

COVID:

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certainly an undercount because only a small percentage of cases were sequenced to confirm if they were delta. Carrie Brogoitti, Public Health administrator at the Center for Human Development, La Grande, reported Union County at the time was sequencing just 3-5% of positive cases.

Dr. Bill Messer, an associate professor in the department of microbiology and immunology and the division of infectious diseases at Oregon Health & Science University, at the time said the state was two weeks behind in its sequencing.

Health care experts urged people to get vaccinated to stave off a spike of delta infections that again would tax hospitals.

CORONAVIRUS SURGES IN SUMMER

LA GRANDE — A fifth wave of the virus surged in the summer, leading to more strain on hospitals and forcing events to again shut down or change their usual operations.

“The highly contagious delta variant has increased tenfold in the past two weeks in Oregon, and it is now estimated to be associated with 80% of the new cases in Oregon,” said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state’s top epidemiologist, on July 27.

The result was an explosion of cases, and Union County was not immune.

By late July, the county reported an average of nine cases every day, more than three times higher than the case rate in early July. The county reported 19 cases on July 26, the highest one-day count since January. By Aug. 5, the county averaged 13.2 cases per day.

For several months before, the 25 beds at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, were plenty for the county’s low COVID-19 rates. But the spike stretched the hospital’s resources thin, and as the county’s only hospital, GRH took on the responsibility of caring for COVID-19 patients brought in from smaller hospitals in Eastern Oregon, such as Enterprise’s Wallowa Memorial Hospital.

Of the 25 intensive care unit beds across six counties in Eastern Oregon, only three were available on Aug. 6, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Along with this, four COVID-related deaths were reported on Aug. 4, raising Union County’s pandemic death total to 28.

According to Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo, county and health officials met on Aug. 4 to discuss the possibility of bringing back COVID-19 restrictions, but no changes were made.

“If anybody wants to wear masks, that is their right to do so,” he said.

A summer wore on and Union and Wallowa counties experienced record high COVID-19 cases in August, many late-summer and early-fall events were canceled or modified.

HQ on Depot Street put its open mic nights and concerts on



Dick Mason/The Observer

The Elgin memorial bench, installed in December 2021, sits between the Elgin Museum and the Elgin Opera House and honors those who died over the past two years.

hold. The Celebrate La Grande End of Summer Block Party on Sept. 9 was transformed into a drive-thru food offering at the Union County Fairgrounds. Event organizers in Wallowa County, which had 180 positive cases in August, canceled Oregon’s Alpenfest, the Juniper Jam Music Festival and Hells Canyon Mule Days. The annual Wallowa Valley Festival of the Arts, the largest fine art exhibition in Eastern Oregon, limited patrons and required masks and social distancing.

NATIONAL GUARD ACTIVATED AT SEVERAL AREA HOSPITALS

LA GRANDE — National Guard members arrived at many Eastern Oregon hospitals as the COVID-19 pandemic reached its apex in cases caused by the virulent delta variant.

By mid-September, four of the six Northeastern Oregon counties had National Guard members present at their hospitals. It was a welcome reprieve for the many hospital workers who were facing labor shortages on top of grueling hours brought on by the ongoing pandemic, in which waves of cases broke against the willpower of the now battle-hardened nurses, doctors and hospital staff that had been fighting the virus for nearly 18 months.

Many of the National Guard members called in to serve did so in ancillary and tertiary roles — cleaning up ward rooms and preparing meals were among some of the duties.

To be sure, the respite afforded to the hospitals was more than welcomed. Labor shortages meant that many chores around the wards were left unattended while necessary tasks might have had overqualified personnel manning the stations, such as a nurse doing door screening for COVID-19.

“That helps us be able to deploy our clinical people back to clinical work,” said

Priscilla Lynn, president and chief nursing officer at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City.

As the omicron variant is poised to become the dominant strain in the United States, it could be possible that the National Guard is called in once more to assist the ailing hospitals in their fight against the pandemic.

SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES

LA GRANDE — Throughout 2021 the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on everyday life, from protective face masks to the way we gather. Another major change was the supply chain shortage, as grocery stores, the housing market, food banks and more felt the repercussions.

Customers witnessed empty shelves at grocery stores and reduced hours at local restaurants as workers elected to stay home. The supply chain backup had individuals concerned over sporadic shortages, from turkey on Thanksgiving to everyday household items.

