

JOBS

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Some candidates were leery of returning to work due to concerns about the virus, she said.

Marvin Wood Products' Baker City plant hasn't had any COVID-19 outbreaks, which the Oregon Health Authority defines as five or more cases.

Fuller said a few employees have been infected, or been close contacts with someone who was infected, but there was no spread within the plant.

"We've been really careful, and it's paid off," she said.

Fuller said another factor is one that many frustrated employers have cited as their jobs go unfilled — unemployment benefits that are more generous than in the past due to federal subsidies, both in dollar amounts and in the length that people are eligible.

"The whole dynamic has changed," Fuller said.

In March 2020, the Oregon Employment Department suspended the requirement that people receiving unemployment benefits actively seek work.

That waiver is set to end July 31.

The current \$300-per-month boost in jobless benefits — half the amount included in the federal CARES Act passed in late March 2020 — is set to expire Sept. 4, 2021.

Fuller thinks those are positive steps in helping struggling businesses.

"I believe that will help people who are hesitant to get back in the workforce to start job hunting," she wrote in her email to the Herald.

Businesses reduce operations

In the meantime, though, some Baker City businesses have had to cut days, or hours, due to a lack of employees.

Kari Raffety, who with her dad, Jay Raffety, owns The Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery in Baker City, and the Main Frontier in Haines, said she has had trouble even getting people to apply for openings for cooks and bartenders.

Kari said she's been working every day — both restaurants are open seven days a week — and other employees have had to work extra hours. "They're all burned out," she said.

The staff shortage has persisted, and recently Kari decided to close The Main Event during the day on Tuesdays and be open only for dinner from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. that day.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Dairy Queen in Baker City is advertising job openings on a window at the restaurant.

She said this is the first time she's had to reduce hours due to a lack of employees.

Tyler Brown, who owns Barley Brown's Brew Pub and Tap House, separate establishments in Baker City, said he struggled last summer to entice employees who had been laid off, due to restaurant closures during the spring of 2020, to return to work.

Some had moved away from Baker City, Brown said.

Brown said he understands why workers might choose to receive unemployment rather than come back to work — especially in the restaurant industry, which has endured a series of changing limits on indoor dining and other restrictions.

"There's that yo-yo effect," Brown said. "There's still that distrust. I couldn't really blame the employees."

Brown said he retained a core group of his longest-tenured employees, even though he had to cut their hours in some cases and have them do deferred maintenance because business was slow.

In the past, Brown said he could usually rely on current employees to spread the word when he had a vacancy, and he usually had little trouble hiring new workers.

But this spring he has had openings, for a dishwasher in one case, for which he didn't even receive an application.

"I think unemployment is working well enough that people don't need to work," Brown said.

He said his family, which also owns the Sumpter Junction restaurant near Interstate 84, would like

to eventually reopen the business, which has been closed since March 2020. The family company's business, which prior to the pandemic employed about 50 people, now has approximately 20 workers.

Because he's struggling even to staff the pub, Brown said operating the Sumpter Junction isn't feasible now.

"We would need to double our current crew just to start thinking about opening the Junction," Brown said. "So we're just in a holding pattern."

That's disappointing, he said, because with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown poised to cancel COVID-19-related restrictions, including limits on restaurant capacity, within the next two weeks, he'd like to be able to take advantage of the additional seating capacity.

Baker County restaurants have been limited to 50% of capacity for indoor dining — and at times less than that — since last fall.

Brown said the challenges will continue even when more people start applying for jobs. He worries about replacing experienced workers with ones who need to be trained.

"All that continuity is gone," he said.

Hiring challenges widespread

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, said the issues that Raffety, Brown and Fuller cited are common across Oregon and, indeed, the nation.

Cutler said she works with the U.S. Chamber of Com-

"They flat out told me they're making more on unemployment than they would working for me."

— Shelly Cutler, executive director, Baker County Chamber of Commerce, talking about applicants for a \$15-per-hour job at the Chamber

merce, and "they're seeing it all over the U.S."

