

Advisory

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Inversions can persist for many days, during which smoke and other pollutants accumulate.

Typically, air temperature drops as elevation increases, which is why it's usually colder in the mountains than in adjacent valleys.

But that situation is reversed during an inversion.

As an illustration of the phenomenon, at 8 a.m. on Friday, Jan. 14, the temperature at the top of the chairlift at Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, elevation nearly 8,000 feet, was 32 degrees. At the same time it was 23 degrees at the Baker City Airport, elevation 3,376 feet, 7 degrees along Highway 7 at the Sumpter Junction, elevation 4,245 feet, and 12 degrees at North Powder, elevation 3,255 feet.

The hourly air quality index at sites around Oregon is available online at <https://oraqi.deq.state.or.us/home/map>.

The lone air quality measuring station in Baker County, atop the David J. Wheeler Federal Building in Baker City, had been offline from Jan. 6 through Friday morning, Jan. 14.

But Lauren Wirtis, a public affairs specialist with the DEQ, said DEQ employees were able to get the station operating again. As of 11 a.m. on Jan. 14, the air quality index in Baker City was 18, which is in the good (0-50) category.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

This scene from Flagstaff Hill on Friday, Jan. 14, 2022, shows how a temperature inversion — with warm air trapping cold air near the ground — can result in a layer of clouds over Baker Valley.

Clinic

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Turk was accompanied by Ashlenn Robertson, who said she was offering moral support.

Robertson said she received her booster dose during the Baker County Health Department's most recent drive-thru clinic, on Dec. 12-14.

Terry Fosback and Sherry Buxton received their booster doses as well during the Jan. 13 event.

"The doctor told us to get boosters," Fosback said.

Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, said she was pleased with the turnout during the clinic, which ran from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The clinic boosted Baker County's vaccine dose number to its highest one-day total since Dec. 14, the last of the three days of the clinic. A total of 445 doses were administered in the county during that three-day period, most of them at the clinic, also at the Fairgrounds.

Since then the county's seven-day running daily average of doses given has dropped from 90 to 20.

The Jan. 13 clinic happened during the county's biggest surge in COVID-19 cases since September.

Baker County reported 36 cases on Thursday, Jan. 13, the second-highest one-day total during the pandemic.

The record high is 37 cases, on Sept. 9, 2021, and Sept. 14, 2021.

For the first 12 days of Jan-



Samantha O'Conner/Baker City Herald

About 85 doses of COVID-19 vaccines were given during a drive-thru clinic on Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022, at the Baker County Fairgrounds.

uary, the county reported 197 cases. That's more than the totals for December (106), November (143) and October (168).

The daily case rate of 16.4 exceeds that of September, which set records with 465 total cases and a daily average of 15.5.

Staten said that although the Health Department is receiving a handful of positive test results from residents who did at-home tests, she believes more people have been infected recently than the official numbers show.

Breakthrough cases and hospitalizations

During the most recent week tallied, Jan. 2-8, Baker County had 35 breakthrough cases — infections in fully vaccinated people — out of 91 total, a rate of 38.5%.

Oregon's overall breakthrough rate for that week was 26.4%, according to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

Health officials say the breakthrough case rate is likely to increase, as the now-dominant omicron variant is more likely to infect vaccinated people.

But officials also note that vaccination continues to reduce the risk for developing severe symptoms that require hospital treatment.

In December, breakthrough cases accounted for 19.7% of the 188 COVID-19-related deaths in Oregon, according to OHA. Statistics on breakthrough case deaths are not available at the county level.

Omicron is also less virulent than the delta variant that drove the surge last summer, which peaked in Baker

County in mid-September.

OHA reported on Thursday, Jan. 13, that across the state, 777 people with COVID-19 were being treated in hospitals. That's an increase of 32% from Jan. 6, but it's below the peak of about 1,200 patients in early September 2021.

The number of patients currently in intensive care in Oregon is also well below all-time records. There were 144 COVID-19 patients in intensive care in the state on Jan. 13, compared with about 310 in early September 2021.

Staten said she was encouraged by the turnout to the Jan. 13 vaccination clinic because "our best line of defense is being vaccinated and boosted."

She said the growing evidence that omicron is less likely to cause severe illness or death is welcome. But she said the sheer number of cases means more people are likely to need medical treatment than was the case during most of the fall.

"I want to be optimistic but I also want to be realistic," Staten said. "Hopefully we won't see the level of hospitalizations that we did with the (delta) variant."

Testing clinic set for Jan. 22

The Health Department will have a free COVID-19 testing clinic on Saturday, Jan. 22 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the former Baker Clinic building at 3175 Pocahontas Road, just east of Saint Alphonsus Medical Center.

