

# EOU students and staff eager to finally take off their masks

BY DICK MASON  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Daniel Fuchs was happy to see the change. Eastern Oregon University lifted its mandate for wearing masks on campus indoors beginning Saturday, March 12, in accordance with the state's plan. The lifting of the mask mandate came about two years after it was imposed. "I'm excited. There is something really good about being able to see people's faces," Fuchs, a freshman at EOU, said last week. "It is important to be able to see people's faces when interacting with them because it lets you see their emotions." Gov. Kate Brown last month announced the current mask requirements will expire at 11:59 p.m. March 11, citing decreasing cases, hospitalizations and a strategic alignment with the lifting of mask mandates in Washington and California. Brown announced Oregon's accelerated timeline Feb. 28 on the two-year anniversary of the state's first known COVID-19 infection, saying residents must "learn to live with the virus" while maintaining vigilance going forward. EOU freshman Eli Millington is also looking forward to being mask free because



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

**Dr. Lau Vargas studies in the campus library at Eastern Oregon University on Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021. Eastern Oregon University lifted its mandate for wearing masks indoors Saturday, March 12, in accordance with the state's plan. The requirement has been in place for two years at EOU.**

it will make interacting with others less difficult. "I'll enjoy not having to wear a mask in class. It will make it much easier to communicate," Millington said. EOU women's soccer coach Jake Plocher said EOU's students have been good about following the mask mandate rule, but he senses they are ready to start going mask free. "I can tell they are ready to get back to normal," he said. Brian Avila, EOU's head athletic equipment manager, is eagerly anticipating the lifting of the mask mandate be-

cause it will make it easier to communicate. He explained that when he is in an environment where it is hard to hear people talking he likes to read lips, something masks make impossible. Avila noted that when he first started wearing masks the strings made the skin around his ears sore. Today, though, he feels no soreness because of calluses that have developed. While he has become accustomed to wearing masks indoors, he is happy the mandate is being lifted. "It will be good to be back

to normalcy," he said. Eastern will continue to monitor COVID-19 cases and will remain in contact with local and state health officials as it moves through changes in other safety and health protocols. State and federal requirements for wearing masks in health care settings, within public transit and in other specialized settings will remain in place after March 12, according to a press release from the school. Masks will still have to be worn at EOU's student health center, said Vicky Hart, EOU public information representative. Ron Wheeler, EOU's food services general manager, is particularly looking forward to not wearing a mask. He noted that he came to Eastern two years ago, which means he has never been on campus when masks were not required. He feels good about Eastern's COVID-19 status because he said a high percentage of its students are vaccinated for COVID-19. Wheeler said that masks and sanitizing supplies will still be available to students. "We have raised sanitizing to a new level," he said. "Sanitizing stations are now everywhere you go."

# Advisory panel weighs comments on paid family and medical leave

BY PETER WONG  
Oregon Capital Bureau

An advisory panel seeks public comments as it writes rules for how Oregon will offer paid family and medical leave, which is scheduled to start next year. The Legislature approved the program in 2019. But last year, it extended the deadlines from Jan. 1, 2022, to Jan. 1, 2023, for the program to collect its first payroll taxes — workers will pay 60% and employers 40% of the fund — and from Jan. 1 to Sept. 3, 2023, for the first payments of benefits. Oregon will join eight states

and Washington, D.C., with similar programs. Workers who earn at least \$1,000 during the previous year would qualify for up to 12 weeks of paid family leave, the maximum benefit set at \$1,215 per week. "We remain on track and on budget," David Gerstenfeld, acting director of the Oregon Employment Department, told reporters in a briefing on Wednesday, March 9. Oregon's program is more generous than a proposal last year by President Joe Biden for a federal program, which

would offer up to \$4,000 per month. The House has passed a program that proposes four weeks of benefits, but it is part of a broader plan of social supports — known as Build Back Better — that has stalled in the Senate. It is highly uncertain whether a federal program will emerge. Nine members will advise the Employment Department on rules required to carry out the law. Gerstenfeld says one rule will focus on how workers obtain benefits. "Topics include how much money someone may receive

in a benefit year, how people apply for paid-leave benefits, how we will verify whether someone is eligible, and if and how workers must give notice to their employers to use paid leave," he said. "This is an opportunity to provide feedback on these rules. There will be more in the coming months." The advisory committee has scheduled a second virtual meeting from 9 a.m. to noon on March 17. It held a similar meeting March 10. Advance registration is required for participation: [bit.ly/3w1Cdq2](https://bit.ly/3w1Cdq2)