Cutler said she has heard that employers are having more success at filling vacancies in states that, unlike Oregon, are no longer accepting federal subsidies that boost unemployment benefits.

She believes the unemployment quandary is actually more harmful now than the pandemic itself.

"It is killing our small business owners," Cutler said.

She has personally experienced the difficulties that local business owners have reported.

Cutler said that while trying to hire an employee at the Chamber of Commerce, for \$15 per hour — the minimum wage is \$11.50 in Baker County and much of rural Oregon — she spoke with several people who, after learning the wage, declined to apply.

"They flat out told me they're making more on unemployment than they would working for me," Cutler said.

She said that based on her conversations with local business owners and managers, the hiring dilemma has worsened since about spring break.

That includes restaurants and motels, some of which have had trouble hiring enough housekeepers.

"That's very concerning to me," Cutler said.

Rajinder Chahal, who bought the Eldorado Inn motel in Baker City in October 2017, said the past 15 months have been challenging in multiple ways.

Business travel hasn't rebounded since it plummeted early in the pandemic, and although people are beginning to travel on vacations again, he has struggled to hire employees.

"People are not applying for jobs," Chahal said. "The struggle is on for all small business. There is nothing small in small business — it takes a lot of effort to keep the doors open."

Chahal, who also owns motels in Idaho, Montana and Nevada, said jobs in Baker City should be attractive since Oregon has a higher minimum wage than each of those states — Idaho, \$7.25; Mon-

Lawmakers want state to end unemployment benefit

By Davis Carbaugh and Bryce Dole
EO Media Group

SALEM — Eastern Oregon lawmakers are calling for the state to end supplemental unemployment benefits to help out-of-work Oregonians endure the pandemic, saying the programs have spurred a workforce shortage that is hurting regional business economies.

Commissioners from 14 Eastern Oregon counties, as well as three state representatives and one senator, signed a letter and sent it Monday, June 7, to Gov. Kate Brown's office, asserting "unemployment recipients, especially those receiving additional federal unemployment benefits, are choosing to stay home rather than look for work."

The letter stated the benefits are "creating a labor shortage that is impacting our most vulnerable communities and will not be sustainable long term."

"There's a disincentive to work," said Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, who signed the letter. "You get paid as much, or nearly as much, to not work as you do to work with the federal dollars coming in."

"It's really hurting the economy right now," said Donna Beverage, a Union County commissioner who signed the letter. "There are some people that need to be on unemployment, certainly if they have to do childcare and that sort of thing. But, it's really discouraging a lot of people from going back to work when they make more money by being on unemployment."

Workforce shortages felt across Eastern Oregon

For weeks, Eastern Oregon officials have voiced concerns over the workforce shortage. In a letter to Brown "on behalf of Morrow County employers" in late May, Kalie Davis, director of workforce development for the Port of Morrow, listed 25 employers in the county that had more than 200 job openings total.

The letter from the lawmakers concluded with the exact same language used in Davis' letter: "The benefit of being unemployed should not outweigh the benefit of working."

The letter comes as COVID-19 cases decline while vaccinations rise statewide, signaling the pandemic is largely waning. That's why some officials decided to call for an end to the federal benefits now, even as several Eastern Oregon counties with disproportionately high infection rates have reported some of the lowest vaccination rates in Oregon (see related story on Page 5A).

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said there's "no question" that federal unemployment relief was "a great deal" during the pandemic's earlier stages.

"At that point, businesses were closed, people were not going to work, and people were laid off," he said. "That's changed. They're now open, they have jobs and people who are worried about COVID have had multiple opportunities to get vaccinated. Our businesses are struggling because so many people don't want to go back to work."

tana, \$8.75; and Nevada, \$9.

But with unemployment benefits boosted by the \$300 monthly federal aid, Chahal said there seems to be little motivation for people to take jobs.

Chahal, who is replacing the indoor swimming pool and making other upgrades at the Eldorado Inn, said he'd like to have long-term employees because he can pay them more than new workers who have to be trained.

Housing challenge

Unemployment payments and concerns about returning

to work during the pandemic aren't the only potential obstacles to filling job vacancies.

