



James Hooper, right, a cath lab tech, stands with more than 100 others during a strike at St. Charles Bend on Thursday. The striking workers are part of the Oregon Federation of Nursing and Health Professionals.

Photos by Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Strike

Continued from A1

Both sides have come together 28 times since the union was formed in 2019.

Still, union workers were excited and hopeful, said Frank DeWolf, a St. Charles cardiac catheterization lab technologist.

The hospital offered a bargaining session on Wednesday with the union and a federal mediator, but the union declined. A requirement of that meeting was that the union had to cancel the strike, rather than just delay it. It was unclear if there were conditions for the late night meeting, as well.

“This is a sad day,” said Aaron Adams, president of St. Charles Bend, in a prepared statement. “We want to come to an agreement with our caregivers and have attempted to do so repeatedly. But we also have an important job to do and responsibility to our community. Our focus is taking care of our patients.”

The union has called for an open-ended strike that has no end date.

A meeting is scheduled with a federal mediator for March 10. The last time the two sides were at the bargaining table was in December. The hospital said it has to hire trained replacement workers and the community should feel confident in the care provided.

From the picket line, Kristen Keim, a St. Charles Bend scrub technician for the past 4½ years, said she just wants the same pay benefits that nurses get, particularly wage differential for night and evening work.

“We never wanted this to happen in the first place,” Keim



Striking workers show their signs to passers-by at St. Charles in Bend on Thursday.



George Wainscott, a family birthing CST, rallies the crowd during a strike at St. Charles in Bend on Thursday.

said. “We are hoping that St. Charles will get their act together and realize that they need to value us, and the patients need us.”

“We just want to live here, make a livable wage, take care of our patients, retain people.”

St. Charles Health System, which operates the Bend hospital, said Wednesday in a prepared statement that there are two items on the table: com-

pensation and union security.

The health system said, in a prepared statement, that it ended 2020 about \$21 million below its financial targets even after federal grant money from the the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. Losses were incurred due to the period of time when the hospital could not perform scheduled surgeries as a way to regulate hospital patient loads

in case of a surge of COVID-19 patients.

St. Charles is experiencing a difficult start to 2021 as well, after posting an operating loss of \$4.9 million in the month of January, the hospital said in a prepared statement.

“We have put our caregivers and our patients first throughout this pandemic, which has been hard on us financially,” Adams said in the statement issued Wednesday. “It is unfortunate that (the union) is now adding to that financial strain.”

X-ray technologist Kate Wells, who has worked at St. Charles for a dozen years, said she never thought she’d have to go on strike.

“We are not asking that much, and they have whittled down our negotiations to the point where we won’t go any lower,” Wells said. “We are just requesting the least amount of respect they can give us, and they are not willing to give us that. So it’s very frustrating.”

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Virus

Continued from A1

With a positive test rate of 3.9%, Oregon is firmly on track for numbers to continue downward statewide, and 1 million vaccine shots have been administered to residents.

The governor said she made the decision to waive the restrictions “recognizing the challenges businesses encounter when facing a switch back and forth between extreme risk and other risk levels,” Brown said.

The drop to the higher risk level meant that restaurants could offer limited indoor dining, a key change during the cold, wet winter months that have stretched into March.

Higher numbers would have required a return to the tighter restrictions on businesses, dining, and activities. Brown’s message did not include any changes to rules covering counties already in the extreme risk level.

Brown had announced Feb. 23 that 10 counties had dropped out of the extreme risk level, the highest of the four-tier rating system that also includes high risk, moderate and lower. The higher the risk level, the more restrictions are in place on businesses, dining and activities.

It was a dose of good news after a period in which most of the state had been in extreme risk at one point or another.

“For the second time in a row, we are seeing great progress in stopping the spread of COVID-19 across Oregon and saving lives,” Brown said on Feb. 23.

Of the counties on the extreme risk rating prior to Feb. 23, Brown announced seven had dropped one step to higher risk: Crook, Jackson, Lane, Marion, Polk, Umatilla and Yamhill counties. Malheur and Union dropped to medium, while Wasco fell all

the way to lower.

Five counties: Benton, Coos, Douglas, Jefferson and Josephine are currently on the extreme list.

Risk level adjustments are made every two weeks. But measurements are taken every Friday and analyzed each Monday. The numbers are published weekly, with the period between reassignments called “the warning week.”

With the next assignment of risk levels set to be announced March 9 and go into effect March 12, state officials evidently saw some counties trending back up to extreme risk.

Brown’s office did not say what counties were of concern. The “warning week” numbers indicate trends, but the final status would also be determined adding in the as-yet unknown statistics of this week through Friday.

Of those that dropped out of the extreme risk category but are showing a reverse in trends during the warning week are Jackson and Malheur counties. Among medium and small counties, Baker showed an increase in cases and infection rate.

