

STATEWIDE COVID-19 HOSPITALIZATIONS NEAR 300, WHICH WOULD TRIGGER CHANGE IN RISK LEVELS

Baker County could return to 'extreme' risk on April 30

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com
and Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

A sharp increase in COVID-19 cases could push at least 12 Oregon counties, including Baker, into the extreme risk level April 30, requiring the most severe restrictions the state can impose on businesses and activities, Gov. Kate Brown said Friday, April 23.

Those restrictions include a ban on indoor dining at restaurants and bars.

Baker County hasn't been in the extreme category since Feb. 4.

The county moved into the high risk category on Friday, April 23.

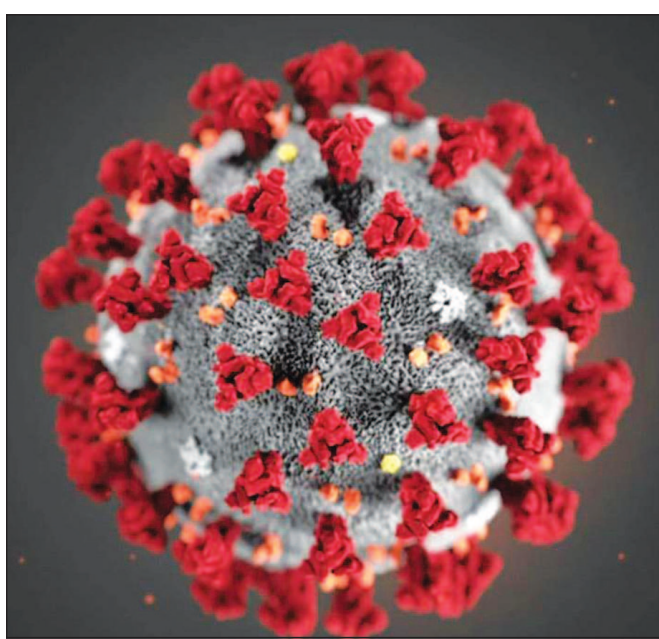
Baker County previously would have qualified for the extreme risk category, starting that day, based on the 79 new cases it reported during the last two-week measuring period, April 3-17. The threshold for extreme risk is 60 cases over two weeks.

But Brown changed the system so that no county, regardless of its case counts, would move into the extreme risk category so long as fewer than 300 COVID-19 patients, statewide, were being treated in hospitals.

With case rates increasing across much of the state, the number of people being treated in hospitals has risen as well. As of Thursday, April 22, a total of 283 people statewide were hospitalized with the virus.

In response, Brown announced that Baker and other counties could move into the extreme risk level if statewide hospitalizations exceed the 300-person threshold.

Baker County Commission-



Centers for Disease Control

An illustration of a COVID-19 particle.

"I hate to see us go back to high risk, and I'm concerned it will be worse next week. The spike in cases we've experienced over the last four weeks has sickened and quarantined many people, and will also hurt our businesses, especially the restaurants."

— Mark Bennett, Baker County commissioner

er Mark Bennett addressed the possibility of the county moving to extreme risk.

"The spike in cases we've experienced over the last four weeks has sickened and quarantined many people, and will also hurt our businesses, especially the restaurants," Bennett said. "I hate to see us go back to high risk, and I'm concerned it will be worse next week. Thank you to the Health Department staff for their tireless work to provide good information to those who have come down with symptoms or been exposed, and to keep providing vaccines. We're try-

ing to make getting vaccinated as easy as possible."

What was not clear, as of Friday afternoon, is whether a decrease in new cases in Baker County before April 30 could potentially keep the county at high risk rather than moving to extreme risk.

Baker County's rate of new cases has more than tripled over the past month or so.

Through the first 22 days of April, the county averaged 6.1 cases per day, up from 3.1 per day during March, 2.5 per day in February and 3.4 per day in January.

The county's worst month

was December 2020, when the daily average was 6.3 cases.

Oregon reported more than 1,000 new infections on Friday, April 23, a mark that puts the state second in the nation for the rate of increase of new COVID-19 cases.

The counties that could move to extreme risk, other than Baker, are Clackamas, Columbia, Crook, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, Linn, Marion, and Polk.

The restrictions would go into effect Friday, April 30. There will be no "warning week" as is usual with changes in risk levels, which delayed restrictions for a week.

