

Local & State

Scammers seek to prey on virus fears

By Dick Hughes
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Scammers, fraudsters and price gougers are preying on Oregonians, capitalizing on their concerns about coronavirus.

“There are no known cures or vaccines — yet — for COVID-19. So anyone trying to sell you one is lying,” Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum said. “And as for any money that you may eventually get from the federal government, and we hope you will, please be careful.”

“Scammers are already scheming on how to intercept all or some of that money,” Rosenblum and Gov. Kate Brown spoke during a conference call last week with Oregon members of AARP, which had received more than 500 calls on its price-gouging hotline.

“Exploiting the public’s fear for profit will not be tolerated,” Rosenblum said.

Brown this week extended her executive order declaring an abnormal market disruption

due to COVID-19. The order authorizes legal action against wholesalers and merchants who provide “essential consumer goods or services for an amount that represents an unconscionably excessive price,” such as at least 15% above the normal price.

Rosenblum said the only other time she could recall the regulation being invoked was during Salem’s water crisis two years ago, when some sellers jacked up prices for bottled water.

Responding to the current price gouging, the Oregon Department of Justice has sent more than 20 cease-and-desist letters to businesses, ordering them to reduce their prices on toilet paper, hand sanitizer, face masks or other essentials. Rosenblum said most businesses complied after learning price gouging was illegal.

Other current scams involve the stimulus payments headed to Americans as part of the federal government’s coronavirus response. Distribution through direct deposit

or mailed checks could begin next week.

The official term is “economic impact payment,” but state and federal tax officials warn that scammers will emphasize such words as “stimulus check” or “stimulus payment.”

Rosenblum noted that Oregonians do not need to pay anything upfront or give out personal information to receive the payments, despite what scammers might claim.

“The government’s not going to contact you to ask you for your Social Security number or your bank account or your credit card number to confirm your identity. So people who ask for this type of information are scammers,” she said.

“And if they say they’re from the government, they’re what are known as imposter scammers. They’re pretending to be from the government. But they’re not. They’re scammers.”

Most government communication with Oregonians

comes through mail, although even some of those could be fake demands for money.

Rosenblum urged people to take control by looking up the phone numbers or websites of government agencies and contacting them directly when in doubt or suspicious of a scam.

Imposter scams already were the second-most-frequent consumer complaint to the Department of Justice last year. Telecommunications topped the list, and the attorney general predicted a surge of pandemic-related illegal robocalls.

“You’re going to start hearing that voice, whether it’s Rachel from Credit Card Services or Joe, you know, from Coronavirus Central,” Rosenblum said.

As for people selling miracle cures or supposed coronavirus test kits, Rosenblum said, “Ask yourself, if there’d been a medical breakthrough, would you be hearing it for the first time through an ad or a sales pitch?”

LOCAL BRIEFING

County Democrats cancel April meeting

The Baker County Democrats will not have their regularly scheduled monthly meeting in April. Whether they meet during May, and in what manner, will be determined by the first of May.

Vector Control board to meet Thursday

The board of directors for the Baker Valley Vector Control District will meet Thursday, April 16, at 1 p.m. at the District office, 19611 S. Airport Lane. The public can attend through webex; a link is available at bvvecd.org.

Baker City Planning Commission public hearing by teleconference April 15

The Baker City Planning Commission will have a public hearing, by teleconference only, on Wednesday, April 15, to consider two applications. The meeting will start at 6 p.m. The public can participate by calling 1-877-820-7831 and entering this code — 8204693.

The two applications:

- Applicant and property owner Lane Parry is requesting a variance to the 5-foot side setback in the residential medium-density zone to allow a future property line adjustment to accommodate an existing accessory structure and to correct a boundary discrepancy at 3750 Campbell St.
- Applicant Christina Smith, on behalf of property owner 5th Street Rental LLC, is requesting approval to use an existing single-family home as a real estate office in the residential high-density zone at 2333 Main St.

