



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Workers with JAL Construction of Bend build a retaining wall along the Ukiah-Hilgard Highway, 3 miles south of Red Bridge State Wayside on Thursday, Aug. 12, 2021. The wall is part of a \$1.2 million Oregon Department of Transportation project aimed at repairing and stabilizing the highway's shoulder.

Highway project near Starkey nears completion

■ \$1.2 million job intended to stabilize slope along Grande Ronde River

By **DICK MASON**
The (La Grande) Observer

STARKEY — This wall will never stop sightseers driving along the Ukiah-Hilgard Highway but it will stop erosion along the Grande Ronde River.

The wall is one now being built by the Oregon Department of Transportation as part of a \$1.2 million project aimed at repairing and stabilizing the shoulder of a section of the Ukiah-Hilgard Highway about 12 miles south of Hilgard State Park.

ODOT Project Engineer Mike Remily said the work is necessary because in some areas the highway shoulder drops steeply toward

the Grande Ronde River. Erosion has occurred as a result, creating an unstable slope that has washed out several times in recent years.

"Without repairs, the shoulder would continue eroding and put the highway at risk," he said.

The wall being installed consists of rocks enclosed with wire. It is 240 feet long and 8 feet high. It is replacing an old wall that had badly deteriorated.

A new guardrail also will be installed in front of the new wall, replacing another guardrail that, like the old wall, was deteriorating. Ken Patterson, ODOT's Region 5 manager, said the wall will

make installing the new guardrail much easier, providing the stability needed for the installation of the footings for the guardrail.

The installation of the new guardrail and wall is one of two portions of the highway project. The second involves moving two small portions of the Ukiah-Hilgard Highway 15 to 20 feet farther away from the Grande Ronde River over a 1,500-foot span. This will give the roadway greater protection from flooding and soil erosion.

The work also will reduce the amount of future repairs the state will have to do at the site.

"Less maintenance will be needed in the long run," Remily said.

Space has been cleared out for the roadway, which is

up against a steep hillside, by blasting of rock earlier this summer.

The Ukiah-Hilgard project, which started in March, is expected to be essentially completed by early September. The final phase of the project will involve reseeded vegetation on land disturbed by the project, Remily said.

Traffic is being controlled by flaggers during work hours, and temporary traffic signals are in operation when workers are not at the site. Remily said soon there will be traffic delays only when workers are present.

Patterson added that people driving through the work zone have been good about obeying the lower speed limit in place at the project site.

"People have been really understanding and patient," he said.

MASKS

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for COVID quarantines, so it doesn't reduce employees' sick leave.

"There is no additional money from the state to manage that, but I think it's the right thing to do and it helps our staff be able to function appropriately," said Witty.

Board hears concerns about masks

Kelly Tanzey, who joined the board's Zoom meeting, asked board members why they believe the protocols are a better option than allowing parents to decide whether to have their children wear masks.

(The requirement is statewide, and not made by individual school districts.)

"Have you done your due diligence?" Tanzey asked. "If you are only consulting county health officials, I'd like to know why you are not consulting virologists. Are you asking them how they are basing their advice and are you asking to see the peer-reviewed studies they are using?"

Tanzez contends that cloth masks are ineffective.

She also pointed out that although the county's vaccination rate is tracked, it doesn't include residents who have tested positive and thus have a level of natural immunity.

"Why are those numbers not reflected and only vaccinated numbers?" Tanzey asked.

She said children are neither vulnerable to the virus nor as likely to spread it as adults.

"So the most important questions are — how is masking children in school doing anything to slow the spread?" Tanzey asked. "And how do we know what the long-term effects it will have on developing lungs? God forbid that in five years from now, we find out that wearing a mask for extended periods of time caused irreversible damage."

Tanzez told the board she believes schools are the safest environment for children, and she urged board members to fight harder against the state mandates for masks and vaccinations.

Witty said that the district is striving to gain more local control.

"We certainly want to see some metrics that demon-

strate when and how you can move in and out of these situations as we navigate them and we continue to advocate for that," Witty said.

Baker students were required to wear masks during the 2020-21 school year. Elementary students attended in-person classes for most of the year. Middle school and high school students attended one or two days per week starting in November 2020, and moved to a full in-person schedule in April 2021.

Witty said the district will use the same health protocols as last school year, saying they were fairly successful at limiting COVID-19 spread within schools.

The district reported 36 staff or students testing positive during the 2020-21 school year.

"We will do health checks at the doors, making sure that as kids come in they don't have a fever or exhibit any type of issues," Witty said. "I know many of our staff believe that was one of the key factors that helped us manage last year and be successful."

The district will also



Samantha O'Conner/Baker City Herald

Protesters gathered outside the David J. Wheeler Federal Building in Baker City on Thursday evening, Aug. 19 to voice their opposition to a state mandate that students wear face masks in schools.

emphasize sanitation, offer multiple hand-washing opportunities and follow a social distancing policy of three feet, he said.

"So, there's a number of things that we're putting into place, but at the same time we're working within the system to see about

leveraging for local governance and those aspects from every angle we can think of," Witty said.

Witty pointed out that the vaccination requirement for school workers and volunteers doesn't start until Oct. 18 or until the FDA gives final approval for the vac-

cines (they're currently approved for emergency use), whichever happens first.

"We have a little bit of space here to ascertain what this really means and then determine what opportunities are in front of us so that we can manage appropriately," Witty said.



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More Coverage

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's mandate that students wear face masks when classes start soon prompted a protest Thursday, Aug. 19 in Baker City.

About three dozen people gathered about 5:30 p.m. outside the David J. Wheeler Federal Building, 1550 Dewey Ave.

Protesters, many carrying signs with slogans such as "Your fears do not usurp our rights" and "Unmask our children," marched through downtown.

"I'm very passionate

about our freedoms and I think that it is child abuse to put masks on children, and so I want to protest that," said Debbie Henshaw, who carried a sign reading "We the people will not comply."

"I want to protest the mandated vaccines and have our freedoms. We have freedoms and I'm here to fight for them," Henshaw said.

Tisha Bass said she's concerned that no one is talking about the psychological effects of the mask mandate.

"They can't see each other's expressions and everybody knows that facial

expressions are really important," she said. "Especially for kids that don't vocalize really well like adults do. No one's even talking about that. That's not right. That's not good."

Amanda Bain, who joined the protest, said she has withdrawn her children from public school. She hopes the mask requirement will end.

"We're just upset about our kids having to wear masks, taking away a lot of their childhood and their freedoms," Bain said. "We're just fighting it."

— Samantha O'Conner