

BOND

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In spite of those concerns, Cassidy joined the other directors in supporting the effort to place the bond measure on the ballot in May.

“I do believe we push ahead and even if it’s unsuccessful, we continue to put it in front of the community as a serious need by this district — and it is,” Cassidy said. “It’s a need that’s been neglected by this community for a number of years.”

The current plan calls for \$12 million in improvements. That includes:

- the \$4 million bond
- a matching \$4 million state grant
- another \$4 million from the District’s Capital Projects Fund and money from the Student Investment Account of the Student Success Act.

Mechanical and electrical system improvements would be made in all schools and a stand-alone kitchen/cafeteria would be added at Baker Middle School. Safety and security improvements would be made at every school.

Before voicing their unanimous support for proceeding

with the bond measure — a decision that will not be final until the Board’s Feb. 18 meeting — directors considered several items of information.

Witty presented the results of an informal survey of staff, parents and other community members regarding their opinions of the bond plan.

A total of 385 people responded to the survey, showing 61% support for the \$4 million measure, Witty said. Among parents and staff support reached 65%.

The key to success will be to get supporters to turn out and vote during the election, directors agreed.

Many of those who said they would not support the bond were in the 65 and older category, Witty said. He reminded the Board that during a 2018 vote asking patrons to approve a \$48 million bond, which was soundly defeated, those age 55 and older cast 65% of the votes.

Upgrading mechanical and electrical systems and adding a cafeteria/kitchen at the middle school was supported by 74% of all respondents and by 81% of staff and parents.

While 53% overall support the vestibules to provide se-

cure entry at the schools, 37% among the general public and on social media don’t believe there’s a strong need for those improvements, Witty said.

Voters said they value having the state grant (70% overall and 78% parents and staff). Support for the bond drops if the grant were not available (from 70% to 51% overall; and from 78% to 55% among parents and staff.)

Witty said he believes key messages the District should focus on are the urgent need to upgrade the outdated mechanical and electrical systems in the aging school buildings and the need to provide a kitchen and cafeteria at the middle school.

Bryan Tweit, Baker County economic developer, also spoke to the Board, bringing a message of an improving economy.

“Sixty percent of the businesses in the county are doing better than they’ve done in the past,” Tweit said.

He pointed to Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort as a success story even as the pandemic continues.

“Cars are parked a half-mile away and the lodge isn’t even open,” he said. “There’s a

massive push economically to move forward.”

Even restaurants that were able to be flexible and make changes are weathering the shutdowns. Others have not been so lucky, however, Tweit said. And those businesses might not survive the periodic shutdowns they’ve been hit with, he conceded.

Still, Tweit said 100 manufacturing jobs are waiting to be filled.

In response to director Andrew Bryan’s question about concerns regarding a new president in office and doomsday attitudes about the future, Tweit said most people he talks to are positive.

“Ninety-five percent of businesses are optimistic; 5% say the sky is falling,” he said.

Another reason to consider pursuing bond approval in May is tied to low interest rates, Witty said.

“This is one of the most advantageous times in recent history to go out for a bond — keep that in mind,” he said.

The repayment rate, which earlier had been estimated at 68 cents per \$1,000 of property value over five years of increased property taxes, has dropped to 66 cents per \$1,000, Witty said.

COVID-19

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To meet the state standards to drop to high risk for the two-week period starting Jan. 29, which would allow restaurants to have limited indoor dining, the county would need to meet both of these thresholds, measured for the period Jan. 10-23:

- fewer than 60 new cases
- a test positivity rate of less than 10%

As of Friday the county was on pace to meet the first metric, with 53 new cases, but Staten said the test positivity rate was at nearly 14%.

Bennett pointed out that Baker County has to meet both standards because the state designates it as a medium-size county, those with populations between 15,000 and 30,000 (Baker County has about 16,800 residents). If the county had fewer than 15,000 residents it would need to meet only the case count threshold; the test positivity rate wouldn’t be a factor.

Bennett said he has lobbied state officials to change those requirements, but to no avail.

The county likely would have trimmed its positivity rate this week had a free testing clinic set for Wednesday, Jan. 20, not been canceled by the Oregon Health Authority.

Bennett said OHA canceled such events across the state due to security concerns related to the inauguration of President Joe Biden that day.

During two previous testing clinics in Baker City, on Jan. 6 and Dec. 16, there were just four positive tests out of 216 people tested. That’s a positivity rate of 1.8%, well below the county’s current two-week average.

Bennett said he also urged state officials to consider more than just case numbers and positivity rates. For instance, he said the intensive care capacity in Boise hospitals, where Baker County residents with severe COVID-19 cases have been treated, has increased recently.

Brown defends giving vaccine priority to teachers

■ Governor discusses controversial plan to delay vaccinations for senior citizens, something only four other states are doing

By Gary A. Warner

Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown said Friday, Jan. 22, that she will stick with her controversial plan to vaccinate school staff ahead of elderly residents.

“My priorities have not changed,” Brown said during a press conference.

The current state vaccination priority list calls for an estimated 100,000 K-12 teachers, school staff, child care workers and preschool employees to be eligible for vaccination Jan. 25.

Residents 80 and over will be eligible two weeks later, on Feb. 8. Oregonians 75 and older will be eligible a week later, but the time-frame for those 70 to 74 was pushed back to Feb. 28, and for those 65 to 69 to March 7, both a week later than previously announced.

Eligibility does not ensure availability. Brown has set a goal of the state’s program administering 12,000 shots per day. With the current vaccines requiring two shots spaced several weeks apart, the goal means 6,000 residents would be fully vaccinated each day in the near future.