The shortage of lumber and inflation played a large role in the housing market, with the inventory of real estate at all-time lows and the demand and prices of houses near an all-time high. In La Grande, Federal Reserve Economic Data showed that in June, houses stayed on the market for an average of 36.5 days. While that average was up to 53 days in October, the city still is in a seller’s market as 2021 concludes.

“I don’t know if it’s all necessarily from COVID, but inventory has definitely been more scarce. It’s been much harder for buyers in the last year, year-and-a-half,” said Anna Goodman, principal broker at Eagle Cap Realty in La Grande. “At some point it’s going to level out, but the supply shortage is playing a big role.”

The supply chain woes even reached local schools, impacting students’ lunches. Those issues

prompted state leaders with the Oregon Department of Education to issue temporary waivers for schools for nutritional requirements.

Officials grappled with brokering deals with new suppliers to get food to the students. And, with supplies short on hand, school cooks had to improvise to get food out to hungry students.

During fire season, a jet fuel shortage raised concern over possible danger in the case of a large wildfire. Airport officials lacked the necessary fuel as demand saw a major increase in the wildfire season.

“We haven’t run into that before,” said Jessica Gardetto, a National Interagency Fire Center spokesperson in Boise and a former wildland firefighter. “It’s a scary thought, with all the shortages going on.”

SAYING GOODBYE TO THOSE LOST

ELGIN — The downtown decor of Elgin has a new addition that may prove to be as timeless as the memories of those it honors. In December, a granite bench was installed on Main Street between the Elgin Opera House and the Elgin Museum, dedicated to the memory of those who died in the Elgin area in 2020 and 2021.

The installation of the bench followed a service that took place in August honoring the approximately 75 people in the Elgin area who died the past two years. The service was conducted to give people a chance to honor family and friends for whom services were not conducted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has prevented many large gatherings, according to Lauri Ferring, pastor of the Elgin Harvesters Nazarene Church, who helped lead the project.

“They were not allowed the service their family and friends clearly needed. We wanted everyone to have a chance to say goodbye,” she said.

The granite bench, which

features polished engraved lettering, was purchased from La Grande’s Memorial Monuments. Kevin Loveland, the owner of Loveland Funeral Chapel, said granite memorials are known for holding up well.

“When they are polished they will last for hundreds of years,” said Loveland, who officiated as a volunteer at the August service.

“It was truly amazing. People were in tears and giving each other hugs,” Loveland said of the service.

The bench cost more than \$2,500 and was purchased with donated funds, many of which were contributed by local businesses and the families of loved ones the August service was for.

The program at the service listed the names of 31 people whose families and friends requested be honored at the memorial event. Others in the Elgin area or with roots in the community, who had died in 2020 and in the first eight months of 2021, were also honored.

IN-PERSON EVENTS RETURN IN THE WINTER

LA GRANDE — Toward the end of 2021, several holiday events took place that were missed in 2020. From Halloween trick-or-treating and Thanksgiving food banks to holiday fundraisers, Union County saw a large return of in-person events in 2021.

Guests packed the Blue Mountain Conference Center on Dec. 3 to bid on a variety of decorated Christmas trees and items to raise money for the Soroptimist International of La Grande, a nonprofit that works to improve the lives of women and girls through social and economic change. The Festival of Trees also featured a Family Fun Day on Dec. 4, which included photos with Santa Claus and a number of activities for children.

The Soroptimists were one of many groups to adjust to a new hybrid format, leaning on virtual participation last year — participants could reserve a table for in-person attendance or bid on items online. The 2021 Eastern Oregon Film Festival in October also used a hybrid model, hosting in-person showings for festival members while airing movies online.

“For us to be able to manage the festival this year, we have to limit that all-access festival pass to just our members,” Eastern Oregon Film Festival Director Chris Jennings said. “Because we’ve had such a large response in artists who are coming, we need to make sure we can serve up the festival in person to visiting artists and major members as well as having everything else available online virtually.”

Holiday parades lifted spirits across Union County. La Grande’s parade and tree lighting returned on Dec. 3 as a crowd came out to watch locals march down Adams Avenue to ring in the holiday season. The event was canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic. This year Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus were embraced by a large gathering at Max Square as the community lit the tree.

COVID TOP STORIES