## Money

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Ash said the state statute for forgery includes situations in which a person uses a "forged instrument," including counterfeit money. Michael Small was arraigned Monday afternoon on a lesser charge, third-degree theft, rather than felony forgery. The investigation is continuing, District Attorney Greg Baxter said. Although the bills are printed with words that they are to be used only as movie props, Ash said the bills are realistic and that the movie prop warning "blends in with the bill quite well." He said the paper also feels similar to legitimate currency. Ash said it doesn't surprise him that an employee would not notice the bills were counterfeit while processing a normal transaction. He said on Monday morning, March 14, that he wasn't sure whether deputies had gone to the site where Small said he found the counterfeit bills among the other items.

## Resolution

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The mask mandate ended March 11, and Brown has also ended the vaccination requirement. Jake Brown of Halfway, representing Baker County United, told commissioners on Dec. 15 that "we are merely asking you commissioners to double down on the liberty that we already are afforded in the Constitution and Bill of Rights." The proposed resolution states, among other things, that "all actions by the federal government and its agents will conform strictly and implicitly with the principles expressed within the United States Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights." After discussing the resolu-

tion Dec. 15, commissioners scheduled a work session on Jan. 12 at the Baker County Events Center to solicit comments from the public about the proposal. More than 40 people attended that meeting, and several encouraged commissioners to approve the resolution. Commissioners did not take any action then. Commission Chairman Bill Harvey said he did not support the mandates that Brown had enacted through executive order. Commissioner Bruce Nichols, although he has expressed concerns about the mandates, said during the Jan. 12 meeting that executive orders from the governor's office have the force and effect of law until the legislature changes that authority or until the courts declare such orders illegal and unconstitutional.

## Raffle

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Capa rides in an SUV that the department bought with money from fundraisers and donations. "When we started the K-9 program back in 2009, then Chief (Wyn) Lohner made it very apparent to the (city) council that the only way we could continue to do it was if it was based totally off of community donations because we didn't have the money nor did we want to burden the taxpayers more," Chastain said. Phoebe Wachtel, administrative assistant and car seat technician for the police de-

partment, said the city appreciates the support of the sponsors for the raffle prizes. Travis Cook won the grand prize, a 2021 Can Am Maverick XDS RR Turbo side-by-side ATV. Cliff's Saws and Cycles sold the ATV at a discounted price for the raffle. Alvin Dockweiler won the second prize, a Tikka .300 Winchester magnum hunting rifle with a scope. Patton Excavating donated the rifle, and D&B Supply donated the scope. Tyler Hufford won the Traeger Pro 780 wood pellet grill, the third-place prize, donated by Lew Brothers Les Schwab Tires.

## Museum

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**Extraordinary Women exhibit**  
The exhibit "Extraordinary Women of Baker County" continues this season. Weems said they decided to extend it for a year longer than originally planned. A display about the Chinese presence in Baker County will open in 2023.

Weems said the "Extraordinary Women" display has been redesigned and updated. "We added some things," she said.

For example, the section dedicated to Phyllis Badgley now features several of her original pressed flower cards.

Another addition came when Weems received a phone call from a woman who wanted to donate a friendship quilt made by members of the Baker City Methodist Church that includes 130 stitched names. "One of them happened to be Myrtle Lee," Weems said.

Lee, who became superintendent of Baker schools in 1943, is included in the exhibit. The quilt is on display near her section.

Other featured females include Johanna Packwood, who arrived in Auburn as a schoolteacher in 1862, and Nellie McCarty, who participated in four bank robberies between 1891 and 1892 with the McCarty Gang.

### Volunteer support

The museum is supported by the Friends of the Baker Heritage Museum, a volunteer group that raises money



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

**The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center is creating exhibits inside the Baker Heritage Museum. This to-scale replica of display plans offers a sneak peek of what the center will unveil in May.**



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald  
**The display "Extraordinary Women of Baker County" continues this year at the Baker Heritage Museum. It includes information on Myrtle Lee, who became superintendent of Baker Schools in 1943.**

for exhibits, maintenance, and other needs. Weems said volunteers are also needed for daily activities inside the museum. "We have jobs for everyone," she said. Anyone interested in getting

involved can call the museum at 541-523-9308. Updates on events are posted on the Facebook page, or check these websites: [www.bakerheritagemuseum.com](http://www.bakerheritagemuseum.com) or [www.friendsofbakerheritagemuseum.com](http://www.friendsofbakerheritagemuseum.com).

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