Copies of applications and other materials can be emailed for free by calling 541-523-8219 or emailing planning@bakercounty.org

COUNCIL

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Two staff members will participate in the meeting by the Zoom computer application from their offices downstairs in City Hall, to reduce the number of people in Council Chambers.

The first item on the agenda is also related to the pandemic. Councilors Lynette Perry and Larry Morrison plan to join the meeting via Zoom as well, but before that can happen at least four of the five other councilors must be present (to constitute a quorum) and approve a resolution that allows councilors to attend meetings in a manner other than in person.

A 2013 resolution requires councilors to physically attend meetings.

Presuming the councilors at City Hall approve the new resolution allowing their colleagues to participate remotely, the meeting will move on to a resolution declaring a local public health emergency.

The Baker County Board of Commissioners declared an emergency on March 18.

The city declaration authorizes the city manager to take several actions, if he deems them necessary, including establishing a curfew. The city has not proposed imposing any such restrictions, which, according to the city’s emergency procedures ordinance, must be subsequently approved by the City Council “at the earliest practicable time.”

New well contract

The city’s 2016 water facilities master plan calls for the city to drill a new well near Quail Ridge Golf Course south of Indiana Avenue. The well will serve as a new source of water when demand is highest, and as a temporary source when maintenance work is happening at the reservoir.

Design and preliminary work took place last year, and the city received four bids for drilling the well. Construction is slated to start

this October and be finished by May 2021. The lowest bidder, at \$677,055, is Schneider Water Services of St. Paul, Oregon, between Salem and Portland. The company also bid \$87,000 to decommission an existing well, which was used for irrigating the city-owned golf course. The Oregon Water Resources Department is requiring the city to decommission the existing well.

The city’s primary water source is a series of streams and springs in its 10,000-acre watershed on the east slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains, about 10 miles west of town. The city also has a state permit that allows it to divert up to 200 million gallons of water per year from the watershed to the city’s current well, which is near its reservoir at the southwest corner of the city above Indiana Avenue and Reservoir Road, and then pump that water back into the distribution system when needed. The city typically taps that well late in summer when water use peaks and the volume available from the watershed

declines.

According to a report to councilors from Michelle Owen, the city’s public works director, the city will be able to pipe surplus water from the watershed to the new well as well as the old, giving the city what are in effect two underground storage reservoirs.

The city also can use water from Goodrich Reservoir, a natural lake high in the Elkhorns that was dammed to increase its storage capacity to about 200 million gallons.

Airport work

The city has received federal and state grants to pay to fill cracks and apply a sealant to the main runway at the Baker City Airport and seal the adjacent taxiway.

The estimated cost is \$180,000 to \$220,000.

Property purchase agreement

Cutters Edge, which made emergency rescue saws, has closed its business in the Elkhorn View Industrial Park near Behlen Mfg. Co. and

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative.

According to a staff report to councilors, Cutters Edge’s owner has offered to sell a 1-acre property to the city for \$30,000. The city’s training structure for firefighters sits on the company’s property. Fire crews can use the structure for live-fire training.

The city has no other place for the training structure, and moving it would incur “significant costs,” according to the staff report.

Fee resolution

Councilors will consider approving new fees for a variety of city services for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

The proposed resolution includes 2.3% increases in water and sewer fees, the amount based on the federal Consumer Price Index. That equates to about \$1 more per month for the base fee for most residential customers. That fee includes 3 units of water per month (one unit is 748 gallons). The cost for each additional unit would increase from 93 cents to 95 cents.

CLASS OF 2020

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Illingsworth has been in leadership for four years, and says she’s happy with how her classmates have always treated others.

“Befriending students who appear to be alone, helping others who seem to be struggling, coming together to lift others up when they appear to be down — these are just a few of the things I have seen my class do,” she said. “Although these actions may seem small, they can make a huge difference to one individual.”

“The Class of 2020 has always been unique,” Carter said. “We are competitive and have driven each other to perform at the highest levels both academically and in our extracurricular activities.”

“Our class is filled to the brim with leaders that have helped the community in many ways throughout the years, and I believe that many of these leaders are now working to spread positivity during these tough times,” McCauley said. “Overall, I couldn’t have asked to be part of a better class.”

