

Local & State

Brown: 'Cautious' on restarting economy

By Dick Hughes

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Reopening of Oregon businesses will occur “gradually, carefully and incrementally,” Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday, but she refused to say when that might happen.

“It will not be easy. It will take longer than we want,” she said.

Brown and health officials held a press conference to announce her framework “for restarting business and public life in our state — how we’re going to approach reopening Oregon” from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have to be cautious or it will backfire,” Brown said. “We know that a vaccine or an effective treatment may yet be months away. And if we move too quickly, we will see a spike in cases that could lead to an overwhelmed hospital system and unnecessary deaths.”

Geography may be one consideration for when businesses can reopen. Some rural areas have had few confirmed cases, and none have been reported in Baker, Gilliam, Harney, Lake and Wheeler counties as of Wednesday.

Contacted later, a member of Brown’s recently formed Medical Advisory Committee said the governor was emphasizing the right approach.

“This is not going to be over soon,” said Dr. Bob Dannenhoffer, the Douglas County health officer. “So anybody who thinks that, like by May 1, everything will be back to normal, they really are not looking carefully at the data. The data would suggest that until we get a good and effective vaccine — and we don’t know when that’s going to be — life in the U.S. and life in



Gillian Flaccus / Associated Press

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, shown here at a press conference in March, said Tuesday that reopening of businesses will happen “gradually, carefully and incrementally.”

“We have to be cautious or it will backfire.”

— Oregon Gov. Kate Brown

the world is going to be radically altered.”

Dannenhoffer said physical distancing and staying home when sick would be key preventive measures for at least a year, and Oregon has been doing what it should. Oregon has one of the lowest per capita rates of coronavirus infection, he said, “Certainly better than all the states around us.”

Brown said businesspeople and health professionals would be brought together to discuss how to gradually reopen restaurants, retailers, child care, and personal services such as hair and nail salons. “For example, this might include additional guidelines for reconfiguring the delivery of services with additional physical barriers

like plexiglass dividers, or requirements for wearing PPE,” she said.

She promised “a science-driven process” based on several conditions for reopening Oregon: slowing the growth of COVID-19 cases, having more personal protective equipment (PPE), increasing test capacity, establishing a robust system for tracking who has been exposed to the coronavirus, and ensuring effective isolation and quarantine for people who test positive, including nursing home residents and homeless individuals.

The state’s latest modeling projections are that, under current conditions, COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations would remain steady through mid-May but would shoot up if those regulations were eased.

Neither Brown nor Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state health officer, would specify a date for potentially relaxing business restrictions and social distancing requirements.

Much has yet to be determined. Brown said epidemiologists and her Medical Advisory Committee were working on the appropriate metrics for evaluating the state’s progress.

The state does not know how much PPE is needed, including having sufficient gear for physicians and dentists to resume elective surgeries and other procedures, or potentially to protect employees in personal-service jobs.

More testing capability also is needed, enabling at least 15,000 Oregonians a week to be tested, according to Sidelinger. Even then, not all Oregonians will be tested for COVID-19.

FUNERALS

Continued from Page 1A

The pandemic, and the limits on social gatherings it spawned, has forced families to postpone most funerals and memorial services. And with the uncertainty about when restrictions will end, they can’t schedule ceremonies with confidence.

This deprives grieving family and friends of a vital step in the emotional closure process that’s so important for people adjusting to the death of a loved one, said Stephanie Waldron Brown of Tami’s Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services.

“One of the hardest parts is we’re all out of our comfort zones,” Brown said.

The pandemic has drastically altered society in many ways, and when people who are already anxious have to deal with a relative’s or friend’s death — without the ability to have a traditional funeral or celebration of life — the stress is exacerbated, Brown said.

She said social distancing has affected her personally as she works with clients.

“The hardest part for me is I’m a hugger,” Brown said. “When people are grieving and you’re comforting them my natural inclination is to reach out and touch their hand or give them a hug. Not being able to offer that comfort is difficult.”

Brown’s mother, Tami Waldron, who owns the funeral home, said the restrictions have greatly changed how she works with her clients. “Typically we meet with our families at their homes

and it’s very comfortable,” Waldron said. “Now it has to be very safe. Our comfort is distanced.”

She said that in a recent case the deceased, as part of a pre-arrangement package, had planned a celebration of life with dozens of family and friends invited.

