

Fed up

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“I guess the main point is we’re being culturally oppressed, because, I mean in rural counties, not one county in a rural area has received any money and very little help,” Albertson said at Thursday’s meeting. “And none of us have had direct contact with the governor.”

The meeting came to be after months of conference calls with state health officials and growing frustrations with the governor’s guidelines to combat the coronavirus outbreak that have wreaked havoc on local economies.

The tipping point, said Albertson, came after a recent conference call with the Oregon Association of Counties and the Oregon Health Authority. On the call, he said, a representative from a county asked if protesters, primarily in Port-

land, would be contact-traced. According to Albertson, a health official on the call said that the protesters’ cause was just and the state would not infringe upon their rights to peacefully protest.

The demonstrations in response to the death of George Floyd — an African American man who died May 25 after police officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck for nearly nine minutes — have occurred in rural and urban communities across the state. However, the commissioners focused primarily on large demonstrations in Portland where large crowds violated the governor’s guidelines for social distancing.

Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts said an official, whom she did not identify, told her the state would “deal with it” if they saw an uptick in positive COVID-19 cases as a result of the protests.

“In other words, you can protest, but we can’t go to

church,” Albertson said in an email to the commissioners after the OHA call. “You can protest but can’t go to a ball game, you can protest, but you can’t have a fair or rodeo.”

Harney County Commissioner Kristen Shelman said the “top-down” approach of the governor’s executive order does not sit well with rural residents. She said she was specifically concerned about the governor’s guidelines requiring a COVID-19 vaccine or treatment before the final stage of opening, and possible requirements for vaccination.

“Within that executive order, we should all be rounded up and given the vaccine without our permission,” she said.

“And it goes right back to the cultural oppression,” Albertson said. “That is definitely culture. Us on this side of the mountain are not treated the same.”

Albertson said it is no different than racism and religious discrimination.

“We’re oppressed by our state,” he said.

The commissioners said having to cancel their county fairs because of the guidelines has a big impact on rural communities.

“The fair is the one thing that brings all of our counties together,” Palmer said.

Roberts said the closure of parks statewide impacts the culture in her county.

“They closed parks in the city of Portland. Why do they need to close the park in Enterprise?” she said. “We have 2,000 people in the whole town. Less than a third of them were kids. They couldn’t go to the park.”

Other commissioners pointed to canceled graduations, closed schools and rules about reopening businesses, which, they said, face unique challenges in rural areas.

Roberts said she wrote a letter asking Brown’s office to lift all restrictions in Wallowa

County by June 30. The county leaders went back and forth on a date and said each should be able to determine their own reopening guidelines.

Hamsher said the counties should wait a couple of weeks to see if the wave of protests would lead to a surge in cases. He said he hoped the state did not see an uptick.

“If we don’t, then we might have more of a justification to open back up,” he said.

According to Oregon’s phased reopening plans, many activities can resume with limited social gatherings under Phase 2, which most counties in Eastern Oregon are in. The third and final phase of reopening would bring the state back to normal, but it is not an option for any county until vaccination or treatment is available under the governor’s guidelines.

Albertson said he questions the reporting data coming from the state’s health author-

ity. He said he did the math and the chances of dying from COVID-19 are very low.

Roberts said the counties took the pandemic seriously and did everything the state asked them to do.

“We are prepared to meet the challenge in our community,” she said. “Our medical people say they’re ready, they’re prepared.”

The county representatives said they want their respective health departments to be the authority, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all guidance from the governor.

Hours after the meeting, the governor’s office announced that it was putting a hold on reopening the state after 178 new cases were reported, according to the OHA’s website. Half of those cases were in Multnomah and Clackamas counties. Only eight of those cases were in the seven counties represented at Thursday’s meeting.

Recall

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organizations that are part of the sphere surrounding this recall,” Lathrop said.

Two other recall petitions were approved by the Oregon Secretary of State in late April and early May. One of those was withdrawn in late May.

