



E. Oregon leaders ask governor to reopen economy regionally

Brown to release draft plan next week with criteria that must be met

By Dick Hughes
and Ellen Morris Bishop
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Exactly when Oregon Gov. Kate Brown might begin reopening Oregon's rural counties is uncertain.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock is thinking May. Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts is convinced it will be June — or later. The date remains uncertain, based on a 90 min-

ute conference call with about 80 county commissioners late Monday afternoon.

Roberts said a June opening "...would be a disaster for us."

Roberts sent a letter to Brown, signed by commissioners from Grant County and eight other Eastern Oregon counties requesting a "conversation" about re-opening for those counties, on Thursday instigating the meeting. Pressure from Republican lawmakers provided additional motivation.

"Commissioners are under

tremendous pressure in their counties to reopen for business," Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said afterward. "I felt like it's actually progressing. The conversation about opening up, with the notable exception of large groups, is almost progressing more quickly than I had anticipated."

He added, "Now, by moving right along, we're talking about mid-May or so."

Roberts was far less optimistic.

"I'm angry and frustrated," she said. "We had asked for a conversation between the governor and Eastern Oregon to ask about opening up our small communities, and we got nothing. We didn't get any real answers for our small business owners, just 'we need to review that, and set up committees.' So basically what it is: No, we're not going to allow the state to open, and we're not going to talk with Eastern Oregon."

Roberts was also unhappy with the seeming unavailability of funds from the federal coronavirus relief bill \$1.6 billion

payment to Oregon for communities and counties in Eastern Oregon.

"We had costs due to COVID-19 in our county, and we should be able to recover those costs out of this fund," she said. "And Brown told us she was not sure she could do that."

Gov. Brown expects to release a more detailed draft plan next week. It will not contain dates for when businesses might reopen and social distancing restrictions might be eased. Instead, it will require meeting criteria that Brown announced last week, combined

with President Donald Trump's recommendations.

In a statement released after the meeting, Brown specified that "timelines for reopening communities will be driven by solid data on the spread of COVID-19, county by county as appropriate ... We would expect that the first counties ... eligible to begin the process of reopening will be in rural Oregon — but only if we can ensure those counties have adequate testing capacity, sufficient supplies of personal protective

See Economy, Page A18

PAYING FOR A POOL

Plans revealed for aquatics center in Grant County

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Information regarding the taxing district boundaries, tax rates and design for the new aquatic center proposal were presented during a virtual John Day City Council meeting April 14.

"We kept the team working, and we had finished a lot of the work prior to the coronavirus," said John Day City Manager Nick Green.

Green said construction is anticipated to cost \$6 million, and the aquatic center's operations, maintenance and equipment replacement is expected to cost \$90,000 per year.

If approved, a proposed ballot measure could be sent to voters in John Day, Canyon City, Seneca, Prairie City, Mt. Vernon and those within their rural fire districts. The proposed measure consists of two parts with one part covering the operations expenses and the other part covering the 20-year capital improvement bond to build the aquatic center.

To cover operations, a new taxing district would be established with a permanent rate of 20 cents per \$1,000 of a property's assessed value. For a property assessed at \$100,000, this would cost \$20 per year permanently.

To cover the 20-year capital bond, property owners would pay a temporary rate of about 71 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. For a property assessed at \$100,000, this would cost



Contributed image

The site concept for a future aquatics center in John Day presented during a virtual meeting April 14.

about \$71 per year for 20 years.

A goal in planning for the proposal was to have a rate that would come in below the hospital bond rate set to retire in 2020. While the aquatic district will present a new tax, property owners would still see a reduction in their overall year-over-year net tax with the retirement of the hospital bond.

Green said the goal was achieved, and the average savings is 27 cents per \$1,000 of

assessed value. This translates to an average of a \$24.91 net tax reduction for a property owner in John Day going into the 2021 tax year, \$16.03 for Canyon City, \$7.08 for Seneca, \$12.06 for Mt. Vernon and \$13.75 for Prairie City, according to figures provided by Green.

"Everyone pays the same rate," Green said. "The reason the costs are different by community is that that rate is applied to your assessed value. If you look at the average assessed value

for each city, John Day's average assessed value is much higher than Seneca's. So the average Seneca property owner will contribute about \$25.22 a year, and the average John Day owner will contribute \$110.68 a year."

The average tax for property owners in Canyon City would be \$66.67 a year, \$58.55 a year for Mt. Vernon and \$64.49 a year in Prairie City.

Green noted that this was based on a pre-COVID-19 pandemic analysis.

"What is interesting to note about that is that it was based on our analysis from a month ago when municipal bond rates were hovering around 3.3%," Green said. "... We're borrowing at 2%, and it may go lower."

A multi-city project

Multiple people throughout the county assisted in planning for the aquatic center: Haley Walker, who is the chair of the swim board; Art Thunell, Russ Young, Lisa Weigum and Zach Williams from the John Day-Canyon City Parks and Recreation District; Grant School District Superintendent Bret Uptmor; and Rob Raschio, who is appointed to represent the county's interests. Each contributed to the discussions and planning for the proposal. The plans were also presented to a steering committee of public

See Pool, Page A18



Eagle file photo
John Day swimmer Sierra May competes in a butterfly event at the John Day Swim Meet in 2019.

Local business owners struggling to stay afloat during the pandemic

BEO helped six small Grant county businesses secure federal loans before program ran out of funds

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Bank of Eastern Oregon helped six Grant County small businesses secure loans through the Paycheck Protection Program last week before the funds ran dry. Congress appeared to reach a deal to extend the program Tuesday, but the details were not finalized before press time.

The forgivable loan, established by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, is designed to support small businesses to maintain their payroll and some overhead expenses through the period of emergency. The purpose of the program is to keep workers employed during the crisis.

Bob Quinton, a commercial loan officer



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Bob Quinton, commercial loan officer with Bank of Eastern Oregon, said Thursday that six businesses secured Payroll Protection Program loans through the SBA COVID-19 stimulus program. Quinton said a total of \$3 million has been obligated between the businesses.

with the Bank of Eastern Oregon, said the PPP loans are for small businesses with less than 500 people. Companies who maintain or rehire staff can have the loan wholly forgiven if they spend 75% of the money on payroll and the remaining 25% on rent, utilities and other operating expenses.

Quinton said the Bank of Eastern Oregon received about 44 applications, and at one point, the online SBA portal was completely inundated.

He said in the past 14 days, according to his SBA representative, the SBA processed more loans than it had previously handled the past 14 years combined.

"It's been overwhelming," Quinton said.

He said some business owners were hesitant because of the lack of details and the ever-changing terms of the loan process.

"There were so many questions and not enough places to get answers," Quinton said.

Quinton said he ordered more sets of loan documents in the event Congress allocates more funds to the program.

Meanwhile, business owners in Grant County remain in limbo as Congress hammers out the details of both the PPP program and opening up the economy.

Shawn Duncan, the owner of the Squeeze In Restaurant and Deck, said that she applied for the PPP loan through both Umpqua Bank and U.S. Bank. She said she never heard back from Umpqua, and U.S. Bank said the SBA stopped accepting applications.

Duncan said she temporarily closed to keep her staff and customers safe. She

See Struggle, Page A18