

Oregon State Police budget cuts could shutter nine offices

By Gary A. Warner
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon State Police would make the “heartbreaking” decision to lay off almost 200 personnel and close nine field offices under a proposal submitted to Gov. Kate Brown.

Brown has asked all state departments for how they would cut their budgets by 17% over the next year, the maximum the governor can order on her own.

The numbers are expected to be a starting point for filling an expected \$3 billion hole in revenue due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The next budget forecast is set to be released May 20 by the state Office of Economic Analysis.

OSP would implement an estimated \$27 million reduction in its budget by cutting 199 positions and closing nine field offices in Prineville, La Pine, McMinnville, St. Helens, Albany, Hermiston, Grants Pass, Government Camp and Tillamook.

“This is a planning exercise — a hypothetical, and this is not a layoff notice,” said Oregon State Police Superintendent Travis Hampton in a “straight-talk” statement to OSP staff released Tuesday afternoon.

There was bipartisan support for keeping the budget knife away from OSP.

“We are going to have to find a way to fund essential services, and that definitely includes OSP,” said Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, one of the chairs of the Joint Ways & Means Committee in the Legislature.

Rep. Jack Zika, R-Redmond, said lawmakers in both parties believe there needs to be a larger state police force.

“This would be a steep cut — too steep,” Zika said. “They just hired a bunch of troopers — it costs about \$100,000 to train each one. It doesn’t make sense to turn around and lay them off. That’s a cut to public safety.”

Hampton told OSP personnel that Brown and the Legislature could also tap into the state’s “rainy day” funds to patch the budget gaps for OSP or other departments.

But to meet the governor’s forecasting request, OSP would reduce or suspend 199 positions, including 102 positions in field operations and services bureaus

and 39 positions in forensic laboratories and pathology operations, including suspending operations in Springfield and Central Point. Hampton said the overall effect on forensic services would be “severe.”

Another 39 would come out of headquarters support, internet technology, central records, human resources and the office of professional standards and dispatch.

Hampton said 18 positions assigned to training, procurement, fleet and the Oregon State Athletic Commission would also fall to the budget ax.

OSP would remove all positions from its Dignitary Protection Unit and firearm investigative unit.

The Oregon Fire Marshal Bureau would have its budget cut, but not lose any positions. It is funded by sources other than the state general fund. Positions funded by Oregon Lottery and tribal gaming revenue could face cuts under other budget proposals.

Hampton said “scenarios are endless, complex and almost unimaginable to fathom” amid the crisis. But he chose to shutter offices and specific operations rather than taking a “thin-soup” approach and spread reductions across the entire force.

“I would look to build this agency around our core mission — the protection of people, property and natural resources,” he said.

Hampton said the offices chosen for closure were near enough to stations that would remain open, making the reassignments less onerous for those forced to move.

Hampton told OSP personnel that the final outcome is unknown.

“Team, there is no crystal ball for this job, but times like these deserve straight talk,” he said. “If our agency will be spared to a degree, or face more drastic reductions, we likely won’t know for many weeks.”

OSP and other departments must now wait for the hard numbers to come down from analysts.

“Now we do the hardest part, we wait for something beyond our control — the May 20th revenue forecast that will give us an idea what type of scenarios we are truly looking at,” he said.

“Hang in there and look out for each other.”

Most Oregon counties are given green light to lift many COVID-19 emergency limits

By Gary A. Warner
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown announced Thursday morning that most Oregon counties will be allowed to take the first step toward lifting emergency limits on activity put in place since March by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a phone-in press conference Thursday, Brown said she realized that the decision to reopen some but not all counties would be seen as too little by residents who want to accelerate an economic rebound and too much by those concerned that it could lead to another spike in infections.

“But my job is to make hard decisions, even when they are unpopular,” Brown said. “When it comes to the health and safety of Oregonians, the buck stops here.”

Those getting the green light for partial reopening include Deschutes County in Central Oregon, Lane and Linn counties in the Willamette Valley and most southern and Eastern Oregon counties.

While most of Oregon’s 36 counties qualified to reopen, about 2.23 million residents — more than half the state’s estimated 4.22 million population — live in counties not covered by Thursday’s decisions.

The state’s three largest counties — Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas — did not file a request, saying they were not yet prepared to reopen. They represent nearly 1.8 million residents.

Marion and Polk counties, with a combined population of about 417,000, had their applications rejected because of concerns over high infection rates. Umatilla County, Jefferson County and Morrow County applications were approved later in the day Thursday.

Among Oregon’s five largest counties, only one — Lane County at No. 5, which includes the city of Eugene — can re-open.

The patchwork of openings means that some counties will see restaurants, salons, gyms and other establishments returning to business.

Brown said the moves were a clear-eyed attempt to balance the sometimes competing goals of public health and economic revival from a crisis that has put millions out of work.

“The shared goals of good public health and a strong economy are intimately connected,” she said. “It’s not an either/or scenario. As we reopen parts of our economy, we know and expect that there may be an uptick in new coronavirus cases.”

Brown said there will be no assured path to both ensuring public health and allowing the economy to recover in the foreseeable future. She likened the moves announced Thursday as the

equivalent of stepping out on ice without truly knowing how thick or thin it might be underfoot.

“Reopening any part of our state comes with risk,” Brown said. “This virus is still very dangerous. Until there is a reliable treatment or a vaccine, unfortunately, we will not be able to go back to life as we knew it.”

But the fact that large swaths of the most populous areas won’t see a change has Brown and state officials worried that residents in those areas could travel to areas such as the Oregon coast, Deschutes County and cities like Eugene where they can enjoy relative freedom to eat, drink and socialize. That could expose the open counties to outside infection from counties that remain closed.

“We hope that people will stay close to home,” Brown said.

Oregon has recorded over 3,000 positive cases and 137 deaths during the coronavirus pandemic. The state has recorded among the lowest per capita infections and deaths in the nation.

Overall, about 1.4 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported in the United States, with 85,601 deaths through Wednesday. Worldwide, about 4.37 million have tested positive and 298,000 have died.

Oregon counties were invited last week to submit plans to have some of the restrictions under Brown’s March closure orders lifted.

They had to meet a list of standards set by the Oregon Health Authority, including evidence that the county could test for COVID-19 infections and had the staff available to trace the contacts of anyone with a positive result.

Each county also had to account for its ability to isolate positive cases, including homeless people who did not have the resources to do so on their own. Counties had to show they could provide medical care and hospital space if there was another outbreak.

The next step will be to see if the loosened restrictions will not lead to a spike in cases. In three weeks, each county’s infection statistics will be reviewed, including hospital use, ability to trace cases and adherence to social distancing guidelines. If successful, counties would be eligible in June or early July to move on to less restrictive controls, which have not fully been detailed yet. Larger group gatherings are one of the most likely results, as well as allowing more visits to elder care facilities, which have been a major infection point. Brown encouraged residents to retain the resolve and patience most have shown so far, so that the isolation that led to a less-than-expected impact on the state doesn’t go to waste with a resurgence.



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Governor Kate Brown wears a mask May 7.

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