

LETTER

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State representatives

State Sen. Lynn Findley, a Republican from Vale, said he and other legislators had been working on drafts of the letter for about three weeks before sending it to the governor's office on Wednesday, Nov. 18.

Since discussion of the letter started weeks ago, the COVID-19 landscape in Oregon looks different. On Nov. 1, Oregon Health Authority reported 524 new cases of COVID-19. Since then the state has repeatedly set new records for daily case counts, and on Nov. 19 reported 1,225 new cases.



Findley

Findley, whose district includes all or parts of 11 counties, including all of Baker County, said his main goal is to promote a "dialogue" between the governor and other state officials and legislators, county commissioners, school administrators and other local officials in rural counties.

He said he wants the state to give more autonomy to local officials in designing strategies to combat the spread of COVID-19.

He notes that during the spring, the state required counties to submit detailed plans for state approval before moving into Phase 1, which relaxed some of the restrictions on businesses, church services and other activities that the governor had imposed in March at the outset of the pandemic.

Findley contends that approach "is totally ignored now."

He laments that in place of pandemic planning that acknowledges the different effects the virus has had in rural Oregon, state officials have switched to a "one-size-fits-all" strategy — including the two-week statewide freeze in effect from Nov. 18 through Dec. 2.

He concedes that one reference in the letter about rural communities slowing the spread of COVID-19 has been overtaken, to some extent, by subsequent trends in new cases.

"Clearly the situation seems to continue to escalate, and the numbers in most of the (legislative) districts are pretty darn high, which is unfortunate," he said.

Nonetheless, Findley stands by his belief that statewide restrictions such as the two-week freeze fail to reflect the differences between rural and urban areas.

Wheeler County, for instance, has reported only one COVID-19 case during the pandemic.

Three other counties in his district have had fewer than



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Tyler Brown, owner of Barley Brown's Brew Pub and Tap House in Baker City, is frustrated that Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has forced restaurants to offer takeout meals only during a two-week statewide "freeze," in effect through Dec. 2.

"You don't get the feeling that there's any sort of emergency going on when you're at a grocery store. The only thing you see that's apparent is when you drive by and see restaurants closed."

— Tyler Brown, owner, Barley Brown's Brew Pub

100 cases — Lake, with 82 cases as of Thursday, Nov. 19, Harney, with 78, and Grant, with 74.

House District 58 State Representative-elect Bobby Levy, R-Echo, added her signature to the letter because she believes the individual differences of counties should be taken into account.

"I signed onto this letter because I believe it's true. Hospitalizations in the metro shouldn't automatically mean that our rural communities suffer the consequences. Our children need to be in school full time. Our churches need to be open to attend. State business needs to open back up and serve the communities they have left behind," Levy said in an email to The Observer.

Levy signed the letter before the governor's freeze took effect and said on Thursday, Nov. 19, her feelings about the COVID-19 lockdown issue had not changed since then. She remains very concerned about how the state's handling of the pandemic is impacting the district she is set to represent.

"We have small communities that heavily rely on summer tourism and rodeos that were unable to count on those funds to carry them through the winter months. We all are doing our best to help keep our communities safe and financially afloat — but shutting down businesses, schools and churches that have no correlation to outbreaks is not the answer: I want to make sure that HD58 and the rest of Oregon has a fighting chance to survive this pandemic. Physically, fiscally, and mentally," Levy said.

Levy will succeed three-term State Rep. Greg Barreto,

R-Cove, when she is sworn in in January. Barreto, who did not run for reelection, signed the letter for a fundamental reason.

"I read it and I agreed with it," he said.

The state representative said he objects to how the governor's mandates are the same for all counties despite their differences. A point also made in the letter.

"The shutdowns are carte blanche throughout the state," Barreto said.

He describes Brown's measures as unnecessarily draconian.

"You cannot shut down schools and businesses and not expect huge consequences," Barreto said.

He also said the governor should not be focusing on COVID-19 rates but rather at how many cases of it are hospitalizing people and requiring respirators. Barreto said these are the statistics which really matter.

Barreto said that rather than issuing strict orders, Brown should be asking people to take individual responsibility and providing guidelines for them to follow in an effort to reduce COVID-19 rates.

Baker County

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said he and fellow commissioner Bruce Nichols, along with nine other commissioners from rural counties, had a conference call with the governor on Wednesday, Nov. 18.

Although that conversation happened before the letter had been sent to Brown's office, Bennett said he and the other commissioners broached the same topics outlined in the letter, namely

their insistence that counties should have autonomy in crafting their strategies to stem the rising tide of infections.