"This is your warning," Brown said.

The differences in restrictions on businesses are significant between high risk and extreme risk, most notably for restaurants, bars and theaters.

Those businesses can have indoor capacities of 25% while a county is at high risk.

But when a county is at extreme risk, indoor dining is prohibited in restaurants and bars, and theaters have significant limits on capacity, as well as a ban on consumption of food and drink.

The "fourth surge" of the pandemic will be different, offering some hopeful news to state residents and businesses.

There is now enough Moderna and Pfizer two-shot vaccine for most people in the state. The vaccination has reached three out of four people 65 and older, which means that the current spike will lead to fewer deaths among the most vulnerable age group in the population.

Baker County COVID-19 cases

AGE RANGE	3/23 TO 4/2	4/3 TO 4/21
70 and older	17.5% (of cases)	9.9%
60 to 69	10.5%	13.2%
50 to 59	24.6%	11%
40 to 49	19.3%	11%
30 to 39	10.5%	26.4%
20 to 29	8.8%	4.4%
10 to 19	7%	16.5%
9 and younger	1.8%	7.7%

COVID

Continued from Page 1A

Staten said the trends also show that the virus continues to spread among people who aren't vaccinated. She hopes to see a significant change in that number today.

The Health Department is having its first drive-thru vaccination clinic at the Fairgrounds, with the potential to inoculate 1,160 people, and potentially more depending on how many people show up, Staten said.

Although the rise in cases started around March 23, the spread of the virus, based on age range, has changed substantially in the latter part of the period.

Between March 23 and April 2, about 17.5% of new cases in the county were among people 70 and older, Staten said. But since April 2 the rate of infections among people 70 and older has dropped to 9.9%.

The difference between the two periods is much greater when the comparison involves cases among county residents 50 and older.

From March 23 through April 2, that age range accounted for almost 53% of the county's cases.

But since then infections among that age group have dropped to 34% of total cases.

Over the past three weeks the proportion of cases among county residents younger than 50 has increased from 47% to 66%.

The age range with the biggest change has been among people in their 30s. That group accounted for just 10.5% of cases from March 23 to April 2. Since then, more than one in four cases in the county — 26.4% — has been a person between 30 and 39. That's the highest percentage of cases, by almost 10%, of any age range.

Cases among residents younger than 20 have also increased, from 8.8% from March 23 to April 2, to 24% since.

Younger people are much less likely to become seriously ill after being infected. Statewide, 90% of deaths attributed to COVID-19 were people 60 or older, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Of the 2,467 deaths, just seven were younger than 30.

But Staten said some Baker County residents younger than 30 have had severe symptoms.

"It's unpredictable," she said. "Even younger kids can still get very sick."

Staten also pointed out that when it comes to the county's risk level, and the associated restrictions on businesses and events, all cases "count the same" regardless of the person's age.

"The choices people make, about mask-wearing and vaccinations, are going to affect our schools and our businesses," she said.

Starting Friday, April 23, Baker County's risk level moved from the lowest of the state's four categories to the second-highest. That forced restaurants, bars, fitness centers and theaters to reduce their indoor customer limit from 50% of capacity to 25%, with a maximum of 50 people, including staff.

Effects of vaccinations

Staten said the declining rate of infections among older residents is to be expected, considering that group has been eligible for vaccinations longer and has the highest rate of inoculations.

As of Thursday, April 22, a total of 5,410 Baker County residents — 32.2% of the county's population — had been either fully vaccinated (4,251 people) or partially vaccinated (1,159). Almost 64% of county residents who are fully or partially vaccinated are 60 or older.

Staten said the county has had a few "breakthrough" cases — people who tested positive after being fully vaccinated.

House panel ponders combining gun bills

Proposal would make changes to legislation banning firearms in public buildings

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Legislation that combines proposed requirements for firearms locks and safe storage with a narrower ban on firearms in public buildings is gaining political momentum in the Oregon House.

The House Rules Committee heard a proposal to combine elements of two bills, one awaiting a vote of the full House and a second that has already passed the Senate. If it happens, the House would have to take only one vote, instead of two, on a firearms regulation bill — and the Senate would have to vote only on whether to accept the final version.

"In this legislation we kind of mash them together," House Republican Leader Christine Drazan of Canby, who sits on the committee, said during a presentation Wednesday, April 21.

