

Local & Region

North Powder has new fire station

By Phil Wright

The (La Grande) Observer

NORTH POWDER — The North Powder Rural Fire Protection District welcomed the first day of spring, Saturday, March 20, with an open house of its new fire station. Dozens of people attended the event — which included free hamburgers, sodas and desserts — and liked what they saw.

“This is nice” became a common refrain.

The new two-story building stands on 2 acres at 710 E St., North Powder, about 600 yards from the previous station’s site. Among the most eye-catching elements inside are barnwood wainscoting that adds a rustic touch to the decor and the large sliding door between the big apparatus bay and the conference room. There’s also a second floor overlooking the bay that provides recreation space.

Fire Chief Colby Thompson and Assistant Chief Casey Martin were stoked about the new digs. The project to build this fire station began in 2017, they said, out of sheer necessity.

“We literally did not have room in the old structure,” Martin said.

Holding meetings and trainings was a challenge, Martin said, because the quarters were so cramped. And as The Observer reported in January 2018, the vehicles inside the old building left little room for firefighters to hustle and get into protective gear.

The former building also was too small to house the department’s big equipment, including its bulldozer and 5,000-gallon tank water truck. That and other equipment remained outside.

The crew had to drain the tank each winter, Martin said, to protect hoses and pumps, and having the heavy equipment outside meant they could have been



Phil Wright/The (La Grande) Observer

The North Powder Rural Fire Protection District’s new fire station at 710 E St., North Powder, is ready for service Saturday, March 20.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Residents celebrate the opening of the North Powder Rural Fire Protection District’s new fire station.

targets for vandalism.

While that never materialized, he said, it was a constant concern.

But the new building provides 11,500 square feet of space, Thompson said, about four times as much as the former, and has wide bay doors to accommodate the big equipment. The dozer and water truck both were on display inside the new station.

The department paid a good chunk of that with its own building fund, which it had been adding to for many years, Thompson said. Grants from local and regional organizations also helped cover the tab, as did donations from numerous businesses and residents. Martin stressed this was key to the money end of the project.

“That was a big part of the process with trying not to increase the tax rate for the district,” he said.

A general contractor oversaw the construction of the building, and the department’s own members shouldered their share of work, including installing interior walls. Martin said the children of firefighters chipped in, often with the cleanup.

“They’ve really been a big part of this also,” he said, adding that getting youth involved has the benefit of piquing interest in the next generation of firefighters for the North Powder Rural Fire Protection District.

Environmental groups oppose dam removal plan

■ Coalition backs removing dams but not in exchange for a 35-year moratorium on related lawsuits

BOISE (AP) — A coalition of 17 environmental groups is speaking out against a key part of a sweeping plan to remove the lower Snake River dams to save salmon and steelhead.

The groups said in a letter to Democratic senators in Oregon and Washington that the 35-year moratorium on fish-and-dam-related lawsuits included in Idaho Republican Rep. Mike Simpson’s proposal in exchange for dam removal was too high a price to pay, the Idaho Statesman reported Saturday.

A years-long ban on lawsuits will make federal and state laws on clean water standards and species protections harder to enforce, the groups said in the letter to Washington Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and Oregon Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden.

The groups urged the lawmakers to oppose the proposal “as written,” but said they generally support the idea of breaching the dams and helping impacted communities. The letter argues that the reason salmon aren’t yet extinct

“We don’t support the status quo even though we are opposed to this proposal as written.”

— David Moskowitz, executive director of The Conservation Angler

on the Snake River is because of lawsuits to protect their habitat under environmental laws that were enacted after the dams were already built.

“The Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act are critical to protecting wild salmon and protecting water quality, and when you are removing the enforcement of those for many years, you could actually be doing more harm than the dams are causing,” said Kurt Beardslee, executive director of the Wild Fish Conservancy.

Simpson last month released his \$33 billion legislative concept to breach the dams and mitigate affected industries and communities through a wide range of investments. It includes funding to replace power produced at the dams, to help farmers

get wheat and other grains to market, and to help communities like Lewiston.

To address what some in the region see as the “slippery slope” of dam removal, the concept includes a 35-year moratorium on ESA, Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act lawsuits on most of the remaining dams in the Columbia River Basin and it would extend federal licenses at those dams for 35 years.