People are encouraged to pre-register at doineeda-covid19test.com.

Prosecutors

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But perhaps the biggest reason why lawyers have given the cold shoulder to Eastern Oregon attorney offices is salaries in the rural areas have not been able to compete with the metropolitan areas.

According to the economic survey from the Oregon State Bar, the gap is significant. Median income for the 2017 survey shows an average Oregon lawyer can expect a salary of \$105,000 per year. Eastern Oregon attorneys will see \$84,000. Portland attorneys, however, will earn \$125,000, or nearly 20% more than the Oregon average and roughly 50% more than those working in Eastern Oregon. That \$41,000 a year difference means student loans can be paid off much faster.

But those averages, which cover all attorneys, not just prosecutors, still are higher than the advertised salary posted for many Eastern Oregon counties.

Union County, which has one open position, offers a starting salary of about \$56,000 a year and going up to \$92,000 a year based on experience. Morrow County, which has no deputy district attorney at the moment, advertises \$68,400 per year with the ability to earn up to an additional \$30,000 per year by doing county and city work. Umatilla County pays up to \$77,000 for an entry level deputy district attorney.

Wallowa County's open position advertises a yearly salary of just over \$52,000. Frolander said the salary for a prosecutor was raised recently, but has yet to attract any prosecutors to join the team in Wallowa County. While the district attorney's office waits for applicants, the lack of qualified staff means cases sometimes don't receive the attention they deserve.

"There are cases that I have resolved for less than I wanted to," Frolander said, "and there have been cases I've declined to prosecute due to resources."

Frolander also said the coronavirus pandemic had created a traffic jam of cases that has yet to clear, further impacting the office's ability to prosecute crimes.

"Prosecutors should be able to make decisions on whether to pursue a criminal action, based on the merits of the case, rather than on the resources available," Carpenter wrote. "However, that is exactly the position many prosecutors in Northeastern Oregon are in at the moment. The lack of available deputy prosecutors and the lack of funding to attract the qualified applicants leave us in the position of making resource based decisions every day."

Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus said his office was able to increase the salary, but he said that money isn't the sole cause of hiring woes in Eastern Oregon.

"I think that regionally, it plays a role in what we're doing. I think it's also less desirable to be a prosecutor," Primus said.

County

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industries, to either be vaccinated or receive a medical or religious exemption.

Commission Chairman Bill Harvey said the work session was scheduled to ensure people had a chance to express their views.

Commissioners made no decision about whether or not to adopt the ordinance.

"We're here just to listen to you because the last meeting we had we were not able to give everybody the opportunity to speak," Harvey said. "That's all we're asking."

Kody Justus told commissioners that although the proposed resolution is "somewhat redundant," he supports its adoption.

"I think our county officials with their oaths of office, they already understand and have

promised to follow the federal and state constitution," said Justus, a former candidate for the county commission. "The issues that I have, I think it would be a great idea to have a committee or something in the county to help understand what the constitution actually says on certain matters."

Curtis Martin of North Powder said he thinks the chief goal should be "a return to true represented government at the county level."

"And I don't mean that in the generic term, I mean it in specific terms," Martin said. "We already have one commissioner who decided to go off and not be here and join virtual because he considers this mask mandate and this social distancing as law. It's not law; it's a mandate that does not have the authority or the validation to make those edicts."

Martin was referring to Commissioner Bruce Nichols,

who participated in the work session remotely.

Martin said Baker County United is asking commissioners to stand strong and emphasize that "we have authority, at the county level, that we're not going to let the state or federal come over" and enforce mandates that are "totally unconstitutional."

Penny Rienks said many people could not attend the meeting as they were "trying to save their businesses that these mandates have destroyed."

"When are we the citizens of the United States, state, county, and city, going to start standing up for our God-given rights?" Rienks said. "That is why we need to be a constitutional county. We need to have our constitution abided by."

Debbie Henshaw reminded commissioners that they work for the citizens and that they promised, in their oaths of office, to uphold both the state

and federal constitutions.

Harvey, in responding to the mask mandate, said the county is obligated to enforce it for county employees only.

"We have no legal authority to mandate that any citizen do something else," Harvey said. "So, there is no mask mandate from Baker County other than the employees that we have to deal with and that's because of OSHA and SAIF. That's what we have, that's why you're allowed to do whatever you want to do here today."

He said he will not support mask or vaccination mandates. Karen Riener of Richland talked about the mixing of government and corporate rule.

"Because we are very concerned about COVID, but we are also concerned about religious beliefs," Riener said. "I do not have the shot because of religious beliefs. But you have to remember when these

70TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

The Guymons

Gary Guymon, Teri Swanson and Tim Guymon are marking the "amazing milestone" of their parents, Pat and Nadine Guymon, as the Baker City couple celebrates their 70th wedding anniversary on Jan. 18, 2022.

