

BRIEFING

Jobless claims at fewest since COVID

The number of people seeking unemployment benefits fell sharply last week to 684,000, the fewest since the pandemic erupted a year ago and a sign that the economy is improving.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell from 781,000 the week before. It is the first time that weekly applications for jobless aid have fallen below 700,000 since mid-March of last year. Before the pandemic tore through the economy, applications had never topped that level.

The number of people seeking benefits under a federal program for self-employed and contract workers also dropped, to 241,000, from 284,000 a week earlier. All told, the number of applicants fell below 1 million for the first time since the pandemic.

Economists are growing more optimistic that the pace of layoffs, which has been chronically high for a full year, is finally easing.

Income growth highest last year

Americans earned an additional \$1.1 trillion last year — the most ever in data dating back to 1930 — thanks entirely to stimulus checks and other government aid.

Total U.S. personal income rose 6.1% last year to \$19.7 trillion as a surge in pandemic-era aid outpaced gains in wages, property values and other sources of wealth, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

The dollar amount of so-called transfer receipts, which include COVID-19 relief payments, steered income growth in 26 states while increases in other types of personal income led in 25 including the District of Columbia, the preliminary estimates show.

The report illustrates how important government relief programs have been in helping to shore up Americans' finances as the world's largest economy recovers from the pandemic. On top of stimulus checks, an additional \$498 billion was doled out in state unemployment benefits last year, according to the data.

Suit claims Amazon fixed book prices

A proposed class-action lawsuit from a Seattle firm has added to the swarm of antitrust scrutiny gathering around Amazon.

The suit, filed Thursday in federal court in New York on behalf of Chicago-area bookseller Bookends and Beginnings, alleges Amazon colluded to fix prices on print books.

Amazon's restrictive contracts with major publishers has made it impossible for book retailers to try to beat Amazon on price, Seattle law firm Hagens Berman alleges in the suit. The contracts, with publishers Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster — known as the "Big Five" — prohibit the publishers from selling books to other retailers for less than the price they offer Amazon, provisions Hagens Berman has said are "anticompetitive." Amazon did not respond to questions about allegations in the suit.

— Bulletin wire reports

Travel Oregon plans grants for projects to spur tourism industry

BY JAMIE GOLDBERG
The Oregonian

Travel Oregon, the state's tourism office, is providing \$2.3 million in grants to fund projects across the state to help spur tourism as Oregon tries to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local governments, port districts, federally recognized

tribes, nonprofits and Oregon-based tour operators and guides can apply for up to \$100,000 in funding to support projects focused on improving infrastructure to safely welcome back tourists as the pandemic continues.

The agency will fund projects that support outdoor recreation, help guides and tour

companies operate, enable paid events and attractions to safely move forward, and improve business districts, including funding projects that create new outdoor spaces for visitors.

The application process will remain open until March 31. Projects must be completed by the end of November.

"The grants that we're pro-

viding today are going to aid communities and aid businesses in being well-positioned to be able to offer these great Oregon experiences in a very safe way," Travel Oregon CEO Todd Davidson said. "That's what we're focused on, making sure folks know they can travel in Oregon safely."

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Olive Garden boosts pay in sign of recovery

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN
The Associated Press

The company that runs the Olive Garden chain is raising pay for its workers and handing out one-time bonuses, a sign of optimism from the kind of casual sit-down restaurant that has been devastated by the pandemic.

Darden Restaurants said Thursday that every hourly restaurant worker will earn at least \$10 per hour including tips as of Monday. That will rise to \$11 per hour in 2022 and \$12 per hour in 2023.

Darden, which also runs LongHorn Steakhouse, Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen and other chains, said it will spend an additional \$17 million one-time bonuses for its nearly 90,000 hourly employees. Workers will receive between \$100 and \$300 depending on how many hours they work each week.

The company on Thursday reported a surprisingly strong quarter, and the pay hikes signal both confidence about an economic recovery and potentially increased competition for workers.

A year ago this month, Darden closed all of its dining rooms. Casual dining chains were especially hard hit because unlike pizza places or fast food chains, they had neither drive up windows nor well-established delivery service.

At one point, same-store sales at Darden, a key reading in retail for the health of a company, plunged 75%.

About 99% of Darden's dining rooms have since reopened with at least partial capacity. For the week ending March 21, same-store sales for the Orlando, Florida, company rose 5% compared with the same period in 2019.

About a third of Darden's sales still come from carryout orders, but the company expects that to shift back to the dining room as more people are vaccinated and the economy recovers.

"It's getting to a point where, you know, I think we're cautiously optimistic and excited about what's going to transpire here over the next few months, maybe few years," said CEO Eugene Lee during a call with industry analysts Thursday.

In the fiscal third quarter, which ended Feb. 28, Darden's sales fell 26% to \$1.73 billion, better than the \$1.6 billion Wall Street had expected, according to FactSet.

The company's net income fell 44% to \$128.7 million, or 98 cents per share. That easily beat the 70 cents analysts had forecast.

Darden said its average hourly worker makes \$17 per hour. But some currently make the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, so the raise will ensure that all workers make at least \$10 per hour.