Currier’s petition is the one currently being circulated by Lathrop and other volunteers in Wallowa County. It lists 11 grievances. They include charges that Brown used COVID-19 to unlawfully restrict freedoms, caused needless economic ruin, denied citizens protection from the growing domestic threat known as Antifa, attempted to deprive Oregon’s working families of jobs using faulty environmental policy and failed to protect Oregon’s foster children.

In the past week, Lathrop and other volunteers have set up booths or tables in Enterprise, Joseph and Lostine to gather signatures.

“It’s an all-volunteer organization,” Lathrop said. “So where we set up depends upon who has time to do it.”

To be sure that petitions are error free, there will soon be a mobile app that will allow petition circulators to instantly verify whether a potential signer is a registered voter, what their registered address is and whether they have already signed the petition.

“We’ll be validating as we go,” Lathrop said. “That means, if used faithfully, nearly all of the signatures should be valid.”

There’s also mandatory training for signature gatherers, also known as signature circulators.

“You can’t just pick up a bunch of blank signature pages and take them somewhere to have all your friends and family sign,” Lathrop said. “There’s requirements that signature circulators have to meet or the whole sheet of signatures can be thrown out.”

Friday, June 12, Pam Diggins and Tammie Quinby set up an unambiguous flag-draped booth on Lostine’s Main Street to gather signatures. They also included the Greater Idaho petition as well and invited visitors to sign either or both. Including the Greater Idaho petition, which asks that Eastern Oregon counties become part of Idaho, was their own idea. The two petition drives are not related, Lathrop said.

Former Wallowa Mayor Vikki Knifong stopped by to sign both, as did Karen and David Wurdinger of Enterprise.

“I don’t know what Kate Brown’s done for us that’s good, and whatever she’s doing isn’t working. She doesn’t even know we exist,” Knifong said.

“Don’t much care for what Kate Brown’s been doing to Oregon,” Karen Wurdinger said. “Taxes, immigration, driver’s licenses for illegals. We voted the license thing down several times, and (Brown) just came along and overrode our votes after we’d voted it down overwhelmingly. That was the straw on the camel’s back to me.”

By around 2 p.m., Diggins and Quinby had accumulated nearly 100 signatures, and called Lathrop to ask her to deliver more forms.

“They were too busy at the booth to even drive 2 miles to get more forms,” Lathrop said.

Budget

Continued from Page A1

state and local governments to take necessary measures to ensure continued operations and public participation in decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“The governing body of a public body shall hold public meetings and hearings by telephone, video or through some other electronic or virtual means whenever possible,” the order states.

Brown’s order allows for public comment to be taken by phone, email, text message and by mail.

Hamsher said the court members, instead, approved the purchases outside of court, mostly through email without public deliberation.

Palmer said the purchase agreements were signed by all three members of the court.

“All three of the purchase agreements were signed by the court,” he said. “It just didn’t happen at a county court meeting.”

Palmer said, during the COVID-19 crisis, the governor’s office has been unclear about public meeting rules.

Myers said, while COVID-19 is still a declared emergency statewide, the county court is mandated to follow public meeting laws throughout the pandemic.

Myers said Hamsher and Palmer are mistaken. He said, if there is an immediate emergency, the court can get together and make a decision.

“Right now, if the creek is flooding, we can get together and make a decision without an announcement,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean, three months later, they can get back together and talk about what to do next about the creek bed and what happened in the flooding.

Otherwise you’re bending the rules to suit your situation, and that’s what gets elected officials in trouble.”

Palmer said, with two members of the court at the EOC, they tried to “play it safe.” He said the staff at the EOC knew that if he was in a room with Hamsher one of them would not talk so it would not be misconstrued as deliberating on county business because it would have been a quorum of the county court.

In retrospect, Palmer said he did not ever think about calling a county court session to amend the previous motion requiring purchases of \$200 to be approved by the court.

As far as going over the approved budget, Palmer said the meeting minutes reflect that he pushed for the full \$250,000 initially requested by the incident commander. He said, had they voted to fund the full amount, they would not have had to go back to the court and end up in the situation they are in now.