"We'd like to see that the local level is where the decisions are made," said Bennett, who has served as Baker County's incident commander during the pandemic.

Bennett pointed out that during the spring Baker County officials, while writing a plan to allow the county to move into Phase 1 of reopening, assembled a robust contact tracing and case investigation plan.

Although he acknowledged that the county's case rate has accelerated during November — about 38% of the county's 240 cases have been reported since Nov. 1 — Bennett said he objects to the current statewide freeze not only because it ignores geographic differences but because it imposes severe restrictions on restaurants, bars and churches, none of which has been identified as a significant source of COVID-19 spread.

"It's the small social gatherings that causes our community spread," Bennett said.

Tyler Brown, who owns Barley Brown's Brew Pub and Tap House in Baker City, said the restrictions imposed on restaurants have been "incredibly frustrating."

He hopes the letter the legislators and commissioners signed will prove influential in Salem.

Brown, whose pub and tap house are both on Main Street in downtown Baker City, said he's had no feedback from state officials about whether previous requirements for restaurants, such as limiting seating capacity and requiring diners to wear masks, actually helped stem the spread of the virus.

"We're not getting any information," Brown said.

The two-week "pause" announced on Nov. 9 to take effect Nov. 11 in nine counties, including Baker, required that

restaurant owners limit indoor capacity to 50 people, including customers and staff.

Brown said those restrictions had been in effect for just two days when the governor announced that the pause would be superseded by the two-week freeze, and that restaurants would be limited to takeout meals only from Nov. 18 through at least Dec. 2.

He said he's been frustrated since the early days of the pandemic, during the spring, by what he considers the state's inconsistent approach to regulating businesses to combat COVID-19.

In particular he said he is annoyed every time he visits a grocery store.

"You don't get the feeling that there's any sort of emergency going on when you're at a grocery store," he said. "The only thing you see that's apparent is when you drive by and see restaurants closed."

He said the changes at grocery stores, such as taping directional arrows on the floor to encourage shoppers to walk one way down aisles, and the installation of plexiglass shields at checkout counters, seem to him modest compared to the restrictions imposed on restaurants and bars.

Union County

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage said the start of the freeze was the right time to release the letter that had been in the works for about a month.

She said one of the most important parts of the letter is an early passage which says the state's uniform approach to dealing with COVID-19 is no longer applicable. She said all the Eastern Oregon counties really want is a seat at the table when the state is determining what should be done to reduce COVID-19 rates. She believes county commissioners and local health department officials should be involved in discussions with the state.

"We all want to be safe and to make sure that we do not lose people to depression or suicide or have people lose businesses," Beverage said.

The Union County Commissioner said the governor's staff in the past couple of days has seemed to become more receptive to the individual needs of counties. Beverage said that in the past when the governor's office called Eastern Oregon counties about COVID-19 it told officials what to do.

"Now it is giving us a chance to give more input," said Beverage, who was re-elected to a second-term in May.

Paul Anderes, chair of the Union County Board of Commissioners, said he hopes the letter opens lines of communication between the governor's office and Eastern Oregon.

Anderes, like Beverage, wants representatives of Eastern Or-

Baker County nearly sets daily record for new cases

Baker County reported 12 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, tying Nov. 13 for the second-highest one-day total since the pandemic started.

The record is 13 new cases, on Nov. 4.

The daily totals during the past week: Nov. 14, 0; Nov. 15, 6; Nov. 16, 4; Nov. 17, 9; Nov. 18, 4; Nov. 19, 2; Nov. 20, 12.

Baker County has reported 252 total cases since the pandemic started in March.

egon counties to be at the table with the governor's staff when considering what to do.

"We want to be part of the discussions and decision making," Anderes said. "We want them to let us in on decision making rather than having the state make decisions with a wide blanket."

Anderes said he senses that Brown and her staff are beginning to listen more to Eastern Oregon officials.

"I'm encouraged by the direction it (communication with the governor's office) is going now," the first-term Union County commissioner said.

Wallowa County

Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash said many who signed the letter hoped to get it to the governor sooner.

"There were a number of us that wanted to send this letter some time ago, but felt like there was a decision made to not send it prior to the election and make it a political stand," Nash said.

The letter in a nutshell, Nash said, is essentially a request for counties to have their own autonomy when it comes to the COVID-19 response and not be placed under an umbrella that may work for some regions of the state and not others.

"We want to engage with the governor and come up with the plans that best suit our own communities," he said. "I had access to the governor (Wednesday) night and visited with her a little bit. She's not ready, at this point, to drop the matrix and just have them be guidelines. She still wants them to be enforceable."