Republicans were already dead set against House Bill 2510, which awaits a vote of the full House scheduled April 26. The House Health Care Committee advanced it March 30 on a party-line vote.

That bill would require the storage of firearms with trigger or cable locks, in a locked container or in a gun room. An offense is a Class C violation, which carries a maximum fine of \$500, unless someone under age 18 obtains access, in which case it is a Class A violation with a maximum fine of \$2,000. No jail time is imposed for violations.

Its chief sponsor is Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn, who has advocated for it on behalf of a constituent since her election in 2018. She said she would support it becoming part of a broader bill.

"The goal of this safe-storage firearms bill is to change the behavior of the portion of gun owners whose careless actions lead to death and injury."

— Rep. Rachel Prusak, Democrat from West Linn

"No one is under the illusion that enacting a safe storage law will stop all gun violence," Prusak said. "Many responsible gun owners already lock up their guns. The goal of this safe-storage firearms bill is to change the behavior of the portion of gun owners whose careless actions lead to death and injury of others."

Split view of changes

The Rules Committee proposes to combine it with a narrower version of Senate Bill 554, which passed the Senate on a 16-7 vote March 25. All votes for it came from Democrats; one Democrat joined six Republicans against it, and the rest were excused or absent.

The original bill stated all firearms would be barred from state buildings, including the Capitol, and local governments would have the option of barring them from their own buildings. In essence, the ban would apply to the estimated 300,000 holders of concealed-handgun licenses, who are now exempt from weapons bans in public buildings.

The proposed amendment would narrow the scope of the Senate bill.

The proposed ban would apply to the Capitol, but not other state buildings. (State

courts, which are often in buildings maintained by counties, already ban weapons by orders on the presiding judges.)

It would allow boards of the seven state universities, 17 community college districts and 197 school districts to bar firearms from their buildings, but not their grounds. Unlike the Senate-passed bill, cities, counties and special districts would not be allowed to bar firearms borne by concealed-handgun licensees.

Sen. Ginny Burdick, a Democrat from Portland and a longtime supporter of firearms regulation, said the proposed change goes too far.

"I've been in this process a long time, and I understand the necessity for compromise," she said at a Rules Committee hearing. "But the amended version goes way too far in terms of weakening the bill."

Though the proposal would still bar firearms inside the Capitol, she said, "In the climate we live in, state buildings need to be included."

She also said if school boards have discretion to bar firearms from their buildings, their grounds need to be included, "because sports activities can get pretty hot, as we all know, and they need to be covered."

As passed by the Senate, public sidewalks and streets are excluded from regulation.

Sen. Floyd Prozanski, a Democrat from Eugene who leads the Senate Judiciary Committee, offered substitute language.

"It only seems appropriate for us to give local control to school boards, community colleges and universities to make the determination

what is best for them and their properties, not just their buildings," he said.

The House committee is considering other amendments, including one by Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem, that would enable local governments to regulate firearms in public parks. He also proposed an amendment that would do away with state preemption of most local firearms ordinances — a law that dates to 1995 — but conceded it would go nowhere.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

I-84: Upper Perry to Richland Interchange Bridge Repairs

In 2022, we will be repairing six Interstate 84 bridges at various interchanges in eastern Oregon. The bridges are located between the Exit 256 Upper Perry Interchange (five miles west of La Grande) and the Exit 302 Oregon Highway 86 / Richland Interchange (two miles north of Baker City). To collect feedback about the upcoming project we are holding a virtual open house.

ONLINE OPEN HOUSE April 26 through May 7

<https://odotopenhouse.org/openhouse/i-84-upper-perry-to-richland-interchange-improvements>

Please take a few minutes to visit the site during this time to review our plans, pictures and traffic impacts information, and then let us know if you have any comments.

Overview: Each bridge requires repairs and upgrades to fix a variety of deficiencies. We will repair bridge decks and joints, seal cracks, replace bridge and approach rails, and install protective screening. We will design the project this year and construct it in 2022.

We appreciate your review and feedback. It will help us construct a better, safer project.



ODOT is pleased to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you need special accommodations or alternate language formats to participate in this open house event, please contact us (contact information below). Alternate formats available upon request, or call statewide relay at 711.

For more information, please contact Tom Strandberg, ODOT Public Information Officer at 541-663-6261, or email thomas.m.strandberg@odot.state.or.us

