

The virus vigil continues locally

By Jayson Jacoby
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Mark Bennett is maintaining a vigil of sorts, waiting for something he hopes doesn't happen.

A rash of coronavirus infections in Baker County.

Bennett, a Baker County commissioner, is the county's incident commander during the pandemic that has entered its fourth month.

As of Friday, Baker County had only one confirmed case of the virus. It was reported May 6 and the person, who has not been identified but lives in the 97814 ZIP code, recovered at home.

But the relatively tranquil conditions changed abruptly this week when Oregon's biggest outbreak — more than 235 new cases — was confirmed with almost all of those infections connected to the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City near La Grande, about 45 miles from Baker City.

And now, Bennett said, comes the waiting.

"We're making sure we're prepared and trying to stay very vigilant," Bennett said.



Bennett

Given the incubation period of COVID-19 of up to 14 days, Bennett said it's too early to know whether Union County's outbreak might result in new cases in Baker County.

The Union County Incident Management Team coordinated a drive-thru testing clinic Thursday and Friday at the Union County Fairgrounds in La Grande. Officials hoped to test 800 to 900 people over the two days. The clinic's aim was to test people investigators identified during contact tracing to be at risk for infection.

Sabrina Thompson of The (La Grande) Observer contributed to this story.

SCHOOLS

Continued from Page 1A

Superintendent Mark Witty told the Board Thursday night that keeping students and staff healthy through the coronavirus pandemic will be the main focus of any plans that are put forth for reopening schools.

He presented several options for the startup of a new school year to the Board during a Zoom video session of the Board's regular June meeting.

Witty said he met with administrators, confidential employees and certified staff representatives in an all-day session Monday to review reopening guidance provided by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE).

"There are 46 pages of guidelines," he said. "That's quite a bit of detail we need to look through."

A report of reopening plans for each school in the District must be submitted to ODE before the new school year begins.

Witty said he and Betty Palmer, assistant superintendent, will be meeting with Baker County Health Department administrators on June 29 to discuss two critical components of any plan: physical distancing and proper hygiene practices.

School principals will be on hand at the June 30 work session to discuss reopening plans for their buildings and to answer questions, Witty said.

He said PACE, which provides insurance coverage for the District, has notified schools that it will not be covering any COVID-19 claims.

That leaves the District with a large responsibility to manage the liability that could come with any illness associated with COVID-19,

Witty told the Board.

"In draft form, it does appear we can meet the guidelines for K-6 in-person school," he said. "We need to manage the best we can to keep people healthy."

That task becomes more difficult across the state for Grades 7-12, Witty said.

Baker Middle School will be the most difficult for the District.

"That one is the most challenging to manage because of the square footage," Witty said. "It has smaller classrooms and smaller hallways."

Providing in-person school will be tempered with requirements to comply with the rules as much as possible, he said.

"That has been driven home a little bit from what happened in La Grande," Witty said, pointing to an outbreak of 242 cases reported this week, at least 236 associated with an Island City church that did not comply with the governor's order to keep in-person meetings to a minimum number of people and to observe social distancing guidelines.

Technology upgrades that will allow staff and families to move easily if needed from in-person to online instruction or to a hybrid version that blends both styles, will require time to train staff and families, Witty said. The District has invested \$600,000 in the new technology, an investment that Witty says will provide the District with "the best technology in the state."

"But we've got to have our families and our staff understanding how to utilize it," he said.

Skye Flanagan, Baker Middle School principal, who worked on the technology project with Lynde Roberts of Chaves Consulting, echoed Witty's desire to provide

adequate training.

"If we spend time on this, we will get more bang for our buck," Flanagan said.

And he empathized with the staff's need to be supported by training in other areas as well as the year begins.

Instruction also will be needed to help staff and students learn how to navigate inside and outside the buildings with respect to social distancing and personal hygiene requirements.

"They deserve to be prepared," he said.

Witty offered three alternatives to adding more training to the startup of school:

- The first would be to work with the Baker Education Association to come to an agreement to start the year four days before the planned Aug. 24 date for the teaching staff. That plan would cost the District \$50,000 per day for a total of \$200,000.
- "I'm a little reticent to do that as we move into a recession even though we are well-positioned," Witty said. If the District could continue to receive CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act funding for an extended period this option would be more attractive, he said.
- As a second option, Witty proposed moving four days on the District's 2020-21 calendar designated as Friday work days for teachers (green days) and adding them to the beginning of the year for use as training days.

Again, Witty said he was reticent to make that move because having those Friday work days spread throughout the year allows the District to be flexible in dealing with issues as they arise

- The third option Witty mentioned was to delay the start of school for students until after Labor Day this

year. Under the terms of the approved calendar, students are set to return to classes on Aug. 31, four days ahead of the Sept. 7 holiday.

Again, this proposal comes with its own problems.

"It does impact instructional time," Witty said.

In other business Thursday night, the Board adopted the District's 2020-21 budget totaling \$68,073,037.08. The budget includes a contingency of \$4,453,760.83, and an unappropriated ending fund balance of \$4,925,462.02 designated as a planned reserve for future use, said Michelle Glover, the District's business manager.

Regarding the English/Language Arts curriculum adoption, Assistant Superintendent Palmer told the Board that after nearly a year of reviewing state guidelines, the District's English/Language Arts team unanimously agreed that Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, the same firm that provided curriculum material 14 years ago, was the best choice to provide the upgrade.

Palmer said the company "revamped its approach in 2020."

"(The curriculum) transfers from in-person to online seamlessly," she said, and is well-suited to all students including those in special education or English as a second language programs. It also has strong components of grammar and spelling, Palmer said.

The Board will consider approving the material, a \$300,000 budget item, at a short meeting after the June 30 work session.

