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Grant County submits plan to reopen economy for approval

If approved, certain businesses could reopen May 15 with some restrictions

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Emergency Operations Center successfully submitted Grant County's reopening plan Friday to the state for approval.

As of Sunday, according to Gov. Kate Brown's website,

Grant County's plan is being reviewed by the Oregon Health Authority.

The process for evaluating reopening plans is on a first-come, first-served basis, according to the governor's website.

EOC Incident Commander Dave Dobler said Brown's office released sector-specific guidelines for restaurants, bars, barbers and salons and updated guidelines for retail, individuals and businesses.

As Friday marked the first

day counties in Oregon could submit plans to reopen gradually in the aftermath of Brown's stay-at-home orders, counties must demonstrate they can meet seven public health criteria.

The benchmarks counties must meet include declining levels of COVID-19 hospital admissions, minimum levels of testing and contact tracing capacity, ade-



Interim Emergency Management Coordinator Dave Dobler

quate hospital surge capacity, quarantine facilities and personal protective equipment and finalized sector guidelines from the state to communicate to individual businesses.

Parts of those criteria — PPE capacity, hospital and testing — must be met within a health region, groups of adjacent counties

established by the governor.

Grant County will be in region seven, along with Deschutes, Jefferson, Klamath, Crook, Lake, Wheeler and Harney counties.

Dobler said Thursday in a teleconference meeting he received confirmation that region seven meets the criteria to move forward.

Among the benchmarks counties must hit in the governor's reopening plan is a 14-day decline in the number of COVID-19 patients admit-

ted to hospitals — but this does not apply to counties with fewer than five positive cases such as Grant County.

Grant County has had one confirmed positive case in mid-March, and the patient, who was not identified, followed all public health recommendations, which included staying home and self-monitoring for symptoms, according to a health department press release.

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Contributed photo/Julie Watterson

Prairie City School special education assistants put packets together for students.

Special educators unified in learning and helping families

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

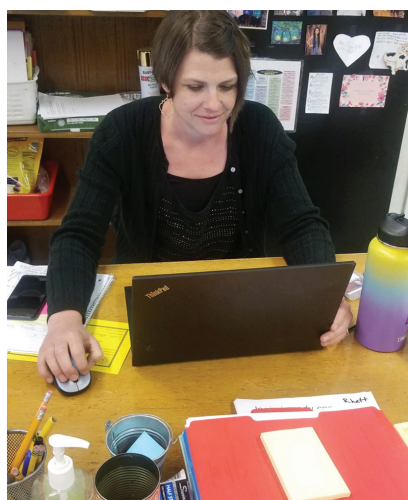
Teachers and administrators in Grant County continue to teach students and themselves as distance learning enters its fourth week of implementation amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

Special education administrators in Grant County shared their experience on how distance learning has been a learning experience for teachers, students and parents.

"In our district, our case managers looked at each kid's (Individualized Educational Plan), and we talked about what they were going to need, their technology capability, and if their parents are still working," said Rhonda McCumber, the director of special education in the John Day District. "And of course, lots of checking in and making adjustments."

Wendy Burrill, the Grant County Education Service District Special Ed Director/Specialist, said she can say the same for other schools in the county with how individualized distance learning has been for students. Some kids adapted quickly when using technology, but there were other kids that struggled.

Each situation at home may be different, but individualized education and helping parents is a priority for administrators as distance learning is



Contributed photo

Marci Judd is a special education teacher at Humbolt Elementary.

applied in different ways.

At Prairie City School, Julie Watterson, the special education director there, said she sat and met with her aids and decided from the beginning that the best way for them to teach students was to gather weekly packets and hand them to students every Thursday at 10 a.m.

Another priority for Watterson is to schedule a time to reach out to parents to see how they are doing and respond to emails she receives.

Shelley Myers, the speech language pathologist for Grant County schools,

said she called all the parents and set up times for students to teach through Google Meets. Many students are met twice a week for their speech and language therapy.

Technology provides the biggest challenge in distance learning for the county since it is a learning process for students and teachers.

"Learning the technology was the big one and getting everybody trained on how to use Google classroom, and by everybody I don't just mean the students, the teachers had to learn this stuff too," McCumber said. "Older kids can understand the technology quickly, but we start going into the primary grades, and we have to rely on mom and dad to help them, but sometimes they are struggling with it as well."