Less clear is the status of Marion County, which includes Salem. It has seen a moderate upswing in numbers. State health officials and the governor will make the final decisions based on the most recent data.

The drop in infections was part of the recent good news that has seen overall new infections down from their winter holiday period highs. A third vaccine, made by Johnson & Johnson, has arrived in the state and the first 100 doses sent to each county, with a total of 34,000 expected to immediately follow.

But there was cautionary news as well. Two potentially more virulent and easier to spread versions of the virus showed up in Oregon.

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OSU

Continued from A1

“These plans provide me with the confidence that we are on our way back to a more traditional fall term, including predominantly in-person instruction on our campuses and on-site research, engagement, and extracurricular programs and activities,” Alexander wrote in the email.

It is still too early to know exactly what a more open fall term will look like, Coffin noted. It will depend on the state’s COVID-19 guidelines, as well as if the numerous COVID-19 variants pose a threat, she said.

“We need to be ready to adjust, should the variants increase infections, or should public health guidelines change,” Coffin told The Bulletin on Thursday.

OSU-Cascades’ student dorms have been at half capacity for the entirety of the 2020-21 school year, and between 40-50% of courses have been online-only.

The university expects the majority of classes in the fall to be held in-person, Coffin said. But some courses, like science labs, may still have capacity limitations.

“Because of the nature of what happens in a lab, with people moving around and not necessarily being stationary, we have less space to

provide (social distancing),” Coffin said.

The college hasn’t decided whether it will require mask-wearing on campus this fall, Coffin said. But because the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still recommends social distancing and wearing face masks even after being vaccinated, it’s likely there will still be a mask mandate, she said.

The possibility of allowing spectators at sporting events in Corvallis, including football, will depend on what state and Pac-12 Conference regulations look like come September, said OSU spokesperson Steve Clark.

Quentin Comus — a sophomore at OSU-Cascades who works in the student life office — said fellow student life employees are already preparing for the return of in-person extracurricular activities for fall term. This includes student clubs meeting again, outdoor movie nights and more, he said.

Comus is confident most students and staff will be vaccinated by the fall, and is excited to return to a more traditional college experience, he said.

“I think it’ll be great to have more people on campus,” said Comus, 19. “Coming into this fall, I think everyone will feel safe.”

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Highway

Continued from A1

“Why would the Legislature disapprove of this?” Tobiasson asked. “It doesn’t cost them a cent.”

There are nearly 100 signs honoring veterans installed on eight Oregon highways stretching more than 3,000 miles across the state. Each designated highway has between 10 and 18 signs, he said. That means drivers could see one veterans highway honor sign every 65 miles.

U.S. Highway 30 extends 3,073 miles to Boston on the East Coast. It is the only major highway in Oregon not designated to honor veterans. It crosses 11 states and is the nation’s third longest coast-to-coast highway.

Oregon’s section of the highway that winds along the Columbia River from the Astoria-Megler Bridge through Scappoose and Portland before heading east as part of Interstate 84, is the beginning of Tobiasson’s plans for the road. He’s working with veterans groups and lawmakers in 10 other states to get the same designation all the way to Boston.

Tobiasson’s Bend Heroes Foundation has also asked Congress to designate the

3,365-mile U.S. Highway 20, which begins at Newport on the Oregon Coast and heads east to Boston, the National Medal of Honor Highway. Oregon’s section of Highway 20 is already known as the Medal of Honor Highway.

SB 790 is also kind of an ending for Tobiasson. He has proposed similar bills since 2008 and testified 14 times in favor of legislation. When he’s finished with the U.S. Highway 30 project, just about every major highway in the state will honor veterans or service men and women missing in action.

Between World War I (1914) and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf (1990 and 2003), 6,000 Oregon soldiers, sailors — including Coast Guard — Marines, merchant seamen and airmen were killed. During that same time, about 15,000 Oregonians were wounded in combat and nearly 1,000 were prisoners. About 1,000 Oregonians remain missing in action from all of the conflicts.

Oregon highways Tobiasson and the foundation have designated include:

- U.S. Highway 395, from California to Washington, is the World War I Veterans Memorial Highway.
- Interstate 5, from California to Washington, is known

as the Korean War Veterans Memorial Highway and the Purple Heart Trail.

- A section of I-5 from Albany to Salem is the Atomic Veterans Memorial Highway.

- U.S. Highway 101, from Washington to California, is the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans Memorial Highway.

- A section of U.S. Highway 26, from the Highway 101 intersection to Idaho, is the POW/MIA Memorial Highway.

Tobiasson is already planning his Eastern Oregon trip later this year when U.S. Highway 30 is officially designated the Oregon Veterans Memorial Highway. He’s been to nearly every highway sign dedication ceremony, racking up more than 5,000 miles on his vehicle.

“We’ll have a big ceremony in Ontario,” Tobiasson said. “We should have Idaho officials there, because their bill should be done about the same time.”

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