La Grande Observer reporter Dick Mason, East Oregonian reporter Bryce Dole, Wallowa County Chieftain editor Ronald Bond, Baker City Herald editor Jayson Jacoby and Hermiston Herald editor Jade McDowell contributed to this report.

SCHOOLS

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And even before BHS students returned to their classrooms one day per week, they brainstormed to produce an event that included all 36 seniors eligible to serve on a modified Homecoming Court.

After a processional through downtown Baker City on the night of Oct. 30, students returned to Bulldog Memorial Stadium for the crowning of Sydney Keller as Homecoming queen and Mason Van Arsdall as Homecoming king. A limited audience of invited guests joined the celebration.

Blincoe, a member of the Homecoming Court herself, deemed the event "really successful."

The student leaders are working on special events, such as assemblies, food drives and class competitions leading up to the holidays, Blincoe said. They even are considering ways to include students who have chosen not to return to in-person classes, Blincoe told the Board.

Witty took the opportunity to let Blincoe know how much he values the work she and her leadership team have put forth.

"I can't overemphasize how beneficial to our student body I believe

that is," Witty said.

Blincoe already had been honored through nomination by her Leadership Class adviser Toni Zikmund for the BHS Promise Student of the Month award based on her exemplary all-around performance through her years at BHS, where her mother, Dawna Blincoe, teaches Spanish, and even in her earlier years growing up in the District.

Greg Mitchell, BHS principal, read a letter written by Nicole Sullivan, who taught Blincoe as a first-grader, and next as a student at Baker Middle School and later in biology and advanced biology classes at BHS. Sullivan fondly recalled Blincoe's enthusiasm for learning even as a first-grader when she presented a lengthy report about salt water crocodiles.

The Board also honored second-grader Brandon Houg as Brooklyn Primary School's Promise Student of the Month. His teacher, Katie Stephens, composed a song to honor Brandon for his positive attitude at school. She presented the tune, accompanied by her husband on the guitar, via the Zoom computer app at Thursday's meeting.

Principal Phil Anderson also spoke highly of Brandon.

"He makes my day better with each interaction," Anderson said.

"And he makes Brooklyn a better place."

Witty, in his monthly report to the Board, expressed his appreciation to the staff for the work they have done to help students stay healthy and successful.

"This is really hard work," Witty said. "Our staff is doing amazing work every day."

"It took work and commitment to get our students into in-person school safely," he said.

Witty said that since students at South Baker Intermediate and Brooklyn Primary schools returned to in-person classes four days a week on Oct. 14 there has been no spread of the coronavirus in the school setting.

"We have not had a case transfer to a student or staff member," Witty told the Board.

No cases have been reported in Grades 7-12 since Nov. 9 when those students returned to a hybrid system of one day a week of in-person instruction and the other three via comprehensive distance learning, he said.

Six elementary school students have tested positive for COVID-19, the most recent being a sixth-grader at South Baker. The other students in that sixth-grade classroom also have been placed in quarantine, Witty said.

"It's a broad net to make sure we don't get any spread in school," he said.

The total number of students quarantined at the elementary level since the reopening is 116. As of Thursday night, 49 students remained quarantined, Witty said.

The six students who tested positive did not become infected at school, Witty said.

Since July, the District has had 30 staff members quarantined as a safety measure. Of those, seven had potential school connections, with six of those working with students and one working with the District's technology department.

Three staff members have tested positive for COVID-19 and all three were infected outside schools, Witty said.

Keeping the staff healthy, including bus drivers and cooks, is vital to children attending in-person classes, Witty said.

If too many of the adults are in quarantine, the in-person instruction would have to cease until those quarantined were cleared to return to work.

And, unless state guidelines change or the number of cases in the community decline, students will have to return to comprehensive distance learning by Jan. 4, regardless.

"Our kids, families and our communities are better off when our kids are in school," Witty told the Board. "We've got to monitor our behaviors if we're going to make that happen."

Witty also expressed appreciation for the work of the Baker County Health Department and the importance of those workers being able to keep up with demands of contact tracing when positive cases are reported.

"I have conversations with Nancy Staten (health department director) on Saturday, on Sunday at 8 o'clock at night and at 6 a.m. on Monday," Witty said.

"They are working hard to do contact tracing not just for the school but for the community," he said. "We're very appreciative of what they're doing."

Witty said he will be issuing a press release on Monday and a radio interview will air in which he will ask community members to exercise caution over the Thanksgiving holiday as advised by the Oregon Health Authority and Gov. Kate Brown.

"I continue to urge everyone to follow the protocols and to be careful," he said. "Wearing a mask, physical distancing and sanitizing does seem to help."