

CENTER

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The crest of the hill that gives visitors a panoramic view of the Baker Valley and the Elkhorn Mountains also exposes the Center to the summer sun and to year-round winds that often gust above 25 mph.

"The siding takes a beating up there," Bogardus said.

She said today's building materials, including insulation, are more effective at protecting buildings from heat and winter chill.

Heating and air-conditioning systems have also become more efficient since 1992, and all of the Center's HVAC equipment will be replaced during the renovation project.

The work will be extensive.

The contractor will replace the Center's siding and roof, in effect stripping the outside of the building and installing all new materials, Bogardus said.

Although the Center itself will be closed, a portion of the trail system on Flagstaff Hill, including the Oregon Trail ruts, will remain open.

Bogardus said BLM officials are working on the details. The upper sections of trail will be closed for safety reasons, since workers will be removing and replacing large parts of the building.

Although the extended closure of the Center and the need to set up an alternate Oregon Trail experience for visitors is a daunting challenge, Bogardus said the renovations will ensure the Center remains a major attraction in Baker County for decades to come.

"It's very exciting to see the



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File

The Interpretive Center's exposed location atop Flagstaff Hill, and its extensive windows, contribute to its energy inefficiency.

agency make the commitment to the longevity and efficiency of the Interpretive Center," she said.

Bogardus said that about 30% of the money for the renovation will come from the Great American Outdoors Act, a bill that President Donald Trump signed into law on Aug. 4, 2020.

That law includes up to \$1.9 billion a year for five years for maintenance on public lands, including national parks and national forests.

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, said the Interpretive Center is a vital part of the county's tourism industry.

She estimated that at least 70% of visitors include the Center on their travel itinerary.

"People are fascinated with the Oregon Trail and the Old West," Cutler said.

Although Cutler said the Center's extended closure will have an effect on the county's tourism sector, she's "thrilled" that the BLM will operate a temporary "satellite" visitor center in Baker City.

She said that will help preserve Baker County's reputation as a destination for people interested in the Oregon Trail. Cutler said visitors, even while the Interpretive Center is closed, will be able to see wagon ruts and explore trails below Flagstaff Hill.

Timothy Bishop, the county's contracted tourism marketing director, said the Center's extended closure presents "significant marketing challenges."

Most notably, Bishop said, the county, working with Travel Oregon and other partners, will have to figure out the most ef-

fective way to ensure that travelers understand that although the Center on Flagstaff Hill will be closed, the BLM will have an alternate facility open, and that they can experience the Oregon Trail in other ways, such as hiking to the wagon ruts below the Center.

Bishop said he expects many prospective visitors will be receptive to that marketing message because, although the Interpretive Center is sure to be on their itinerary, they also want a broader experience, and Baker County can offer that despite its biggest attraction being temporarily closed.

He said he's "super excited" to work with Bogardus on preparations for the closure period.

"She is really passionate about finding a way to make sure the Center has a presence in Baker City during that time," Bishop said.

Center visits affected by the pandemic

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center has been one of Baker County's top tourist attractions since it opened during Memorial Day weekend in 1992.

The Center was especially popular during its first six years; its annual attendance hasn't reached 100,000 since 1997.

After welcoming 201,545 people in 1992 (despite being open for slightly more than seven months), the Center has its biggest year in 1993, with 347,981 visitors. That surge was no coincidence, as 1993 was the 150th anniversary of the first large migration on the Oregon Trail.

There were multiple special events in Baker County that year, including the annual convention for the Oregon-California Trails Association.

Attendance dipped to 197,307 in 1994, and to 170,405 and 140,281 the next two years.

Annual visitor numbers haven't fluctuated as much in the past dozen years, ranging between 60,231 in 2010 and 32,764 in 2013.

The yearly average between 2008-19 was 43,745.

Due to the pandemic, which has forced the Center to close from March 20 through June 17, and again since Nov. 18, 2020, visitor numbers dipped substantially, to 11,462 in 2020.

Admission was down even during the summer, when the Center was open.

July's total was 2,456, compared with 7,291 for the same month in 2019.

— Jayson Jacoby

The temporary closure also creates a chance for the BLM to work with other local entities, such as the Baker Heritage Museum, to potentially display some of the exhibits from the Center. That could bring more visitors to the county-owned Museum, Bishop said.

More casual tourists present another sort of challenge, he said.

Bishop said some of those travelers stop at the Interpretive Center not as part of a week-long itinerary, but because they're looking for a place to stretch their legs during a long freeway journey.

That category of traveler is more likely, he said, to drive past Baker County without stopping once they learn the Interpretive Center is closed.

New center director search

Bogardus said BLM is also preparing to hire a full-time director for the Interpretive Center.

Former director Sarah LeCompte retired in December 2019, and three BLM officials, most recently Bogardus, have served as acting directors since.

The new manager could be hired by this summer, she said.

COUNCIL

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The city has worked with Gyllenberg Construction on past projects and "has every reason to believe they meet the qualification requirements ..." according to a report to councilors from Michelle Owen, the city's public works director.

The project includes building a 7-mile pipeline to move wastewater from the city's complex of four

lagoons to a new lagoon on 51 acres the city bought in 2019 at Sunnyslope Road and Lee Lane, northeast of the airport.

Gyllenberg Construction will have approximately one year to complete the project, according to Owen's report.

