Chamber to reopen Visitors Center

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The Baker County Chamber of Commerce's Visitors Center in Baker City will reopen Friday for the first time in four months, and resume daily operation from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Chamber director Shelly Cutler said Wednesday that she's "very excited" to reopen the building on the north side of Campbell Street near the Interstate 84 interchange.

Cutler said the Visitors Center, which closed at the end of March due to the coronavirus pandemic, has been receiving an average of about 80 phone calls every five days or so during the closure.

The Chamber has continued to stock visitors guides and pamphlets outside the center, and Cutler said she and office manager Diane Wroe have had to replenish the supply a couple of times per week.

Wroe also spent time at the center July 20-22, and she said a steady stream of visitors came by.

"We know people are still traveling, both from inside and outside Oregon," Cutler said.

Baker County commissioners voted Wednesday to authorize the Chamber to reopen the Visitors Center, as recommended by the county's Transient Lodging Tax Committee.

"We know people are still traveling, both from inside and outside Oregon. I'm thrilled that we're getting folks coming through and spending money in our local businesses."

— Shelly Cutler, executive director, Baker County Chamber of Commerce

The Chamber receives about $76,000 per year from the 7% lodging tax, which is collected from guests at motels, bed-and-breakfasts and other lodging establishments, to operate the Visitors Center.

Cutler said the Visitors Center closed at the end of March due to uncertainty about effects of the pandemic, then in its early stages.

Another concern was plummeting lodging tax collections, the source of the money for the Visitors Center contract.

Timothy Bishop, the county's contracted tourism marketing director, told commissioners Wednesday that although lodging tax revenue has dropped this year, the decrease hasn't been as large as he expected.

Although numbers for the current quarter aren't in, Bishop estimated that revenue is down 60% from 2019. The tax raised about $440,000 in the previous fiscal year, but the county budgeted just $300,000 for the fiscal year that started July 1.

The Chamber didn't receive lodging taxes while the Visitors Center was closed, although Cutler said she and Wroe volunteered to retrieve phone messages and restock the information display outside the Visitors Center.

Payments will resume when the Center reopens, said Bill Harvey, chairman of the Baker County Board of Commissioners.

Cutler said she has talked with operators of visitors centers in other counties in the region, many of which reopened earlier this summer.

She said she's glad to be able to meet with visitors and answer their specific questions.

As an example, she said some visitors might arrive intending to visit Hells Canyon, but they might not know that Halfway, with its restaurants and other businesses, is just a mile or so off Highway 86.

When the Visitors Center is open, she and Wroe can give travelers that specific information.

"I'm thrilled that we're getting folks coming through and spending money in our local businesses," Cutler said.

ARREST

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Clawson and Evee Collard, 19, of Baker City, were walking by the house at 2339 East St., commonly known as the Coe residence, Duby said.

The two men, who were both wearing masks, reportedly jumped Clawson and dragged him into the backyard of the house and robbed him of two cellphones, about $500 in cash, a wallet containing his identification, an Umpqua bank card, an orange Casio watch and a Smith and Wesson pocket knife. Clawson sustained minor injuries, Duby said.

None of the stolen property has been recovered. A reward of up to $200 is being offered for information about the robbery or the return of the items.

Duby said Clawson especially is seeking return of the wallet because of its sentimental value and the items it contained.

Anyone with more information about the robbery is asked to contact the Baker City Police at 1768 Auburn Ave. or call 541-523-3644 and ask for Detective Shannon Regan or Lt. Ty Duby.

Both McMurdo and Prowell are known to hang out at the house where the robbery happened, Duby said.

"They're both known by us to frequent that place, and the one (at 1226) Washington," he said. "Those are the two main flop houses in the community right now."

Duby said the houses attract transients and criminal activity. Gary Kramer is the owner of the Washington Avenue house. Kramer's adult son is the only person who should be living at that address, Duby said.

Six transients and people with warrants for their arrest were cited or issued trespass notices at the Washington Avenue house as part of an operation conducted by the narcotics enforcement team the week of July 27.

Collard also is known to frequent both houses and was cited on a charge of trespassing at the Kramer house on July 28. That same day Prowell was cited at the Baker County Parole and Probation Office on a warrant charging him with possessing methamphetamine on Jan. 16, 2020.

Duby credits the renewed efforts of the Baker County Narcotics Enforcement Team for leading to the arrests of McMurdo and Prowell on the robbery charges and other arrests that have been made this summer.

"I think the last couple of months we've had more contact with people committing drug crimes and other crimes than we have in the last several years," he said. "I attribute that to the task force and being back out on the street and not having to rely on the uniformed officers."