Their children wish to honor their parents' long-term, unwavering love, dedication and commitment to each other and their God upon which they have built their wonderful lives, blessing the community they call home.



Contributed Photo

Pat and Nadine Guymon of Baker City will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary on Jan. 18.

Pierce

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"Incumbency is worth a lot," he said during an interview with the Baker City Herald the afternoon of Jan. 12.

Another difference this year is who's likely to be on the general election ballot.

Betsy Johnson, a former Democratic state legislator, resigned her position last fall to run for governor, but as an independent, not a Democrat.

Several prominent Democrats, including House Speaker Tina Kotek, who is resigning from the Legislature Jan. 21, and Tobias Read, Oregon state treasurer, are seeking their party's nomination.

Pierce believes that with two Democrats on the general election ballot — Johnson and the party's nominee — votes from Democrats, who outnumber registered Republicans by about 34%, could be divided enough to give the Republican candidate "a pathway to victory."

Pierce acknowledged that Johnson, who is generally considered more moderate than the leading Democratic candidates, could also attract Republican votes.

But overall, Pierce believes a general election with both Johnson and a Democratic nominee on the ballot benefits the Republican candidate.

"Republican voters tend to back the Republican candidate," he said.

Pierce said he has also noticed during his campaigning that, unlike in 2016, Oregon voters don't seem satisfied with the current political leadership.

He describes this as a "roiled electorate."

Pierce said he senses that many voters, including Democrats, in effect want to "punish" the party in charge, and in Oregon that's been the Democratic Party for many years, with its supermajorities in the Legislature.

"People rightfully feel that their government isn't responsive to them," he said.

In Eastern Oregon in particular, Pierce said, that includes a failure by state officials to advocate on behalf of residents with regard to how the vast swathes of public land is managed by federal agencies.

Half of Baker County's 2 million acres are managed by either the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management.

Pierce said he believes timber from those public lands should be used to benefit the economy, locally and statewide, rather than relying on obtaining those resources from outside the state or country.

Although Brown won't be on the ballot, Pierce said he doesn't think the Democratic

candidate can deflect blame for voter dissatisfaction — especially if a current state official, such as Kotek or Read, is the nominee.

The pandemic, and specifically Brown's response to it, is among the issues that Pierce believes is fueling that dissatisfaction.

He contends that Democrats need to "accept responsibility" for the state-ordered restrictions that in his view were "more disruptive than they needed to be" to the economy and to public schools.

Pierce, who treats cancer patients five days per week, said he was vaccinated as soon as vaccines were available, in December 2020 and January 2021. He said he had a breakthrough infection last fall, but had mild symptoms.

He believes the current surge in infections due to omicron will "quiet down" relatively soon.

"I think we're on the right path," Pierce said.

He criticizes Brown for what he considers a consistent lack of positive, encouraging statements.

"The messaging was damagingly pessimistic," Pierce said. "A steady drumbeat of disaster."

He said Brown's executive orders for mask and vaccine mandates were "not appropriate" and that citizens should make their decisions.

In a Jan. 6, 2022, speech kicking off his campaign at the Willamette Heritage Center near Salem, Pierce said he believes "the majority of us will voluntarily receive life protecting vaccines. All people in their daily lives will decide proper precautions for their health and vigor."

Pierce believes another focus of his campaign — improving public safety — will resonate with voters even in Democratic strongholds such as Multnomah County. Pierce thinks the riots that played out in downtown Portland on more than 100 consecutive nights in 2020, and the record number of homicides in the city in 2021, have left many voters looking for new leaders, regardless of the party, who will make it a priority to punish criminals.

During his Jan. 6 speech, Pierce said: "Imagine when we can once again safely walk the streets of our cities in Oregon."

Pierce said his campaign will focus, in addition to public safety, on finding a solution to the homeless crisis that benefits communities and those who need shelter, bettering public schools and creating a more hospitable climate for business.

Pierce said he would like the next governor to spend more time outside Salem, potentially living elsewhere in the state for a month or so occasionally.

declare that order illegal and unconstitutional.

Justus spoke again, saying the county needs to "protect our ability to disagree with each other."

"My fear is if we start letting decisions be made in different government, state or federal level, if it's something that's outside of what the constitution says they are able to do, we're going to give away our ability to disagree," he said.

Harvey said the commissioners, through the federal coordination process, have blocked actions such as the Blue Mountain Forest Plan revision process, preventing further road closures and restrictions on the use of public lands that make up half of Baker County's 2 million acres.

"Baker County is one of the only counties left that has our rights intact. So, we do battle, we do fight back, and we are, I believe, winning," Harvey said.