Instead, 10 people, the limit imposed by Gov. Kate Brown’s March 17 executive order, gathered at the grave-site for a 15-minute service. Waldron said she felt “terrible” that the deceased’s wishes couldn’t be met, and that friends and relatives weren’t allowed to celebrate their loved one’s life when their emotions were most intense.

Waldron also talked of a widow who, because her family wasn’t able to travel to be with her, in effect has to begin healing alone, without the family support that’s so vital in such times.

Troy Hanson, owner of Gray’s West & Co. Pioneer Chapel and Coles Tribute Center, said he has also noticed how the limits on group size has affected family and friends who are grieving.

“Electronic condolences versus a hug are very different,” Hanson said.

“I feel sorry for the families in terms of the lack of closure,” said Roger Coles of Coles Tribute Center. “It makes it hard when you’re working with a family.”

The pandemic has also reduced the number of airline flights, Brown said, so in some cases when relatives have planned to travel to Baker County following a

death they haven’t been able to do so.

For some people the difficulties start even before a death occurs, Brown said.

Restrictions on visitors at assisted living facilities and hospitals can prevent family and friends from being present at a loved one’s death, she said.

Brown, Coles and Hanson all said that their clients, despite their disappointment, have been understanding.

“They’ve been very gracious in putting off memorial services,” Hanson said.

Brown said her clients, having had so many other aspects of their lives affected by the pandemic, recognize that the restrictions are designed to slow the spread of the virus.

“Everybody knows what’s going on,” she said.

In addition to the emo-

tional toll, the pandemic has also had a financial effect on funeral homes, Hanson said.

“We’re a service-based business,” he said.

Hanson said it’s difficult to procure personalized items for families, such as flag cases or engraved urns, because the vendors that supply those special orders have either closed or reduced their productivity.

Each of the funeral directors believes that once restrictions are eased, most families will seek to schedule funerals or other services.

Brown expects a flurry of celebrations — ones that not only honor the deceased but also give survivors a chance to rejoice in the easing of the pandemic.

“There will be a lot of celebrating all the way around when this ends,” she said.

EO Media Group hosting online candidate forums

■ Events will feature candidates for Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Stuck on who to vote for in the crowded Oregon 2nd Congressional District race?

EO Media Group soon will provide residents in Eastern and Central Oregon an opportunity to hear from Republican and Democratic candidates. The media group is hosting online candidate forums using Facebook and at www.bakercityherald.com.

The forums, which are being livestreamed and recorded without an audience due to COVID-19 concerns, are scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Friday, May 1, for the Democratic candidates and 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. Saturday, May 2, for the Republican candidates.

“A crucial mission of local newspapers is to inform the public about matters that can affect their lives and their community,” said Kathryn B. Brown, vice president of EO Media Group. “EO Media Group is glad to be able to provide this online forum to give voters the opportunity to get to know more about the CD2 candidates before the May 19 primary election.”

There are 16 candidates — five Democrats and 11 Republicans — running for the seat U.S. Rep. Greg Walden has held since 1998. Walden, the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and Oregon’s only Republican in Congress, announced in 2019 he will retire in January 2021.

With 11 Republicans entered in the primary, Brown said it was necessary to hold two forums on May 2.

“It was important to us to make sure there was enough time for voters to hear from all of the candidates without sitting through an overly long forum,” she said.

The forums are being streamed by La Grande-based Eastern Oregon Alive TV, a local internet TV station. The forums will be available for viewing on the Baker City Herald website or on EOAlive.tv following the events.

“Voters will have the chance to rewatch or watch for the first time if they missed the live stream,” Brown said.

The forums are being moderated by Chris Rush, the regional publisher of the EO Media Group’s east side publications, including the Baker City Herald. Voters can submit questions to CD2forum@eomediagroup.com in advance of the forums or on Facebook Live during the event.

Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District is the largest of Oregon’s five districts, and is the seventh-largest district in the nation, covering all of Eastern Oregon and the Medford area.

Ballots are sent out April 29, and the primary election is May 19. The top vote getter in each party advances to the general election later this year.

How to watch

• WHAT: Oregon 2nd Congressional District candidate forums

• WHEN: Democrat forum is 6:30 p.m., Friday, May 1; Republican forums are 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. Saturday, May 2.

• WHERE: Streaming live on the Baker City Herald’s Facebook page. Forums can be rewatched after the event at www.bakercityherald.com or on EOAlive.tv.

• ASK A QUESTION: Submit questions in advance by email to CD2forum@eomediagroup.com or on Facebook Live during the event.

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