Oregon is one of only five states in the nation where the inoculation of those 65 and over has not begun. As of Friday, it is the only state to



Cathy Cheney/ Portland Business Journal

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

prioritize educators and staff ahead of older residents.

Oregon has an estimated 767,500 residents who are aged 65 or over out of a total population of about 4.2 million.

The state ranks 11th in percentage of elderly residents at just over 18 percent.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state’s top infectious disease expert, said the Oregon Health Authority had not made estimates of the number of people who could die because the starting date for older Oregonians’ eligibility was moved back two weeks.

OHA reported Thursday that COVID-19 related deaths had “surged” to 195 the previous week, the highest weekly toll to date. It broke the record set the prior week. According to OHA statistics, those aged 70 and over have accounted for 77% of the state’s COVID-19 deaths.

Brown and health officials were able to point to some good news during the press conference. OHA reported 849 new COVID-19 cases and 11 new fatalities on Thursday. The report showed a continued gradual decline in cases and hospitalizations at a time when the state had previ-

ously forecast both would rise this month. A feared “Christmas spike” in cases due to residents traveling and gathering for the holidays has been shallower than expected.

Thursday marked the fifth day in a row with fewer than 850 cases. The current positive infection rate is 5.9% of tests, still above the 5% target set by the OHA to indicate infection rates are not growing rapidly.

The state also updated its vaccination numbers, saying 253,711 shots have been given since the vaccines began arriving in Oregon late last year.

When the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines became available, The Centers for Disease Control guidelines identified health care workers who are likely to come into contact with COVID-19 patients at the top of the priority list.

The CDC also called for inoculations for nursing home residents and staff, a group that accounted for just 5% of infections, but 36% of the nation’s more than 400,000 deaths.

The facilities have accounted for 53% of deaths in Oregon, one of 13 states where more than half of COVID-19 fatalities are in residential nursing homes.

Most states have followed the CDC guidelines in deciding the ongoing priority groups. Older Americans,

who are disproportionately more likely to suffer severe and fatal cases, were next on the CDC list. People with medical conditions that put them at risk of severe illness or death were also listed.

Brown and OHA decided to veer from the list, placing educators and school staff in front of the elderly.

With schools mostly closed since March, Brown has consistently said students’ quality of education, mental health and emotional well-being had been damaged by distance learning. She’s set Feb. 15 as a goal for most schools to reopen if they meet minimum COVID-19 health recommendations.

While noting on Friday that school-age children are not in danger of widespread severe illness or death, Brown said the damage was deep enough that it warranted what she cast as a brief diversion of vaccine to jump-start education.

“It’s really pretty simple,” Brown said of her priorities. “I am using every single tool I have to get kids back into the classroom this school year.”

Several studies have shown that students are losing ground because of remote learning. Schools also ensure access to meals for some and safeguard against child abuse because someone is seeing the student regularly outside of their home.

GRADUATION

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“The hand calculations I did showed 94.78%, if they accounted for all of the students that should have been cleared off the nongrad list,” he said. “But 92 — I’ll take it.”

Mitchell noted that Baker High School topped the state graduation rate of 82.6%, which is being touted as an all-time high for Oregon.

He credited the teamwork of his staff for helping students succeed. The effort is led by graduation coach Kati Stuchlik, who was hired for the position in 2019 with money provided by the High School Success Fund. BHS also has developed a Future Center to help guide all students toward graduation and beefed up its career and technical programs.

A portion of the \$170 million Student Success Fund, approved by voters in 2016 as Ballot Measure 98, was distributed to school districts throughout the state by the Department of Education in the 2017-19 biennium. The money was designed to fund, among other things, programs to increase graduation rates.

And that includes the grad coach position, which Mitchell says would not have been possible to add to the staff had it not been for the state money.

“The grad coach has been instrumental in tracking data,” Mitchell said.

As a sort of intervention specialist, Stuchlik stays in touch with families and helps provide extra

“While we take a moment to celebrate the class of 2020, as a district we continue to strive for our vision where every child is included and has a great experience as they transition to the next phase in their educational journey.”

— **Mark Witty, Baker School District superintendent**



support for students who need it.

“She sets up a plan and monitors the students’ progress,” Mitchell said. “It’s been a boon for us.”

The teaching staff executes the plan that’s developed for each student and devises a strategy that they think will be successful, Mitchell said.

Of course, not all students are struggling.

“I’m amazed at how many I’m running into that are doing so well,” Mitchell said. “It’s been tough just having one day a week to come in.”

Students at Baker High School and Baker Middle School, who began the school year with comprehensive distance learning from home, shifted to attending in-person classes one day a week each on Nov. 9.

Beginning Monday, the high school and middle school will expand to in-person classes two days a week for all students.

Mitchell said 55 families have opted to have their students take all online classes since the year began. With the move to two days of in-person classes, 13 of those families have decided to return to the hybrid style of instruction.

Mitchell acknowledges that last

year’s graduates were allowed to finish out their final year of high school with pass/fail grades and did not have to complete the Smarter Balanced tests or provide alternate performance work samples because of the coronavirus pandemic’s effect on schools.

“More kids got diplomas in an easier fashion than it would have been,” Mitchell said. “We’ll see if we can sustain this.”

Still, Mitchell says he’s happy with the increased number of students who graduated in four years in 2020.

“I’m proud of what we’ve gotten accomplished,” he said.

Not only did the total number of graduates increase, but sifting through the statistics more closely shows improvements in graduation rates among groups of students who have struggled in the past.

Mitchell pointed to the 91.67% graduation rate for Hispanic/Latino students; a 92.31% rate for underserved races and ethnicities; 87% for students receiving free and reduced-price lunches; and 75% for students with disabilities.

“Across the demographics we’re pretty excited about what we’re seeing,” Mitchell said.