



EO Media Group/Ronald Bond
The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, Island City, is the source of the COVID-19 outbreak in Union County, according to the Oregon Health Authority. The county's total number of cases was 282 Tuesday, giving it the most per capita in Oregon.

Union County commissioners recommend going back to phase one after church-linked COVID-19 outbreak

By Sabrina Thompson
EO Media Group

Union County commissioners voted June 17 to recommend rolling back to phase one COVID-19 reopening guidelines.

The move comes as the county is the state's hotspot for the coronavirus with 240 confirmed cases as of June 16, according to the Oregon Health Authority, and at least 236 of those stemming from members of the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, Island City.

In the week since, the Oregon Health Authority has confirmed another 42 cases to bring the county total to 282 cases as of June 23.

The board of commissioners met via an internet call to address the community's concerns about the outbreak. Members of the Center for Human Development, the Union County Sheriff's Office, La Grande Police Department and the Incident Management Team's J.B. Brock

sat in on the meeting to provide further information and recommendations. In addition to recommending the roll back to phase one, commissioners voted to recommend wearing masks.

The two motions are only recommendations. Commissioner Matt Scarfo said the board is looking into what power it has to enforce and regulate the more restrictive reopening guidelines and mask use. Commissioner Donna Beverage said she would rather trust residents to voluntarily enact phase one guidelines. The county, like most of Oregon, had moved into phase two reopening earlier this month.

The state's phase one guidelines generally call for facilities like theaters, public pools and bowling alleys to remain closed, bars and restaurants to end on-site consumption at 10 p.m., and limit gatherings of people to 25.

La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell and Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen confirmed there will be no formal enforcement of

guidelines. "I know some would like to see us take more heavy handed enforcement action, but it is really difficult at this time," Bell said. "These are good people."

The two top local law enforcement officers said their agencies will continue to look into complaints about people not following guidelines and make recommendations to those who don't to reconsider their actions to keep the community safe.

"I think we are prepared as any community to deal with this," Rasmussen said. "We were put on the map with how this has happened, and we are on the map on how we are going to handle this."

Public Health Administrator Carrie Brogoitti said what happens next in the county depends on every member of the community stepping up.

"We don't have a reliable treatment or vaccine," she said. "So the tools we have to use are the preventative measures."

Eastern Oregon leaders talk about state deficit and frustrations on special session

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle



Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane

State Reps. Mark Owens, R-Crane, and Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, and state Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, gathered together for their fifth town hall to talk about developments that have happened in phase two of reopening, their thoughts on the upcoming special session and education.

During the virtual town hall, Findley shared his thoughts on the \$2.7 billion deficit the state budget is facing and the growing need to address the hole.

"We continue to ignore, for the most part, the state budget and the hole that we're in, and the co-chairs of the joint committees and ways of means have done some work, but we've yet to put it in front of the legislators," Findley said.

Findley added that a special session will take place this week and focus primarily on policy bills.

Owens said he was frus-

trated that the session will not deal with budget issues as the deficit grows. "I know the call to action from the governor was to talk about police accountability and COVID-19," Owens said. "With police accountability, there's a lot of things there that have been tried through the Senate and the House before like arbitration that are very positive, but I do have a little concern that what came out today on police accountability was a big, ominous bill."

Owens said the bill asks for everything when the conversation should be directed to individual aspects of police accountability. It has things people will and won't support and things that are questionable that convolutes the conversation, according to Owens.

Bonham added that the special session should address the deficit to make the adjustments now instead of making deeper cuts later.

Bonham said he doesn't feel like any of the single issues during the session will rise to the point to where lawmakers may walk out to deny a quorum as happened in previous sessions over cap and trade.

Findley said the special session is closed to the public, and he believes that is wrong.

A common question topic that was received over 42 times for the town hall was on the issue of education and the "let them play" initiative, an initiative to have the governor reconsider the restrictions on high school sports.

Owens said school districts will be able to build their own plan under some guidelines and recommendations. Schools will have the option to convene school for in-class and online, or online only.

Owens said he believes that most school districts in House District 60 will work toward in-class sessions.

"I believe the overwhelming majority of parents and students want kids to go back to brick and mortar. That's where most excel," Owens said. "COVID-19 is not affecting children near as much as it affects our elderly."

Owens added that clubs and choirs will be under the same guidelines as schools.

Owens and Findley sent a letter to Gov. Brown for the "Let Them Play" initiative. Owens said sports will be tougher and that non-contact sports are currently allowed, but the guidelines are difficult. He said there is a conversation going around to have baseball and track in fall while allowing football and volleyball in the spring.

"We need to allow our kids to do our clubs, our athletics and get them back into that building," Owens said.

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