OREGON LEGISLATURE

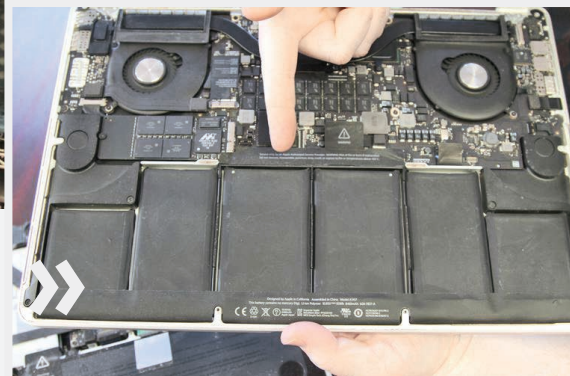
Tinkerers fight for their right to repair



Hilary Shohoney, the executive director of Free Geek, stands in front of a wall of older Mac laptops. She thinks computer manufacturers don't want old products repaired. They want people to buy new.

In some newer computers, technicians say the batteries have been glued down, making it just about impossible to replace them and keep the computer running.

Photos by Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting



BY KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL • Oregon Public Broadcasting

Blake Swensen remembers the day he fell in love with tinkering.

This was 50 years ago in Alaska, and the small plane his father was flying crashed. Swensen, 6 at the time, doesn't know whether it was an unexpected gust or the plane was too full of caribou meat, but either way, they were now in the middle of nowhere, it was snowing, and cell phones had yet to be invented.

Still, Swensen's dad found a way. "I just remember it being so interesting in how he accomplished this feat of getting that plane back together and working, and we were able eventually to fly it home."

Swensen now runs the Tinker Camp in Portland, a program that tries to teach kids that same lesson: "The challenge of it, the acquisition of knowledge. The thrill of doing something that not too many people do. ... Those kinds of things get you really charged up."

That's why he's supporting House Bill 2698, a bill pushing the "Right to Repair" and currently making its way through the Oregon legislature. The bill would require manufacturers to sell the parts, tools and manuals nec-

essary to fix any household product with a chip in it.

Anyone who has ever tried to replace a computer battery or fix a broken washing machine knows that manufacturers don't make it easy. They use screws with special heads that are hard to open, or they won't sell the necessary parts or provide the service manual.

An independent repair shop might charge \$200 to replace a battery, while sending it back to the manufacturer could cost three times as much.

"We need this to stay alive," said Hilary Shohoney, the executive director of Free Geek, a Portland nonprofit that takes secondhand computers and refurbishes them to donate and sell.

Standing in a closet, packed wall-to-wall with hundreds of Apple Macs, she explains that none work.

"Apple will tell me all the time that they're making it possible to buy parts, but there are limitations on that purchase ability, like we have to be able to sell an amount of new product every year that is outside of what we're actually able to do," Shohoney said. "The last time that we went to look to become Apple-certified the only place that we could find training was a dot on the map in the Philippines where

there were no roads and no information about how to contact them."

After hearing of Shohoney's problems, Apple provided OPB with a link to its independent repair program, which will give businesses the same parts, training and repair manuals used by authorized service providers.

Shohoney used the link to attempt to register. Days later she was still waiting. She said she'd be happy to send a tech to get trained, but Apple doesn't say how long that might take or where it might be. So she's looking at thousands of dollars in expenses, and Apple can still turn her down at any stage, for no reason.

"(They're) trying to make it so that we feel like it's too complicated to solve, and if we feel like it's too complicated to solve, maybe we'll just drop it," she said.

Kyle Wiens is the CEO of iFixit, a company that makes specialized tools to open computers and phones. He agrees with Shohoney: "They've put together a program to pretend like it means we that we don't need legislation, where actually no one is getting certified to Apple's program because they make it so difficult," he said.

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Fear, shootings drive sales spike for struggling Ruger

BY TODD C. FRANKEL
The Washington Post

In 2019, one of the nation's largest gunmakers, Sturm, Ruger and Company, was in trouble. Profits fell by half over three years. It shuttered factories for a few days here and there. No reason to make so many guns. A top competitor, Remington Outdoor, went bankrupt. So did a key Ruger distributor.

But everything changed for

Ruger — and the U.S. firearms industry — in 2020. The pandemic hit. People got nervous. Black Lives Matter protests and civil unrest filled the summer. And a presidential election loomed over it all. U.S. gun sales surged an estimated 60% last year to an all-time high.

Ruger chief executive Chris Killoy called the sales boom "historic" and "ferocious" in an earnings call with investors

on Feb. 18. Company profits jumped nearly 40%. Killoy said he saw a connection between the year-long turmoil and the sales explosion. But he'd never seen it like this.

"In my 30 years plus in the industry frankly, I think it's different than what we've seen in some of the past demand surges," Killoy said.

One model he mentioned as popular: the AR-556 pistol — a

smaller version of the AR-15 military-style rifle.

A month later, a Ruger AR-556 pistol was sold at a gun shop in Boulder, Colorado, bought by the alleged gunman who killed 10 people Monday at the King Soopers supermarket. Authorities have not said whether he used it. But he'd purchased it six days earlier, the same day as a mass shooting that killed eight people at

massage parlors in Atlanta.

Now, these two mass shootings are likely to spur even stronger gun sales, as President Joe Biden and some Democrats push for new gun regulations — launching a now-familiar cycle of fear over violence and the political reactions to it that generates more demand for guns, raising the potential for even more shootings.

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