Mark Johnson and Pat Flanagan also will return to the Board meeting to seek approval to move forward with plans to build a community supported and funded soccer complex as part of the Baker Sports Complex.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Three students earn scholarships through the PEO Sisterhood

Three Baker students have received scholarships from Chapter CJ of the PEO Sisterhood, a philanthropic organization dedicated to giving women opportunities for higher education.

Dallas Hardesty, a senior at the Baker Web Academy, was awarded an \$1,800 Oregon Marguerite scholarship. Hardesty, who has already earned credits toward an associate degree at Blue Mountain Community College, plans to teach vocational agriculture at Christ Sanctuary International in Uganda.

She has been active in 4-H and FFA and has traveled to Honduras, Kenya and Uganda on service trips to promote health and agriculture.

Jordan Howard, a student at Eastern Oregon University, received an Oregon scholarship of \$1,400. Howard, a licensed pharmacy technician, is a pre-pharmacy student in her junior year at EOU. She is considering a focus on pharmacology in post-baccalaureate studies.

Sophia Yervasi, a student at Eastern Oregon University, was awarded an Oregon Marguerite scholarship of \$1,250. Yervasi, a 2017 Baker High School graduate, completed the culinary arts program at Walla Walla Community College. She worked in food service while attending the college and decided that studying business would support her goal of owning a food-related business. She will seek a business degree from EOU.

Baker Ladies Golf and Bridge Association plans season-opening lunch July 1

The Baker Ladies Golf and Bridge Association will have its season-opening luncheon on Wednesday, July 1, at Quail Ridge Golf Course, 2801 Indiana Ave.

Weather permitting, golf will start at 8:15 a.m., with lunch served at 12:30 p.m. and bridge following lunch.

Prices are the same as last year — \$9 for lunch, \$1 for 50-50. Masks will be optional for bridge. Those who don't feel well are asked to please not attend.

All new and former members are welcome. For lunch reservations, call Dianne Ellingson at 541-523-4553 or 541-519-4703 by Tuesday evening, June 30.

New At The Baker County Library

Patrons can reserve materials in advance online or by calling 541-523-6419. Drive-in hours at 2400 Resort St. Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

FICTION

- "The Grief Keeper," Alexandra Villasante
- "The Big Buddha Bicycle Race," Thomas Mallon
- "A Single Light," Tosca Lee
- "The Nanny," Gilly MacMillan
- "Tales of Pell," series by Delilah Dawson

NONFICTION

- "Human Diversity," Charles Murray
- "Front Row at the Trump Show," Jonathan Karl
- "Exactly What to Say," Phil Jones
- "The MAGA Doctrine," Charlie Kirk
- "Hidden Valley Road," Robert Kolker

DVDS

- "Bloodshot" (Sci-Fi)
- "Endless Love" (Drama, 1981)
- "The Gentlemen" (Action)
- "The Last Full Measure" (Drama)
- "The Lodge" (Horror)

JUBILEE

Continued from Page 1A

The problem was simply one of numbers, said Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, which puts on Miners Jubilee.

Cutler said she had delayed making a decision on the event because she had hoped Baker County officials might be able to persuade Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to allow counties with relatively few cases of COVID-19 — Baker County has had only one, as of Friday — to have public gatherings with more than the 250 people authorized in the current phase 2 guidelines.

During Miners Jubilee more than 500 people often congregate at Geiser-Pollman Park, where food and craft vendors set up their booths, Cutler said.

She figured that Miners Jubilee might be feasible with a limit of 400 people.

Even after the organizer of the bronc and bull riding events announced June 8 that those events wouldn't happen — they help bring in visitors who also attend the Jubilee — Cutler said she was "still holding out hope" for the Jubilee.

But then Brown announced a one-week pause in the state's reopening plan due to a rising rate of COVID-19 cases.

"I didn't feel comfortable drawing it out, knowing that folks are trying to make plans. It just makes sense that we conceded and try to regroup for next year."

— **Shelly Cutler, executive director, Baker County Chamber of Commerce, which organizes Miners Jubilee**

And then this week the state's biggest outbreak of infections happened in Union County, which reported more than 235 new cases in four days.

Cutler said it became clear that the 250-person limit was not likely to change soon.

She spoke with the Chamber's board of directors, and with Bill Harvey, chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners, and with Timothy Bishop, the county's contracted tourism marketing director.

"I didn't feel comfortable drawing it out, knowing that

folks are trying to make plans," Cutler said. "It just makes sense that we conceded and try to regroup for next year."

Cutler said the Chamber generally makes a profit of about \$3,500 from the Jubilee.

She said her larger concern is how the cancellation of the Jubilee and several other major summer events will affect local businesses.

"I have really serious concerns for the business community," she said. "We know how valuable tourism is to Baker County in the summer."

Other events that earlier

announced cancellations are the Baker City Cycling Classic bicycle stage race, the Hells Canyon Motorcycle Rally and the East-West Shrine All-Star Football Game.

The Haines Stampede Rodeo is still scheduled for July 3 and 4, along with fireworks displays in Haines and in Halfway.

The Baker County Fair will also take place in early August.

In a Facebook post Friday announcing that Miners Jubilee was canceled, the Chamber stated: "We did not come to this decision easily, but the restrictions on large gatherings and the recent outbreak in Union County make it impossible for us to proceed. Please accept our most sincere apology. We hope you understand we must adhere to Governor Brown's mandates during this very difficult time.

"We understand the substantial financial impact this cancellation and the other canceled events will have on Baker County."

Cutler said she hopes the situation will change enough by this fall to make it possible to schedule some sort of community event that can help local businesses.

"Whatever we can do to help strengthen the economy, that's what we want to do," she said.



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