“I guess, if we were to just keep the whole budget, we wouldn’t have had to return to court to do it, and if it got spent, we get reimbursed, if it doesn’t get spent, we don’t put in for the reimbursement, and we are good to go,” he said.

Hamsher, however, maintained that the EOC was within its proposed budget and said it is inaccurate to say the EOC was over-budget.

“I think that it was understood that this was going to cost more money,” he said. “Our incident commander did send out budget updates.”

If there were concerns about the budget, he said, Myers or county Treasurer Julie Ellison — who told the court May 27 the EOC needed a budget transfer to make it through the end of the fiscal year — should have put a budget resolution

on the court’s agenda.

Myers said, however, reaching out to the court for additional funding is the responsibility of the department head.

“Nowhere do we call somebody or remind somebody, ‘Remember, you’re supposed to come and ask us for more money,’” Myers said. “That is the department head (responsibility), and at this particular time, the department head and liaison were Hamsher and Dobler. They should have put together a plan. I don’t know how much staff they need, so why would I be the one that decides?”

During county court, Hamsher said other departments, including the Planning Department and Veterans Department, also required budget transfers to make it through the fiscal year when neither is not considered over-budget.

For the 12-month fiscal year, the Veterans Department needed to transfer \$2,000 from its own Materials & Services account to its Personnel Services account.

The planning director position was changed from three-quarters time to full time during the year so the Planning Department required a boost from the General Fund of \$4,500 for Personnel Services and \$6,000 for Materials & Services.

In less than four months, the EOC overspent its \$125,000 budget by almost \$75,000, according to meeting minutes.

Myers said the budget transfers included a cash infusion to the EOC from the General Fund of \$37,152 for Materials & Services.

“I was a little more generous with purchases,” Palmer said. “I’ll admit it. But only because the county needed the items. If not for this emergency for the next.”

Every first responder in the county, from fire chiefs to ambulances, now has a high-powered radio in case communications should go down because of the EOC procurements, he said..

Palmer said he poured his “heart and soul” into the EOC because it was what he was elected to do, and he and the EOC staff tried to put out as much information to the community as they could through the website, grantcountycovid.com.

“I apologize to the people in the community if there wasn’t as much transparency as they wanted, but I felt we stayed engaged as best we could,” he said.

Hamsher, who previously said up to 100% reimbursement was possible through Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, said Monday that he received confirmation from the executive director of the Association of Oregon Counties that Grant County will receive \$335,000 toward COVID-19-related costs. He said he expects to see the funds deposited into the county’s account within the week.

Wallowa County County Commissioner Susan Roberts said they spent about \$3,000 for a large-screen monitor for the county’s COVID-19 response and did not apply for CARES Act money. Harney County Commissioner Kristen Shelman said Harney County’s CARES Act reimbursement came to about \$90,000.

“That is for everything we tagged as a COVID-19 expense,” she said.

Shelman said Monday that the state has given counties more guidance to ensure the money is spent correctly.

The state, said Shelman, is developing a 21-page document that the county will then sign and return, and as soon as it is received the money will be issued.

Compared to other counties, Palmer said Grant County is somewhere in the middle.

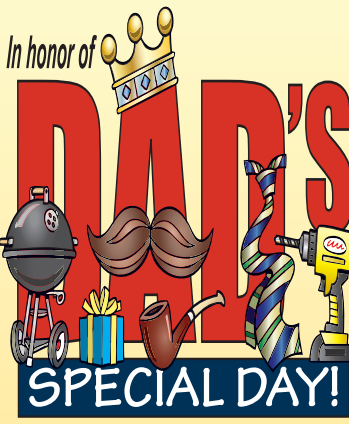
Palmer said Baker County spent over \$600,000 and Deschutes County spent nearly \$1 million.

The EOC’s future will be discussed in a special session of county court June 17, Hamsher said.

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The Chamber Board of Directors will meet June 18th at 10:30 am at the Chamber office for their June Business Meeting. There will be no luncheon at this time.



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