Patrol officers spend their days going from one call to another and don't have the time to follow-up on long-term cases by tracking down witnesses and gathering evidence, Duby said.

Regan formerly was the department's only detective and her time was occupied with major crimes, leaving her little time to do follow-up as well, Duby said.

Since Duby joined the Baker City Police Department as lieutenant in October when he retired from the Oregon State Police, he has been working to revive the narcotics enforcement team.

SCHOOLS

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The task force's name is rather long — Rural Schools Public Health Metrics Review Work Group.

But Bennett, who is also Baker County's incident commander during the coronavirus pandemic, said the overriding goal, from his perspective, is simply expressed.

He wants to let county health departments and their medical advisers decide whether students in their counties, and at what grade levels, can safely return to their classrooms.

That would be decidedly different from the situation as it stands now.

Based on the metrics that Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced July 28, there is no role for local officials in deciding whether to bring students back to classrooms.

Those metrics allow in-person classes only if individual counties, as well as the state, meet specific targets including the number of new virus cases weekly, and the rate of positive tests.

For most districts, including Baker, the metrics include a maximum weekly rate of new COVID-19 cases of 10 per 100,000 population. Baker County would have to meet that metric for three straight weeks for Baker Schools to qualify for any in-person classes.

The district's proposal, announced last month, is to have in-person classes for students in grades K-6 four days per week, the schedule that's been in effect for many years.

Students in grades 7-12 would be divided into two groups, with each group attending in-person classes two days per week and taking the same classes online the other two days.

Based on Baker County's population of 16,134 (from the 2010 Census), the county would fail to meet the metric if it had two or more cases in any single week during that three-week period.

Two cases per week equates to a rate of 12.4 cases per 100,000 — exceeding the metric of 10 per 100,000.

In addition, Baker County would also have to have a case positivity rate — the percentage of COVID-19 tests that are positive — of 5% or below each week for three straight weeks.

But those two county metrics aren't the only ones that would have to be met for Baker to allow any in-person classes.

The statewide case positivity rate would also have to be 5% or below each week for three straight weeks.

Based on current conditions, Baker would fail multiple metrics, and the school district would be required to have all students attend online classes only.

School officials across rural Oregon have asked state officials to consider a more flexible approach.

Mark Witty, Baker Schools superintendent, said last week that "we made our point very clear. These metrics don't make sense in some of our cities."

Those concerns prompted the creation of the work group late last week. Bennett said Baker County's representatives in the state Legislature, Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, pushed to form the group. Members have had several remote meetings since, Bennett said.

He said that he and the other local officials who are members have urged the state to exempt rural districts from the statewide metric, arguing that it's unfair to possibly punish schools in counties such as Baker for a high percentage of positive tests in, say, Multnomah County.

The statewide metric, as of today, would disqualify Baker schools from offering in-person classes because the most recent weekly case positivity rate was 6.1%.

But Baker would also fail to meet the county-specific metrics.

In the most recent week tallied, ending July 25, Baker County had nine new COVID-19 cases. That equates to a rate of 55.8 per 100,000 population, well above the metric's limit of 10.

The county hasn't had three straight weeks with a case positivity rate of 5% or below since June.

Bennett said his goal, and it's an idea he said the work group has discussed at length, is to exempt rural districts such as Baker from the county metrics and instead allow county health departments and medical advisers to decide how schools can proceed.

Those local officials would still use the COVID-19 case numbers and case positivity rates in their deliberations, Bennett said. The difference is that they would be allowed to analyze those data and decide whether the overall situation in the county would allow at least some students to safely return to their classrooms.

As a hypothetical, Bennett noted that Baker schools could not allow any in-person classes if Baker County had as few as two new cases in one week.

But if the county health department's investigators determined that both those cases were members of one household, and that they had no direct contact with a student or school district staff member, those two positive cases might not justify banning the school district from offering some in-person classes, Bennett said.

He said he has complete confidence that the Baker County Health Department and the county's medical review team, led by county health officer Dr. Eric Lamb, if allowed to decide on the matter of in-person classes, would make responsible decisions.

"I feel really comfortable that they will always be on the side of protecting the students, school staff and the community," Bennett said.

He said the task force has focused on the issue of giving county officials authority that they lack under the metrics-based system the governor announced.

Bennett said the finer details of what that might mean for individual counties or districts ultimately depends on whether the governor agrees.

For instance, he said it's impossible to say whether Baker School District might be able to roll out its plan of completely in-person classes for K-6 and the half-time, hybrid model for grades 7-12, or whether it might even be feasible to allow students at all levels to be in classrooms every day.

Bennett said he will learn more when the task force meets this morning.

He expects state officials to announce early next week whether the original metrics will be changed, or whether the governor will agree to let county officials make decisions about schools.