

Local & State

ARTISTIC

Continued from Page 1A

The robot is just one example of a new use for an old newspaper box — all stemmed by local Mike Meyer, who likes to recycle and repurpose items into art.

Meyer gathered about a dozen paper boxes from the Baker City Herald, and he wants to repurpose them — most as little free libraries.

“They are perfect little libraries,” Meyer said. “They still have lots of use in them.”

He’s made one library, and has design ideas for the other boxes — maybe even one that looks like a bug.

“I have lots of plans,” he said.

Animal sculptures at Churchill

Robby the Robot is a fixture in the new sculpture garden at Churchill, which is also hosting metal animal sculptures brought from Africa by The Art Roamers.

At the corner of the property, at Broadway and 16th streets, Vegter has arranged tall metal letters that spell out ART. These are part of the sign for the Maxi-Mart center on Pocahontas Road (now the location of D&B Supply, Miller’s Lumber, and the YMCA fitness center).

Mike Meyer/Contributed Photo

A former Baker City Herald box now serves as a free little library in Baker City.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald
Baker City’s first little free art gallery, also known as Robby the Robot, stands outside Churchill School at Broadway and 16th streets in Baker City. People can pick up, and drop off, art pieces and art supplies in the refurbished Baker City Herald newspaper box.



Oregon among states slow to lift COVID-19 restrictions

By Sara Cline
Associated Press/Report for America

CANNON BEACH — The sand was packed on a recent sunny day at this upscale beach town on Oregon’s coast, but signs of the state’s cautious approach to the pandemic were still everywhere. Almost all the beachgoers wore masks — those that didn’t got nasty looks — and lines for a seat at the many local cafes and restaurants snaked down the sidewalk because of rules limiting capacity to 25%.

It was a sharp contrast to places such as Florida or Texas, where many COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted for weeks. But even as the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention moved earlier this month to ease indoor mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people, some blue states like Oregon and Washington are still holding on to some long-time coronavirus restrictions.

After public pressure, Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, last week lifted a requirement for masks outdoors and put the onus on businesses to decide if fully vaccinated patrons would be required to mask up inside.

But enforcement of business capacity limits, publicized cases of student athletes passing out while competing or practicing in a mask and a widespread shut-down of indoor dining earlier this month continue to stoke resentment among those who feel Brown’s rules go too far as the rest of the U.S. returns to normal.

In Oregon, pushback has been particularly strong in rural areas — which is much of the state outside Portland

Judge rejects businesses’ challenge to Oregon restrictions

PORTLAND (AP) — A federal judge has determined that a group of businesses and political action committees that sought to block Oregon Gov. Kate Brown’s COVID-19 restrictions haven’t shown enough evidence to prompt such a move.

The group — which includes the Gresham restaurant Spud Monkey’s Bar and Grill, its owner Melissa Adams and political action committees Oregon Moms Union and Heart of Main Street — filed a temporary restraining order against Brown on May 5, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. The order protested the “unfair restrictions” they said the governor had put on businesses and public school children.

Such a filing indicates members of the group believe they are at risk of facing immediate damage from the restrictions.

Judge Karin Immergut declined to issue the restraining order, saying this week the group “failed to show sufficient facts and adequate legal support” to warrant a block on Brown’s restrictions.

Brown’s lawyers argued none of the plaintiffs could show they had suffered specific ramifications as a result of the governor’s orders.

Spud Monkey’s was cited for violating Brown’s ban on indoor dining.

Brown has continually evaluated the risks brought on by gatherings and updating state rules based on those factors, including how many people are vaccinated, according to her lawyers.

— and has included an effort by at least one county to become a “vaccine sanctuary” where people wouldn’t have to mask up regardless of their vaccine status.

“We are just so done with this,” said Tootie Smith, chairwoman of the Clackamas County Board of Supervisors and a former Republican Oregon State House Representative. “There’s a huge amount of frustration that people have.”

Smith made national news when she said on Twitter that she would host a large Thanksgiving dinner despite

capacity rules on indoor gatherings in place at the time — and now she says she’s astonished when she travels outside Oregon and sees what it looks like to live with fewer public COVID-19 restrictions.

Texas Rangers’ fans recently returned to Globe Life Field that was open for 100% capacity, droves of college students crowded Florida beaches for spring break and Walt Disney World has reopened its gates.

“Everything was open. People were happy, because they had the freedom to go

“We are just so done with this. There’s a huge amount of frustration that people have.”

