

# Local & State

FORMER U.S. SENATOR FROM OREGON

## Gordon Smith returning to Pendleton

■ Smith stepping down as CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters

By Antonio Sierra  
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Gordon Smith is returning home.

Following 24 years in Washington, D.C., first as a U.S. senator then as the chief executive officer of the National Association of Broadcasters, Smith is stepping down to an advisory role with the lobbying group and returning to his birthplace: Pendleton.

In a video message announcing his retirement, Smith said he would step down at the end of 2021 to spend more time on his family business, his church and his family.

“Many of these things I have put on hold this past quarter century to give public service and to be among broadcasters,” he said. “I look forward to time with them, doing things that grandfathers ought to do: attending baseball games, recitals and more.”

As a lobbyist, Smith represented some of the largest radio and television broadcasting companies in the country, including iHeartMedia, Cumulus Media and the Sinclair Broadcast Group. And although providing news is only one part of what these broadcasters do, it's one of the topics he chose to focus on in his farewell video.

“It has been my great honor to give the lion's roar for broadcasters — those who run into the storm, those who stand firm in chaos to hear the voice of the people, those who hold to account the powerful — and to stand with those of the fourth estate who have the hearts of public servants,” he said.

Although he won't be in Washington full time any more, Smith plans to use some of his time as an advisor for the association advocating for local media in an increasingly inhospitable climate.

Smith referred to himself as “a pea picker from Oregon,” albeit one whose family also owns a food processing business that produces millions of pounds of peas, corn, carrots and lima beans per year.

Smith made a name for himself locally by taking over Smith Frozen Foods and its facility in Weston. But politics also ran through his blood.



Pamplin Media Group

Former Oregon U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, the CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters, is stepping down from that position and returning to Pendleton.

*“I look forward to time with them, doing things that grandfathers ought to do: attending baseball games, recitals and more.”*

— Gordon Smith, former U.S. Senator from Oregon

His father was an assistant agriculture secretary during the Eisenhower administration and Smith has several cousins who have served in the U.S. House and Senate in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah.

Smith won a seat representing Pendleton in the Oregon Senate as a Republican in 1992 and was elected Senate president a few years later. In 1996, Smith sought an open seat in the U.S. Senate only to narrowly lose to Ron Wyden, the first time the state elected a senator by mail. Smith would get a second shot at the Senate later that year when Mark Hatfield retired, and this time he prevailed.

Smith would go on to serve two terms in the Senate before he lost reelection to Jeff Merkley in 2008, putting an end to his political career. He stayed in Washington and joined the National Association of Broadcasters a year later.

Starting next year, Smith will serve as an advisor to the broadcasters association, necessitating only a few trips to Washington per year.

In a Thursday, April 8, interview, Smith said he plans

to use some of those trips to lobby Congress to take steps to save local media.

The past 20 years have not been kind to local newspapers and broadcasters.

As the internet became one of the dominant forms of consumption and communication, local businesses stopped advertising with local media outlets and started flocking to a handful of tech giants like Facebook and Google.

Local media outlets relied on these advertisers to fund their news operations, and, as a result, many of them shrank or shuttered. According to a 2019 study from the Brookings Institute, more than 65 million Americans live in a county where there is only one newspaper or none at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these trends, and the effect is being felt locally.

In March 2020, the EO Media Group, the parent company of the East Oregonian and Hermiston Herald and the owner of more than a dozen newspapers in Oregon and Washington, laid off 47 employees company-wide, including eight locally. Since then, the company has also closed its Pendleton printing facility and laid off another 20 employees.

Working with broadcasters, Smith said the same trend is happening at local TV and radio stations, and much of that has to do with the way tech companies have

dominated the advertising market.

Conducting the interview from his phone on a trip through the Columbia River Gorge on his way back to Pendleton, Smith said tech companies were not only hurting local journalism by consolidating the advertising market, but also elevating bad journalism and misinformation that tends to proliferate the web.

“They are cannibalizing the advertising market, taking broadcaster and newspaper content, putting it online and then competing against it for advertising dollars,” he said. “At the end of the day, good journalism costs money. They don't care about localism or journalism. They just care about making money.”

Smith said the solution to local media's decline could lie in Australia, where the country passed a law that requires tech companies to pay news outlets for their content posted on the companies' platforms.

Nearing 70, Smith said his move back to Oregon does not presage a return to politics. He said his passion for elected office died when he lost re-election in 2008 while acknowledging the state's leftward turn would make it difficult for a Republican to try to win.

And once he returns to Pendleton full time, he has no intention of leaving.

“I was born in Pendleton and I will die in Pendleton,” he said.

## State: 168 of 700,000 vaccinated later tested positive

By Fedor Zarkhin  
The Oregonian/OregonLive

So far 168 Oregonians have tested positive for the coronavirus despite being fully vaccinated against COVID-19, leaving 19 hospitalized and three dead — figures so small that officials said they were “good news.”