Several years ago the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality told city officials that the city would no longer be able to pipe treated wastewater from its cur-

rent lagoons, about a mile north of town, into the nearby Powder River. That wastewater could cause algae blooms in the river that are harmful to fish and other aquatic life, according to DEQ.

The city has used that method to dispose of its wastewater since the early 1960s.

The city hoped to use the wastewater to irrigate nonfood crops near the lagoons, but it wasn't able to make a deal to do so. That led to the

alternative of piping the wastewater to a new lagoon. The water will be used to irrigate nonfood crops in that area.

In other business Tuesday, councilors:

- unanimously agreed to table a request from residents of Fairway Drive, near Quail Ridge Golf Course, to accept the private street as a public right of way. Councilors requested more information from the city staff.
- appointed Gail Duman to the

Historic District Design Review Committee (HDDRC).

- tabled a decision on appointing members to the Golf Board and Public Works Advisory Committee.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten and Councilor Shane Alderson said they wanted to extend the application period, as both have had residents express interest applying for one of the volunteer positions.

"I think it's great to have a bigger pool to draw from," McQuisten said.

Drop in COVID-19 cases will reduce restrictions

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Falling COVID-19 infection rates will allow the state to lift some restrictions on businesses and activities over the next three weeks, the state's top health official said Monday, Jan. 25.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen told the Senate Committee on Health Care that the infection rate in Oregon had dropped to 5.1% for the week of Jan. 17, the lowest rate since late October.

The rate has been steadily dropping since the first week of January and has reached a point where growth in the daily number of cases is expected to stay relatively flat or drop further.

The rates mean the state can move more of the 36 counties lower on the four-tier risk level measures. The latest two-week ratings will be released in the next two days and will show some counties dropping a level, while no county's risk level is on the rise.

"It's the hard work of Oregonians," Allen told the panel.

Allen said Oregon has the fourth-lowest infection rate and the fifth-lowest death rate of the 50 states.

Allen said that if the trend sustains for another two

"It's the hard work of Oregonians."

— Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority, talking about a recent drop in COVID-19 cases

weeks, several more counties will move down the risk level scale, including some with larger populations.

The lower rate of infection is good news as the state continues to struggle with obtaining enough of the new Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to ramp up inoculations. The two-shot vaccines are the key to ending the pandemic that has killed 420,000 people nationwide, including 1,882 Oregonians.

"Our real challenge right now is just flat out not having enough vaccine," Allen said. The state has received more than 492,000 doses of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines that have been approved for use on adults. The vaccines require two shots spaced about a month apart.

Oregon is currently on pace to get more than 12,000 shots administered per day. Allen said that OHA estimates 3.2 million adults are eligible for vaccination, meaning that the state will need 6.4 million doses of vaccine to finish the job.

Allen said the state had enough centers for inoculation and qualified workers to give the shots. It just didn't have vaccine to put to work.

There is hope that new vaccines from Astra Zeneca, Johnson & Johnson and others will be approved and increase the flow of available doses across the country.

Allen said with only the two approved vaccines and the current projected rate of supply coming to the state each week, some Oregonians will not be inoculated until the end of 2021 or beyond.

The state is currently working through the highest priority group: Health care workers, plus residents and staff of nursing homes that have accounted for over half of the deaths in Oregon.

Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, a member of the committee, said he'd heard from constituents upset with Brown's decision

to vaccinate about 150,000 educators and school workers next as a step to getting schools reopened this spring.

Those over 65 are the most likely to suffer severe illness or die from COVID-19, with fatality rates rising as people get into their 70s, 80s, or 90s. After waiting nearly a year in fear and sometimes isolation, the word that they will have to wait longer because of a desire to reopen schools is difficult to accept.

"They are very, very unhappy about it," Knopp said.

Allen said that the federal guidelines calling for seniors living outside of nursing homes as the next priority are "advisory" with each state being able to make its own decisions.

"We had to ask, what are our priorities going to be?" Allen said.

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Gyms can reopen, with tight limits

Gyms can reopen under tight guidelines to control COVID-19 infections, Gov. Kate Brown announced Tuesday, Jan. 26.

The new rules for "indoor recreation" were included in an update of county risk levels.

There was little movement among counties from their risk levels two weeks ago. Nearly all of the state's most populous counties were among the 26 that remained in the extreme risk category. Baker County also remains in the extreme group.

The levels will be in place from Friday, Jan. 29 through Feb. 11, with the next revision announced Feb. 9

Brown said the state will issue new guidelines allowing for indoor activities that were previously banned in extreme risk counties.

Beginning Friday, Jan. 29, a maximum of six people can be indoors at facilities such as gyms that are over 500 square feet. The new rules do not include indoor dining.

Facilities smaller than 500 square feet allow for one-to-one customer experiences, such as personal training.

Brown encouraged people to exercise outdoors whenever possible.

"The science has shown us that outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities when it comes to the spread of COVID-19," she said.

— Gary A. Warner, Oregon Capital Bureau

The kindness and sympathy of our neighbors and friends, Memory Lane, and Tami's Pine Valley, in our recent sorrow will always remain with us as a precious memory. Our sincere thanks and gratitude for all those comforting acts.

The Family of Agnes Heck

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Baker County Veteran Services

Until further notice Veterans will not be seen in person. If you need assistance, call Rick's work number 541-523-8223 and he will call you back to help you over the phone. This is a measure that is being implemented to minimize the spread of COVID-19.