Myers added that technology has been difficult at times due to the delay in audio between the teacher and student, which makes speech therapy difficult, but they continue to make it work.

Another struggle has been trying to accommodate the supports students had at school with distance learning, according to Burrill. She said speech-to-text or audio books were used with the help of staff at school, but with distance learning, the staff is learning how to continue to provide these supports from a distance.

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The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Judy Kerr, finance chief for the Emergency Operations Center, presented a brief rundown of her job duties at the EOC. Kerr said she tracks workers' hours and costs for materials and supplies.

Emergency Operations Center planning to request additional \$25K for more protective equipment

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County Emergency Operations Center is planning to ask for an additional \$25,000 in funding for personal protective equipment at the next county court session as the county looks to ease into the first phase of its reopening plan, according to the county's interim Emergency Management Coordinator Dave Dobler in the location's first onsite media tour Friday at the Grant County Regional Airport terminal.

County Judge Scott Myers said Tuesday this week's regular county court meeting was canceled, but a special session may be held later in the week. He said the county recently received a shipment of personal protective equipment. Dobler could not be reached Tuesday by press time to confirm whether he still intended to request additional funding for PPE.

As the county prepares to ease back into a recognizable version of normalcy with its plan to reopen under review with the Oregon Health Authority, Dobler said Friday the county needs to stay vigilant as the community moves forward to prevent a surge in positive cases and address the economic and mental health

costs related to COVID-19.

"This was a warmup and a shot across the bow," Dobler said.

The EOC was activated in early March in response to the new coronavirus and has been at the Grant County Regional Airport terminal since mid-April.

Dobler, a sheriff's office deputy, stepped into the lead role in early March after an emergency county court session saw the departure of his predecessor Ted Williams, who cited a long-standing feud with Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer.

Dobler said the EOC operates as a hub of information, coordination and planning for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dobler said he is requesting approval to hire a grant writer to apply for Federal Emergency Management Agency's Public Assistance Grant made available under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. The FEMA Public Assistance Grant, available to state and local agencies, offers up to 75% in reimbursement for costs associated with responding to the COVID-19 pandemic including overtime labor expenses, EOC operating costs, PPE and search and rescue.

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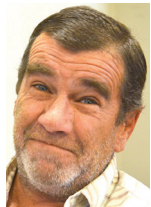
Outlying communities share thoughts on pool

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

The final report has been completed for an aquatic center in Grant County as city leaders outside of John Day continue their discussions on the proposal.

With Gleason Pool in John Day scheduled to close for good after this season, the proposal calls for a new taxing district encompassing Prairie City, Mt. Vernon, Canyon City and Seneca and their rural fire districts with a permanent tax rate of 20 cents per \$1,000 of a property's assessed value for operations costs, as well as a 20-year bond with a rate of 71 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

When Mt. Vernon and Canyon City leaders received details on how the aquatic taxing district would work,



Kenny Delano

they both sent out surveys to measure the response from the public on the aquatic taxing district.

Canyon City's survey is currently being conducted with results planned to be revealed at their next city council meeting on May 19. Meanwhile, Mt. Vernon sent out 200 surveys with 30% sending a response back to the city.

In Mt. Vernon, 81% of respondents said they would not want to participate in the pool venture, according to City Recorder Tami Kowing.

Mayor Kenny Delano said, while people in Mt. Vernon support the idea of a pool in Grant County, the plan to pay for the pool troubles many residents.



Jim Hamsher

was the hospital bond to drop off (the tax rolls this year)," Delano said. "Although it looks like a small amount, it's quite a bit for these folks."

Delano said some residents said they would prefer any taxes collected to go toward projects in Mt. Vernon.

Delano said he wishes there were a way to provide a pool that wouldn't be a long-term burden on taxpayers because he believes the project to be important for kids in Mt. Vernon, especially those who participate on the

"Our thought was that we have quite a bit of fixed income residents that really need any kind of small reduction that they can get (in taxes), and one thing they were looking forward



Steve Fischer

swim team. However, he said that's a limited number of kids, compared to the impact the new taxing district would have.

Delano said the survey was a factor when the city council voted not to support the resolution for Mt. Vernon to be included in the taxing district during a city council meeting on April 14.

Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher said he hopes the pool steering committee will present the final report to the aquatic district communities, detailing the plans for the pool and taking questions from the public so citizens can make an informed decision.

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