

EOU maintains mask mandate through summer

■ University officials will monitor the situation and could potentially drop the mask requirement before fall classes start

By Davis Carbaugh

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LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University is staying the course in its COVID-19 summer protocols following Gov. Kate Brown’s recent executive order lifting mask mandates in Oregon.

Brown announced June 25 that Oregon would end mask and social distancing mandates at the end of the month. Masks are no longer required on a statewide level, but businesses, universities and counties can choose their own requirements. EOU is continuing its health and safety guidelines through the summer, with eyes set on a potential return to normalcy in the fall semester.

“We’re watching it carefully and seeing if we can get to that place where we can be essentially back to normal with the vaccine policy in place, where students, faculty and staff would not be required to wear masks,” said Tim Seydel, vice president of University Advancement.

EOU announced a vaccination requirement for students and staff earlier in June that will affect its future requirements for wearing a face covering.

No major changes to university guidelines

EOU President Tom Insko released a public letter June 30 addressing the university’s direction regarding COVID-19 protocols. In the letter, Insko



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A masked Monty the Mountaineer poses for a photo on campus at Eastern Oregon University May 4, 2021. The university has announced that mask mandates will remain in effect through the summer.

stated that Eastern’s policies and guidelines for face coverings and social distancing will remain in effect, pending further instruction from the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The vaccination requirement was put in place to encourage students and staff to receive the vaccine during the summer break.

“This is consistent with our commitment throughout the pandemic to ensure the health and safety of the entire EOU community and intended to support a return to fully in-person operations and activities in the fall,” Insko said in the announcement.

Despite Oregon’s statewide mandates officially changing June 30, the university will continue to enforce face coverings in shared indoor spaces. However, buildings on

the campus in La Grande will open for public access after previously being closed during the pandemic. Visitors to campus and prospective students will be allowed in buildings as long as they follow the university’s guidelines.

EOU will allow students to gather without masks in groups of eight or fewer if they are in an enclosed space and can show proof of vaccination. As for outdoor activities, students and staff are not required to wear face coverings or practice social distancing. Per Eastern’s face covering policy, masks are still required at in-person settings, shared lab spaces and in the bookstore, library and dining halls.

Masked Mountaineers

While the university is sticking to the mask man-

dates during the summer, it is understood across campus that the goal is getting back to normal operations by the fall. “I’m just kind of excited at the possibility,” business professor Peter Maille said. “It’s hard frankly, a lot of people have had enough of the Zoom sessions.”

Maille expressed the sentiment that professors and staff at the university adjusted effectively to online learning as well as the protocols surrounding in-person classes.

“By and large, the students did a very good job of wearing the masks last year and the folks who did face-to-face learning are capable of doing the same if it’s necessary this time around,” Maille said.

As for the student body, the desire to return to the classroom is evident across campus.

“I think it’s easier for me to concentrate in person with the professor face-to-face, rather than staring at a computer where I get distracted easier,” EOU student Jackie Amaya said.

According to Seydel, Eastern plans for returning to full, in-person learning next school year depending on any changes that may occur during the summer. This opens the door for large events, including football games, concerts, student-run organizations and campus life activities to engage at a more normal pace.

“I’m excited because I was

a freshman this year, so my first year was during COVID,” EOU student Chayann Partain said. “I’m excited to try to make more friends and have in-person classes versus learning through a screen.”

Partain will serve as a resident assistant next school year and noted that the university plans to expand the capacity in on-campus residential buildings. Last year, dorm rooms were limited to two students per room, which will be upped to a maximum of three this year.

Plans for fall

Most learning on campus last year involved face coverings, social distancing and virtual learning. However, the Master of Arts in Teaching program through the College of Education was one of the first to return to in-person instruction during the pandemic. The 10-month program heavily values applying teaching skills in a classroom setting, so the students and staff adjusted to a hybrid classroom.

“We’re modeling what we did last year,” said Matt Seimears, dean of the College of Education. “We were very cautious and we worked heavily with the state and human resources.”

According to Seimears, the hybrid program combined virtual learning and face-to-face interaction, which students likely will be able to opt into this coming fall

semester. Since the program places its students in local schools for hands-on teaching, Seimears and the university plan to communicate with local school districts to meet the required vaccination and pandemic protocols in place.

“I have had no complaints from students about the paths we’re going,” Seimears said. “As far as I’m aware, things have been moving kind of steadily and in a progressive manner.”

The College of Education is one example where in-person learning is crucial to the program, which creates the need for balance between other programs. Labs, art classes and STEM programs often require face-to-face interaction, while other majors might include large lectures with high enrollment.

“That’s part of the reason why we’re still maintaining the vaccination requirement, pending the FDA approval,” Seydel said. “We want everybody to have a safe and healthy environment, including our students and of course our faculty and staff.”

According to Seydel, the university is emphasizing the need for vaccinations to mitigate against potential new strains and create a safer environment for students to return to. Exemption processes for medical and nonmedical reasons are required for students and staff that choose not to receive the vaccination prior to the fall.

PARADE

Continued from Page A1

“Nobody wants to go to a parade that only has 12 entries,” Cutler said.

In pre-COVID times, the Chamber usually had around 60 entries each year, Cutler said.

The reason for the lack of entries this year is a combination of things. Cutler said it’s tough to entice people to participate after nearly a year and a half of restrictions.

“We didn’t know for sure we would have Jubilee and a parade,” she said. “Even though we’ve been

planning since January, we weren’t given the green light until the governor lifted those restrictions.”

That happened on June 30.

If anyone is interested in signing up for a spot in the parade, they need to let the Chamber know by the close of business Wednesday, July 14. There is no entry fee this

year. To sign up, call the Chamber at 541-523-5855.

Aside from the parade, another mainstay of Miners Jubilee will happen as usual — food and craft vendors in Geiser-Pollman Park Friday through Sunday, July 16-18.

The Baker City Bronc and Bull Riding events will also return to

the Baker County Fairgrounds, on Grove Street just north of Geiser-Pollman Park. The bronc riding competition will start Friday, July 16 at 7 p.m., with the bull riding Saturday at 6 p.m.

Both events will also be livestreamed at <https://www.cct-bullriding.com/tickets/cctlive>.



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