The case count means that of the 700,000 people who reached full immunity, just 0.024% got infected anyway.

“This shows the vaccines are working really well,” said Dr. Melissa Sutton, the Oregon Health Authority's medical director for respiratory viral diseases. “All of those numbers are good news.”

While coronavirus vaccines are proven to be effective at preventing hospitalizations and deaths among those who do get infected, no vaccine is foolproof. Sutton was not surprised by the death and hospitalization counts, either.

“They are, of course, unfortunate,” Sutton said. But the numbers were “not more than we would have expected.”

State officials calculated the number of so-called “breakthrough” cases among Oregonians who had reached full immunity, which comes two weeks after a final vaccine dose. Officials track the cases because they could point to dangerous mutations of the virus.

It's unclear how many, if any, of the breakthrough cases Oregon announced were caused by virus variants, Sutton said, though none of them are known to be.

State officials said many of the people with identified breakthrough cases reported no symptoms and were tested for other reasons, such as care-facility workers who must be screened at least once a month.

None of the three deaths was tied to a variant, the state said. Oregon has now identified 294 cases driven by variants the federal government is concerned about.

### Few 'breakthrough' cases in NE Oregon

Although the state report on fully vaccinated Oregonians who later test positive for COVID-19 doesn't have county-level data, it does note that there were nine such “breakthrough” cases in the region that includes Baker County. That region also includes Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa and Malheur counties.

## COVID case affects Early Learning Center

By Jayson Jacoby  
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A student at the Baker School District's Baker Early Learning Center, which has preschool and kindergarten classrooms, has tested positive for COVID-19, the school district announced Sunday, April 11.

The district was notified of the positive test Friday, April 9, according to a press release from the district.

The student did not contract the virus at the Early Learning Center, which opened on Oct. 9, 2020, in the North Baker School building at 2725 Seventh St., according to the school district.

The district still plans an open house Friday, April 16 from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. at the Early Learning Center that includes installing a plaque commemorating the \$2.3 million renovation that created the Center.

Although the student who tested positive “did spend some time at school when they may have been contagious, the facility has been cleaned/sanitized thoroughly and anyone who may have been in close contact has been asked to quarantine for two weeks from possible exposure,” Lindsey McDowell, the district's public information and communications coordinator, wrote in an email to the Herald on Monday, April 12.

## RESCUED

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McClay said the car had a nearly full tank of gas, and the family apparently was able to run the engine to operate the heater and warm the interior.

There are no weather stations within 15 miles or so of the site.

A station at Salt Creek Summit, about 16 miles northeast, recorded a low temperature of 20 degrees Monday.

The Baker City Airport tied a record low of 16 degrees Monday morning.

In early March the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, prompted by multiple search and rescue calls this past winter along Road 39 in both Baker and Wallowa counties, issued a press release reminding drivers that the road is a snowmobile route during winter. The Forest Service placed barriers along the road to discourage passenger vehicles.

According to the press release, the Forest Service planned to move the barriers further up the road this spring as the snow recedes.

Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash said Forest Service officials notified him recently that the barriers would be removed. A sign remains warning the road is not maintained



Baker County Sheriff's Office/Contributed Photo

A Beaverton family's car got stuck in snow along Forest Road 39 in eastern Baker County on Sunday afternoon, April 11. Baker County Sheriff's Office search and rescue members, summoned by a cellphone call early Monday, rescued Jason Brunson, his wife, Jennifer, and their seven-year-old son, George.

during winter, but Ash said he believes the sign is too small to be effective.

He said the Brunsons told search and rescue members that the fam-

ily didn't see the warning sign.

Road 39, which continues north into Wallowa County, usually doesn't fully open to vehicles until May or early June.

One problem with Road 39 and several other forest roads that are popular with snowmobilers, Ash said, is that the snow machines compact the snow into a firm but thin surface

*“You can do fine on that compact snow until you break through. Then you're stuck.”*

— Sheriff Travis Ash

that can hold the weight of a car.

Until it doesn't.

“You can do fine on that compact snow until you break through,” Ash said. “Then you're stuck.”

He said people who aren't familiar with snowmobile routes don't recognize that a road hasn't been maintained for wheeled vehicles.

Ash said that although he's happy the Brunsons are safe, he's concerned that future episodes will not turn out as well.

He believes bigger signs or some other more blatant notice to travelers who aren't familiar with the area is necessary.

“We have to do something,” Ash said.

The sheriff is familiar with rescues on the snow-covered Road 39.

On Thanksgiving Day 2020 Ash helped an 18-year-old Boise man whose car became stuck in snow on the road more than 12 miles beyond where the Brunsons' car was mired.

Exactly 20 years earlier, on the same holiday in 2000, Ash rescued three travelers from Germany who became stranded in the same area.