

# Justice through technology: Circuit court continues work amid coronavirus distancing

In-person hearings restricted, jury trials postponed

By Rudy Diaz  
Blue Mountain Eagle

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of life and work, but the Grant County Circuit Court continues on with adjustments and technology.

Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters issued a revised order restricting in-person hearings on March 16, which has been adjusted as the pandemic continues.

“Primarily, we have moved all jury trials except those that have to be done because of statutory requirements,” said Senior Judge William D. Cramer Jr., who is presiding over Grant County Circuit Court. “We’re not doing jury trials unless we have to, but I do have one in-custody criminal case, and if I don’t release, then we’ll have to do a jury trial.”

Cramer said, if a jury trial is needed, jury selection will be conducted and people will be kept 6 feet apart from each other in the courtroom and the jury room. Cramer said the court hopes to avoid putting people in this situation, but there is a cleaning protocol the court follows.

“We are putting off as many jury trials as possible until June 1,” Cramer said.

There has also been a reduction in the amount of staff present at the circuit court, and many employees are starting to work from home. The court is maintaining two staff at the office, Cramer said.

Cramer advises the public to call the court ahead of time to see if the matter can be resolved by phone. If something needs to be brought in, a dropbox is set up at the office. The court is not doing any face-to-face discussion with the public, he said.

The court is also helping people by directing them to online resources to obtain documents.

Technology can also help maintain social distancing. Cramer said the courts in Eastern



Grant County Judge Scott Myers and Senior Judge William D. Cramer Jr. talk to each other at Cramer's retirement party on Jan. 2.

Eagle file photo



The Grant County Courthouse remains open, but many departments inside have closed or changed policies because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Eagle file photo

Oregon have been prepared, thanks to their experience using technology to accommodate for rural, remote areas.

“What we’ve been working on is getting really good conference calling information out to our partners so they can share that with their clients, and phone appearance is what we’ve been doing most of,” said Tammy Wheeler, the trial court administrator for Grant and Harney counties’ 24th Judicial District. “We have video conferencing in both of our court rooms in Grant and Harney, and those link up with our jails so that’s how we han-

dle our in-custody matters.”

Wheeler said a challenge has been that the Polycom video equipment the court uses is not compatible with Skype, Zoom and other video call services.

“We’re working towards a product called Cisco WebEx, and we’re getting ready to test this out with attorneys the first part of next week, and if you have the app, litigants, attorneys and witnesses will be able to use it,” Wheeler said. “There seems to be a desire with the attorneys to have a video conference where they can see their clients because they’re trying to avoid contact with people as well.”

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—Senior Judge William D. Cramer Jr.

Cramer said the software chosen is much less likely to get hacked or have information sold to another company by outside sources. Cramer added the judicial branch is carefully planning this out to protect people who call in or sign up for something like WebEx.

“The courts are open, and when crimes are committed, they are going to be addressed and people can still be held accountable,” Cramer said. “We’re addressing what we can address and at the same time trying to protect staff and the public.”

## Eastern highway growth

By Rudy Diaz  
Blue Mountain Eagle

Planning continues for Oregon Department of Transportation’s 2021-2024 State-wide Transportation Improvement Program, which has 44 projects planned for Eastern Oregon’s roads.

The public can comment until April 20 on projects in the current draft by visiting [openhouse.oregondot.org/oregon-draft-stip](http://openhouse.oregondot.org/oregon-draft-stip). A map shows specific projects and allows people to comment.

ODOT employees presented five projects at a public outreach meeting March 10 in John Day.

### I-84 Meacham-Kamela pavement upgrade

Sean Maloney from ODOT presented the I-84 Meacham-Kamela pavement upgrade project. Due to the severe winter weather, this a heavy chain area with high maintenance costs.

“Essentially, we’re resurfacing the freeway for 10.5 miles, and we are going to upgrade some safety,” Maloney said.

The passing lane will be resurfaced, which will have a 20-year life, and the truck/slow lane asphalt will be replaced with concrete and have a 50-year life. To increase safety, guardrails and median barriers will be upgraded, and a new cable median barrier will be installed.

These changes are expected to improve efficiency with longer life and durability against chain wear and improve safety by eliminating tire ruts.

The project is in design for 2019-2020 with construction scheduled for 2021-2022 with an estimated cost of \$50 million.

### U.S. 20/OR 201: Burns to Ontario

This section of Highway 20 and Highway 201 from Burns to Ontario includes narrow and curvy sections that force some oversized loads to use long detour routes, such as OR 78/U.S. 95. Also, during highway closures, trucks park along the highway, which causes a safety concern, Maloney said.

The plan is to create pull-out areas, which will allow oversized loads to safely travel and avoid using a detour. The plan would also improve various intersections, which cause safety concerns regarding truck parking issues.