These seniors, especially before the school district launched distance learning, dealt with their extra time in various ways — working, spending time with family, and completing scholarships for the next step in their education.

“My parents and I have found ourselves doing quite a bit of yard work with all of our extra time,” Smith said. “We are now able to get some

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— **Sam McCauley, co-valedictorian, Baker High School Class of 2020**

things done that we haven’t been able to get done because of our usual busy schedule in the spring.”

That busy schedule would, in a normal spring, include baseball.

“I will really miss baseball,” Smith said. “Baseball has always been my favorite sport and I loved going out to play every day after school. The spring was by far my favorite part of the school year because of this.”

He’s feeling the effect of abruptly ending the school year.

“We still had our senior baseball season, senior prom, graduation, and many more memories that were supposed to happen before we ended this journey,” he said.

Illingsworth had hoped the next few months would ease the transition into the next phase of her life.

“I planned for my senior year to be a time where I find closure,” she said. “To say goodbye to my mentors and teachers, while also creating a lifetime of memories with my

classmates whom I may never see again. Because of the current circumstances, I haven’t been able to cherish the final days of my high school life.”

Although she said “it felt like I did absolutely nothing” the first few days, Illingsworth finally settled into the concept of self-isolation.

“I’ve been catching up on my schoolwork, applying for scholarships, and I have been busy working,” she said. “This has been a good time for me to clear my head and find out what it is that I want from my future.”

She’s also offered help to those who need it.

“I’ve reached out to some of the elderly people in our community to see if I could be of any help during this time,” she said. “I’ve gone to the store many times to shop for a family friend, and I offered my help in any way possible to many members of this community. Times are hard for everyone right now, and I think it’s important to realize that.”

Although Cassidy said he’s not “a very social type,” the forced separation has him missing classmates and track teammates.

“This pandemic has given me time to realize the importance of other people in my life,” he said. “I’m greatly missing the conversations we would be having in class and the memories that I would make each day, striving toward the last bit of high school I had. It’s overwhelming to me that I am losing some of the last moments of time I may ever spend with some of my classmates.”

“I hope that we have not had our last day together, but if we have, I would just like to say thank you. I consider myself lucky even if my senior year does not get cut short.”

— **Anna Carter, co-salutatorian, Baker High School Class of 2020**

Cassidy has filled his extra time by training as though track season was still in session. He’s also worked on scholarships, and spent more time with his parents before he heads to college this fall.

“This has been a good time for me to connect with them more before I won’t be around them as often,” he said.

He’s also used his recent bouts of procrastination to work on time management.

“I guess I can say that I’m coping with this extra time by using it to organize how I manage my time and make the most of every moment I have,” he said.

These seniors just wish they’d had more moments to make memories of high school and to continue traditions of past graduates.

“For years we’ve watched the previous classes walk the halls of the various Baker schools in their caps and gowns and dreamed about the day it would be our turn,” Carter said. “It is eerie to think that we may never get that chance.”

But the virus that disrupted their senior year cannot erase 12 years of memories and friendships.

“My classmates are some of the kindest people I have had the opportunity to meet,” Carter said. “It has been a blessing to spend the last 12 years with them. I hope that we have not had our last day together, but if we have, I would just like to say thank you. I consider myself lucky even if my senior year does get cut short.”

Smith echoed her sentiment.

“I may be a little biased, but I truly feel we have one of the best classes to go through Baker High,” he said.

Flanagan agreed.

“I will miss every single person in my class,” he said. “The students in my class have the best character, the best inclusion of others. I believe that our class has been truly unique in our support of others and I wouldn’t ask for another group of classmates.”

Illingsworth said the Class of 2020 wouldn’t be the same without the community that watched them grow up.

“I can’t speak for everyone, but I know that the Class of 2020 has felt the support

and love that the community has given them,” she said. “If there was only one thing that I could say to the community, it would be that the students of the Class of 2020 are forever grateful for the support and love that they have been given.”

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