— Tootie Smith, chair, Clackamas County Board of Supervisors

out to restaurants (without a mask),” said Smith, who cited Florida, South Dakota and Idaho as examples. “Some of the businesses wanted you to wear a mask. And it might have been mandated indoors at certain points — but the attitude was different. You weren’t shamed for not wearing a mask.”

Those who support the Northwest’s more cautious approach, however, point out the region has had lower infection rates throughout the pandemic — likely because of the stricter rules over the past 14 months.

“The benefit of 50 different states is you sort of get a natural experiment of what happens when states take a different approach,” said Dr. Jennifer Vines, the health officer for Multnomah County, the state’s most populous county and home to Portland.

“I’ve watched as some (states) have had various surges or rejected certain restrictions. I think for the most part Oregon got it right,” Vines said. “Even though it may seem like there’s no problem, it’s those same restrictions that are preventing the problem.”

In Oregon and Washington, state health authorities have recently rescinded requirements to wear masks outside but are mostly maintaining indoor capacity restrictions, likely through the end of June.

Most of Oregon’s counties still have limits on capacity for businesses and as of this week, businesses that want to let customers enter their stores without a mask must ask the customer to prove they’ve been fully vaccinated. State health authorities this week said young athletes no longer have to wear masks while competing in outdoor settings, but students must still mask up while playing close-contact sports indoors, such as basketball and wrestling.

And earlier this month, state workforce safety regulators extended indefinitely a rule requiring employees to wear masks at all times, regardless of their inoculation status.

As the state created its fourth COVID-19 surge this month, Brown announced a reopening plan: Statewide restrictions on capacity and masking will be lifted when 70% of Oregon residents 16 and older have at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Currently, more than half of Oregon’s eligible population has received a first vaccine and health officials say they believe the state will reach the governor’s vaccination goal by the end of June — although many individual counties are lagging far behind.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee made a similar reopening announcement, saying his state is on track to fully reopen by June 30, and a full reopening could happen even sooner if 70% or more of residents ages 16 and older have gotten at least one dose of vaccine by then.

COVID RATES

Continued from Page 1A

The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) sets county risk levels based on case counts and positivity rates over a two-week period.

The next day risk levels can change is Friday, May 28. Any changes will be based on counties’ statistics for the period May 9-22.

Baker County reported 15 new cases during that stretch, and a test positivity rate of 3.9%.

Both figures would qualify the county to drop to the lowest risk level. The thresholds are fewer than 30 new cases, and a positivity rate below 5%.

Baker County hasn’t been at the lowest risk level since April 22.

The county moved to the high risk level on April 23, then to extreme risk on April 30. The county returned to high risk on May 7 and has been at that level since.

The county met one of the two thresholds to drop from high risk to moderate risk starting May 21, but the positivity rate was 8.9% — slightly above the 8.0% threshold for moderate risk.

County Commissioner Mark Bennett, who has served as the county’s incident commander throughout the pandemic, said on Monday, May 24 that he believes the county has qualified to drop to the lowest risk level.

“We feel like we’ve been making progress,” Bennett said.

He said the county’s goal is to remain at the lowest risk level until Oregon Gov. Kate Brown cancels all state-imposed restrictions.

The governor said earlier this month that she will end the mandates, which would do away with the risk level system that’s been in place since December 2020, when at least 70% of Oregonians age 16 and older are partially or fully vaccinated, a goal she hopes the state will reach before the end of June. As of Monday, the statewide vaccination rate, among people 16 and older, was 60.7%, according to the OHA.

When Baker County’s risk level drops to the lowest level, restaurants and bars can have 50% of capacity with no limit on the total number of people. At high risk, these businesses are limited for indoor dining to 25% of capacity or 50 total people, including staff, whichever is fewer.

Other differences between lowest risk and high risk:

- Outdoor recreation, including K-12 sports — capacity rises from 75 people under high risk, to 300 people under lowest risk.

- Indoor entertainment, including theaters and museums, and indoor recreation and fitness, including gyms and K-12 sports — capacity rises from 25% of occupancy or 50 total people under high risk, to 50% capacity, with no limit on total people, under lowest risk.

It is time to begin “the next chapter of post-pandemic life,” Brown said — something Republicans have been asking for since last year, from reopening the economy and lifting mask mandates completely to students returning to in-person learning full time.

“What happens if we get another virus?” Smith said. “We can’t keep shutting down our society for months.”

But even once restrictions are lifted in Oregon, not everyone may opt to return to a pre-coronavirus life.

“We all have kind of different levels of risk tolerance,” Vines said. “I think for people who are really intolerant of risk they may choose to continue to mask and I think that is OK.”

Spring is here for ranchers... Please watch for animals!

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