino remained open during the surge in numbers.

Tribal members and employees were encouraged to follow guidelines for limited Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations as the annual Tribal Council Christmas Party was canceled.

During a Dec. 9 Facebook Live event, Rowe reported there were 17

active cases in Grand Ronde.

"We know that this is happening in our community," she said. "It's getting closer. It's more prevalent. So please, please adhere to the public health recommendations."

## Getting better?

2020 ended and the new year started with the first signs of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

Rowe became one of the first Tribal employees to receive a first dose of the two-dose Moderna COVID-19 vaccine on Dec. 22. By the next day, 20 essential health care workers had received their first shot. Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy received her first dose in early January.

Tribal Council approved the 2021 spending plan that reflected a less than 1 percent decrease in spending from the previous year. Miraculously, Spirit Mountain Casino had reached its projected revenue for 2020 despite the 74-day closure and the infusion of federal aid, matched by reduced spending by Tribal programs, helped the Tribe enter the new year on solid financial footing.

As 2021 really got started, the Health & Wellness Center doubled its COVID-19 testing capacity and increased supplies of vaccine saw the Tribe host several vaccination clinics. To date, the Tribe has vaccinated approximately 5,800 people with more than 3,200 of the vaccinations being given to Elders 55 and older.

Local school districts started announcing plans to or are re-opening as their teachers receive vaccinations. Statewide virus cases have plummeted from more than a 1,000 daily in the winter to more man-

ageable levels of several hundred per day.

Using CARES Act funding, Tribal Council upgraded the technology in its chambers to allow for better remote participation by Tribal Council members and the membership. The federal government also extended the deadline to spend any remaining CARES Act funds until the end of 2021.

After a Valentine's Day ice and snow storm caused power outages and downed trees in the Grand Ronde area, the weather turned decidedly warmer and daylight hours lengthened noticeably. On Sunday, March 14, Daylight Saving Time began and extended daylight until after 7 p.m.

The Grand Ronde Tribe and people of Oregon can't help but feel hope and anticipation as warmer spring and summer temperatures arrive. The annual Memorial Day event at the West Valley Veterans Memorial will be held outside this year with appropriate social distancing, Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. said.

Congress approved President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 economic stimulus package that will once again dedicate funding to help Tribal governments.

Oregon was one of the first states to report a case of COVID-19, but a year after it has the fourth lowest coronavirus case rate in the country, the fourth lowest death rate and the fourth lowest death rate among seniors.

If Oregon's death rate matched the nation, three times as many Oregonians would have lost their lives, Health Authority Director Patrick Allen said.

As Oregon moves into spring and summer, the Oregon Health Authority encourages people to keep wearing masks, limit social gatherings and maintain physical distance. And choose to get vaccinated when eligible and as soon as a person can get an appointment.

For the Tribe, it survived and come out the other end financially secure. It has taken care of its members and employees, and is now caring for its community by hosting open vaccination clinics.

The Tribe has bolstered its technology and that of its membership, and has cared for its most vulnerable population – the Elders. Through the hard and unrelenting work of its elected officials, staff, administration and membership, it has once again proven to be resilient in the face of adversity.

"Things are going really well out here in the Tribe," Mercier said during a March 3 Facebook Live event. "I think we have not been hit as hard as other parts of the country and I think a lot of that is due to the incredible job that many of our support staff are doing. Obviously, a lot of people are turning to this community when it comes to the vaccines. ... We've become kind of a place people turn to to handle this. I'm pretty proud of the job we've done and will continue to do until whenever this ends." ■



Willamina Elementary School first-grade teacher Shannon Mode waves while holding a sign while taking part in a parade with other teachers and staff members from Willamina Elementary School through Tribal Housing to support their students staying at home due to the coronavirus in April 2020.

Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez