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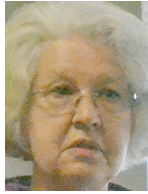


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Residents demand more oversight at EOC

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Tempers flared during the June 17 Grant County Court Session as residents demanded accountability of how county commissioners spent thousands of dollars at the Emergency Operations Center and flouted Oregon public meeting law while overspending its budget by \$75,000 in less than four months.



Frances Preston

Despite word the county will receive \$335,000 in Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act dollars to reimburse the county for 100% of the money spent at the EOC, Grant County citizen Frances Preston said the county lacks a "mechanism of



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

From left, Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer, the Emergency Operations Center Public Information Officer, County Judge Scott Myers and Commissioner Jim Hamsher, the liaison to the EOC, answer questions about the appearance of a conflict of interest during a tense Grant County Court special meeting June 17.

oversight."

"The group chose not to do, as requested by the judge, to come back to court in 45 days and ask for more money," she said. "There was money spent that did not follow the process, and we appear to be holding no one accountable."

Documents presented to the court in May by former Incident Commander Dave Dobler show the EOC spent nearly \$200,000, after being budgeted \$125,000.

County Commissioner and EOC liaison Jim Hamsher told Preston that she was not "even speaking the

truth," and the court did approve the purchases.

Hamsher said the reason the EOC's budget did not come back to the court for public deliberation was that Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 shut-down orders closed the courthouse and other county offices, making it impossible

for the court to hold a public meeting. Furthermore, the commissioner said a year-old motion the court passed allows the county judge to approve purchases of budgeted items outside of county court.

Brown's executive orders, however, allow for in-person meetings with appropriate social distancing guidelines, "authorizing state and local governments to take necessary measures to ensure continued operations and public participation in decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Jack Orchard, a lawyer from Ball Janik LLP, said he does not believe the governor has the authority to issue orders on public meetings law.

"The legislature has not delegated to the governor the right to disregard these basic public meetings standards," he said.

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PREPARING FOR A SPIKE

Grant County health officials say county is prepared in case of an uptick in cases

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

As the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Union County soared to 240 last week, Grant County health

officials said the county is better situated than others to handle an uptick in positive cases.

"We're in a good position right now," Grant County Health Department Administrator Kimberly Lindsay said. "We have the personal protective equipment, the testing and the contact tracing to handle a spike in cases."

Lindsay said, between the hospital and the Health Department, the county has 500 test kits.



Kimberly Lindsay

Blue Mountain Hospital Emergency Medical Services Director Rebekah Rand said the hospital has been watching the situation unfold in Union County, having discussions about what the implications could mean for Grant County.

Rand said the hospital met Friday to "review and reaffirm" the hospital's "surge plan."

The hospital, she said, has rapid testing capability, which can provide a result in roughly 15 minutes and ensures the hospital can quickly identify, isolate and treat positive cases.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Grant County Health Department staff unload personal protective equipment May 7 during the department's curbside COVID-19 testing. County health officials say the county can administer upwards of 500 tests to identify and isolate new cases of COVID-19.

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Grant County set to receive \$335,000 in COVID-19 reimbursement

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

As the Emergency Operations Center faced scrutiny for its budget shortfall and lack of transparency during the June 17 Grant County Court session, the court received news that the county will receive \$335,000 from the state's local government reimbursement program from the Coronavirus Relief Fund.

County Commissioner Sam Palmer, EOC public information officer, moved to appoint EOC liaison County Commissioner Jim Hamsher as the grant administrator.

Hamsher said people do not realize how much time it took for the EOC staff to stay on top of the ever-changing guidelines and information coming out of Salem as they worked to put together the county's phase one reopening plan.

He said one of the biggest hurdles to overcome was how the governor's office's guidelines did not take into account how vastly different rural life is in comparison to urban life.

"There's a disconnect between urban Oregon and rural Oregon," he said.

For example, Hamsher said the state requires rural fire chiefs in the county to report burn rates on personal protective equipment, but unlike many urban parts of the state, rural fire departments in Grant County do not provide emergency medical services. So the rural fire departments end up submitting, for the most part, the same report to Salem each week, he said.

Hamsher said Gov. Kate Brown wants to have an aide talk to a representative from each county weekly now for 30 minutes a week.

"I think that would be helpful," he said. "There's a disconnect when they

don't talk to county commissioners, and we have to watch a briefing on the news."

He said he is not sure who that county representative will be, but since he has stayed informed, he would like to represent the county.

He said he has put in the time and effort, upwards of 1,000 hours through the pandemic, while he has got paid for just 13.3 hours per week.

"It's a lot of work trying to keep up with all of these recommendations and changes," he said. "You do tend to learn some stuff when you devote over 1,000 hours."

Oregon Department of Administrative Services Communications Director Liz Merah said the top priority with the first round of reimbursements was to replenish the money local governments put out for their direct public health coronavirus response efforts.

"Under the first round of this pro-

gram, the DAS will reimburse local governments for eligible costs incurred between March 1 and May 15," she said.

She said local governments are required to submit reimbursement requests based on a list of allowable expenses.

Allowable expenses include medical expenses for public hospitals, clinics, and similar facilities. Public health expenses include communication and enforcement, for which the county received roughly \$15,000, protective equipment, the cost to disinfect public areas and facilities and public safety measures.

The county received \$17,000 for medical and protective supplies and roughly \$55,000 for technical assistance and threat mitigation of the virus.

Payroll expenses for employees dedicated to the COVID-19 response efforts totaled \$215,000.