It would also set up regional watershed partnerships between agricultural interests, conservation groups and Native American tribes aimed at improving water quality. Farmers participating in the voluntary partnerships would be shielded from Clean Water Act lawsuits for 25 years.

Some environmental groups such as the Idaho Conservation League, Trout Unlimited and the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition support Simpson’s proposal. But the congressman has also faced stern criticism from agricultural groups, state legislators and county com-

missioners from both Idaho and Washington.

Todd True, an attorney from the environmental law firm EarthJustice who has represented many of the salmon advocates who support Simpson’s concept, said he sees it as the type of comprehensive proposal that could help save the fish. But he sees Simpson’s proposal as a starting point instead of a finished product.

“It’s not perfect. There are difficult issues that it raises. We are ready to have the hard conversations to find a way forward and resolve those issues,” he said. “The limits on access to the courts is one of the difficult issues.”

David Moskowitz, executive director of The Conservation Angler, one of the groups that signed the letter, said while his group opposes Simpson’s proposal, the groups agree it can be improved and hope the senators from Washington and Oregon do so. For example, he said it might be possible to narrow the litigation moratoriums.

“I think the Oregon and Washington delegation

VACCINE

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Janet Van Diepen of Baker City said she might visit her daughter after receiving her second dose.

“She hasn’t let me come visit her during this whole thing. But other than that, I haven’t really made any lifestyle changes,” Van Diepen said.

Wiley and Carmen Harding from Huntington said they also don’t really plan on making any changes.

Delton and Lita Towell also intend to keep to the lifestyle they’ve had during the pandemic.

“I think we might be relaxed a little bit,” Delton said.

“We’re glad to get the second one,” Lita said.

Common side effects for people who have had their second dose include pain and swelling at the injection site, fever, headache, chills, muscle pain, joint pain, and nausea/vomiting. According to a handout given to people at the clinic Friday, most side effects last less than 24 hours. Side effects tend to be more noticeable after the second dose.

Staten said that means the vaccinated person’s immune system is responding to the vaccine.

NEW CASES

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But the increase in cases since March 22 has pushed the monthly figure to 2.6 per day, slightly higher than in February.

The county’s weekly totals over the past month or so:

- March 22-28 — 33 cases
- March 15-21 — 8 cases
- March 8-14 — 16 cases
- March 1-7 — 16 cases

The rising trend coincides with the start of the new two-week measuring period, which the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) uses to determine the risk level, and associated restrictions on businesses and activities, for each of Oregon’s 36 counties.

Baker County, by dint of recording 24 new cases during the previous measuring period — March 7-20 — dropped to the lowest of the four risk levels on Friday, March 26.

But in the first eight days of the current measuring period — March 21-April 3 — the county already has too many cases to qualify for the lowest risk.

If the county finishes that period with between 30 and 44 new cases, it would move to moderate risk starting April 9. That change has relatively minor effects on restaurants and bars — they would have to close at 11 p.m. rather than midnight — and outdoor recreation events would have a capacity of 150 people rather than the current 300 under the lowest risk.

If the county has at least 45 new cases, but fewer than 60, during the two-week period ending April 3, it could jump to high risk.

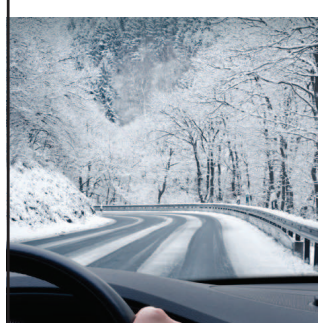
That would cut indoor dining at restaurants and bars from the current 50% of capacity to 25% or 50 total people, whichever is fewer, and the limit per table would drop from eight people to six.

The current four-level system has been in place since early December.

Jonathan Modie, a spokesman for the OHA, said state officials are “continually examining our approach to controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Oregon, including the county risk level framework, based on updated research and current spread.”

Modie said there is no timeframe for changing the system.

Winter is here!
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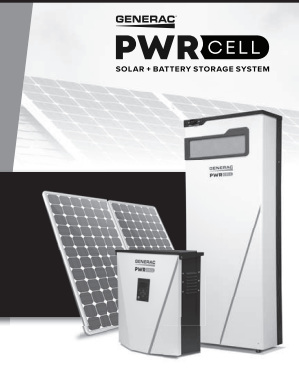


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