Cutler said she's heard from some larger employers that prospective workers had to turn down job offers because they couldn't find, or afford, housing.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said the county had the same problem when trying to hire a planner for the Baker City-County Planning Department.

Two candidates interested in the job had to withdraw, citing problems finding housing, Bennett said.

COUNTY

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The county has not scheduled the meeting Harvey referred to, but the details will be announced.

County attorney Kim Mosier said the resolution begins a process under a state law — Oregon Revised Statute chapter 368 — for designating a county road.

"Today, the purpose of signing this resolution is not to take testimony on the substantive issues regarding the road, this is intended to begin the process by which you will, at a future hearing, get information on the road," Mosier said.

Attending the meeting through Zoom, Pat Rose asked about the main purpose of the resolution.

Mosier said the process is designed to settle disputes regarding the road, including its location.

Harvey said the county doesn't yet know how much the survey will cost.

Someone participating in the meeting through Zoom asked if commissioners' final intent is to declare Pine Creek Lane a public road.

"It depends on the outcome of the hearing," Mosier said.

The road, which leads from the edge of Baker Valley into the Elkhorn Mountains to Pine Creek Reservoir, runs for about 2 1/2 miles through property that David McCarty bought in September 2020. That month McCarty installed a locked gate across the road at his property boundary, citing his concern that people were trespassing on his property and having campfires despite the high fire danger.

Commissioners voted Sept. 30, 2020, to have a county employee remove that lock, which happened Oct. 1.

On April 30 McCarty sued the county, claiming county officials have failed to produce documents proving that there is a public right-of-way on the road through his property.

McCarty, who requests a jury trial, is seeking either a declaration that the disputed section of the Pine Creek Road is not a public right-of-way, or, if a jury concludes there is legal public access, that the limits of that access be defined and that the county pay him \$480,000 to compensate for the lost value of the land based on the legal public access.

Man accused of burglaries at golf course

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Baker City Police arrested a transient early Tuesday, June 15, on charges that he had broken into six cart storage sheds at Quail Ridge Golf Course and taken multiple items.

Timothy Kelly Slaney, 32, was taken to the Baker County Jail. He is charged with second-degree burglary, second-degree theft, possession of a burglary tool or theft device, and second-degree criminal trespassing, according to documents from the Baker County District Attorney's office.

Slaney's bail was set at \$20,000.

Police arrested Slaney at 2:43 a.m. According to documents from the district attorney's office, Slaney had

bolt cutters when he was arrested.

Among the items he is accused of taking are gloves, a key, padlock, U.S. currency, shoes, bags and a range finder. The total value of the items exceeds \$100.

The city-owned golf course, at 2801 Indiana Ave., has had more than 20 break-ins over the past several months, and Baker City Police believe Slaney is responsible for most, if not all, the burglaries and thefts, according to a press release from Sgt. Wayne Chastain.

Police were patrolling the area on foot Tuesday morning when they saw



Slaney

an adult male leaving one of the sheds where golfers store their carts. Police arrested the man, who was identified as Slaney.

The investigation continues, and golfers who have had their shed broken into should call Detective Zachary Thatcher at 541-524-2014.

Slaney was arrested in early February of this year in Baker City and charged with strangulation, a Class

C felony, and fourth-degree assault, a Class A misdemeanor.

He was scheduled to go to trial on those charges on June 22, but that date was canceled.

Slaney now is scheduled to have a probable cause preliminary hearing on the burglary, theft and other recent charges on June 22 at 1 p.m. in Baker County Circuit Court.

APPLIANCES & MORE

Jay & Kristin Wilson, Owners
2036 Main Street, Baker City
541-523-6284 • ccb719615

KitchenAid

Annual Youth Trail Ride started in 1964 is sponsored by the Baker County Mounted Posse

This is an outdoor camp with horseback riding and outdoor adventure for youths ages 12-15 years old.

Cost is \$2.00
(that's right only \$2.00 dollars)

June 26-27, 2021

For more information, questions or an application please call Jodie Radabaugh at 541-524-9358 or 541-403-4933
All state and county regulations will be followed.