The project will reduce travel time and money for haulers, and improve safety by reducing the number of trucks parked in travel lanes during road closures. The project is in design for 2020-2021 with construction scheduled for 2022-2023 with an estimated cost of \$12.6 million.

### OR 82: Bear Creek (Wallowa River) Bridge

Just outside of the city of Wallowa, an 80-year-old bridge on Highway 82 is in need of repair with deteriorating surfaces and an accumulation of debris and ice on the bridge at high water.

The plan is to replace the existing structure with a wider structure including two 12-foot travel lanes and two 8-foot shoulders and sidewalks, while improving the alignment. The structure will go from six spans to three.

The project will improve safety for the traveling public, reduce maintenance costs and improve fish passage in the river. The project is in design for 2019-2021 with construction scheduled for 2022 with an estimated cost of \$15.4 million.

### I-84: Exit 216 eastbound offramp traffic management

Howard Pastovit from ODOT said the eastbound offramp on I-84 at Exit 216 is one of the most frequently closed and congested locations in Eastern Oregon.

“Our existing method of closing is pretty inefficient,” Pastovit said. “It takes our maintenance crew from working on the road to maintaining the traffic, and we are looking at an automated system to take care of that.”

The plan is to install new variable message signs, variable speed limit signs, remotely controlled gates to close the eastbound interstate, blank-out signs to direct traffic and cameras and lighting to improve safety.

This plan will prevent mile-long back ups and relieve congestion, Pastovit said.

The project is in design for 2021-2022 with construction scheduled for 2023 with an estimated cost of \$1.9 million.

“Right now we have \$1.9 million programmed for that,” Pastovit said. “It’s probably not going to cover everything that we would like to do so this will probably be built in phases as funding becomes available.”

## COPS AND COURTS

Arrests and citations in the Blue Mountain Eagle are taken from the logs of law enforcement agencies. Every effort is made to report the court disposition of arrest cases.

### Grant County Sheriff

The Grant County Sheriff’s Office reported the following for the week of April 8:

- Concealed handgun licenses: 0
- Average inmates: 14
- Bookings: 1
- Releases: 3
- Arrests: 0
- Citations: 0
- Fingerprints: 0
- Civil papers: 4
- Warrants processed: 1
- Assistance/Welfare check: 1
- Search and Rescue: 0

### Oregon State Police

April 1: OSP responded to a single-vehicle, noninjury, non-blocking crash at milepost 91 on 395B. After fur-

ther investigation Christopher Compton, 48, displayed signs of impairment. Compton consented to field sobriety tests. After further investigation, Compton was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol and was transported to the Grant County Jail. Compton’s BAC was 0.21%. His vehicle was towed by Frontier Towing.

April 3: A driver was driving a vehicle at 45 mph, negotiating a right hand curve on Highway 395B near milepost 119, when the vehicle’s rear driver’s side wheel came off. The driver lost control of the vehicle, which traveled in a clockwise rotation, turning 180 degrees. The vehicle left the roadway, coming to a controlled rest on the gravel shoulder of the southbound lane pointed toward the south. From roadway evidence, the driver’s statements and examination of the wheel lugs, it was determined that the lug nuts had not been properly torqued and had

come loose. The vehicle was driven from the scene.

### Dispatch

John Day dispatch worked 84 calls during the week of March 30 to April 5, including:

- **John Day Police Department**  
March 30: Responded to a call of graffiti and criminal mischief.
- March 31: Responded to a report of a domestic dispute. Angeline Smith, 21, of John Day was arrested for fourth-degree assault and

harassment.

April 3: Informed about runaway children on West Main Street.

April 3: Responded to a driving complaint. Dharmendrakumar Yvas, 50, of John Day was arrested.

- **Oregon State Police**  
April 3: Advised of livestock on the roadway on Highway 26.
- **Grant County Sheriff’s Office**  
April 1: Two parties called regarding a restraining order violation and a dispute over a house cat on Daly Street.

April 3: Received a report of theft on South Fork Road.

- **John Day ambulance**  
April 1: Responded to an elderly woman that fell on East Sixth Street.
- April 1: Dispatched for a man with difficulty breathing on North Clark Street.
- April 2: Received a report of an 81-year-old man having a seizure on Southwest First Avenue.
- April 3: Dispatched for an elderly woman with difficulty standing and weakness on Valley View Drive.
- April 3: Responded for an

80-year-old woman who had fallen on Green Acres Lane.

April 4: Responded to a 63-year-old woman with shortness of breath on West Main Street.

April 5: Received a report of an 86-year-old man who fell.

- **Monument ambulance**  
April 1: Along with Monument Fire, John Day ambulance, OSP and GCSO, dispatched for a man with a compound fracture. All units stood down. The reported patient was playing an April fools joke on his cousin.

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