

## Budget

Continued from Page A1

She said she budgeted to receive \$500,000 in PILT money this year.

On a positive note, Ellison noted that voters approved a 3% tax on marijuana products in the November election, but the county will only receive May and June revenue this fiscal year.

She said the sheriff's office budgeted for an increase in revenue through inmate housing at the county jail. The jail has brought in \$66,500 so far.

She said the county anticipates \$35,000 will go to the sheriff's office to fill the budget holes.

### Expenses up

Repairs at Trowbridge Pavilion at the fairgrounds ended up costing the county \$378,000, but the court members only expected it to cost \$320,000. Ellison pointed out in the budget proposal that the county intended to get a complete reimbursement but only received \$283,000.

She said the the initial plan was to replenish the courthouse reserve fund with the reimbursement, but that fell through and the proposed budget drains the reserve entirely.

Ellison said a part-time forest patrol position, budgeted for \$14 per hour without benefits, has long been in the red due because a deputy sheriff has been filling the position, working 30 hours a week with benefits. She said she asked the court several times to address the situation to no avail.

Ellison also noted the sheriff's office went from 14 to 17 full-time employees since 2016. She said the county could not afford those payroll costs any longer.

"This needs to be taken care of in this budget session," she said.

Spending across many other county funds increased as well.

The Planning Department's personnel costs increased by \$20,000 when planning director Shannon Springer increased to full time.

The county's emergency manager Paul Gray also got a bump to full time, which will cost the county an additional \$16,000.

Ellison said there are many other "variables" that the county will grapple with over the upcoming budget committee sessions.

"With funds not coming in and spending more than we anticipated, the balance of revenue and expenditures just do not pan out," Ellison said.

### Now what?

Ellison said Monday that COVID-19 stimulus money might help fill some of the budget holes, but not all of them.

"Those holes are not going away by with a band aid," she said.

County Judge Scott Myers said the county must get a "handle" on spending. That includes both current and future expenditures, he said.

Myers said the county can put money they do not spend before June 1 back into the general fund, which would help the county going forward.

Over the years, Myers said, the county would typically plan for a lower PILT payment than they would receive, so the county would always have more cash on hand.

## COVID

Continued from Page A1

next week if the case counts continue.

### Seniors and younger people

The surge in cases and the county's low vaccination rate, particularly among seniors, concern public health officials.

As of Sunday, the county vaccinated 34.8% of residents 65 and older, the lowest rate among Oregon's 36 counties, according to CDC data. Meanwhile, in Harney County, 53.1% of people 65 and older received the vaccine. In Lake County, 48.7% rolled up their sleeves. In Umatilla, 57.7%; Morrow, 55.1%; Union, 53%; Baker, 99.9%; and Malheur, 58.5%.

Lindsay said, over three weeks, the health department has also seen more young people test positive for the virus.

Grant County's uptick in positive cases among younger people reflects a national trend. The American Acad-



Eagle file photo

**Greg Armstrong, owner of Len's Drug.**

emy of Pediatrics shows a similar rise in the percentage of new infections in younger people.

While young people do not face the risk of death or hospitalization that elderly adults face, Lindsay said the young people showing up to the health department are presenting more severe symptoms.

Lindsay said, although she has not seen test results, the effects of the virus the health department are seeing are similar to the infectious variant of the coronavirus, referred to as



EOMG file photo

**Kerry Gillette, a physician assistant with Mosaic Medical, fills syringes with the Moderna vaccine during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Bethlehem Inn in Bend on Friday, Feb. 19.**

B.1.1.7. State health officials believe it has been in Oregon since last year, and the CDC notes that B.1.1.7 variant is roughly 50% more contagious and 67% more deadly than the original form of the virus.

So far, OHA has not reported a variant of concern in Grant County's region seven, which it shares with Deschutes, Harney, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake, Wheeler and Crook counties, but the state

just began reporting on the variants.

There are 13 patients hospitalized in region 7, and only seven intensive care beds available in the region.

"We are seeing people getting sicker," Lindsay said.

### Vaccine hesitancy in rural counties

Lindsay said the reason for the surge boils down to the low number of vaccinations.

"This is attacking the

non-vaccinated individuals with a vengeance," she said. "And that's why there's a surge going on in Grant County, as well as in other states."

Grant County is not unique in its overall hesitancy to get the vaccine, but health experts estimate the country must inoculate 70-80% of the population to reach herd immunity.

The reasons behind the lack of interest are varied, Armstrong said.

He said, with how spread out people are from each other in the sparsely populated county, some might believe they do not need to get it.

"I think there's a spatial issue there," Armstrong said. "But what people don't realize is that we have many people traveling through town every day from out of town."

Others, he said, are naturally hesitant about what they put in their body, especially when it comes to vaccines, he said.

Armstrong said people need to know that not getting the vaccine is far riskier than getting the vaccine.

## Support

Continued from Page A1

necessarily near John Day," Maynard said. "If you're even looking at that, I would like to see some information as to what kind of coverage we would be looking at."

Green said, while the discussions are ongoing regarding the specific coverage the city would receive, the three transitioning employees would be paid for by the John Day tax base and would be in John Day for a substantial amount of their time.

"The intent is that we're paying for three officers that would be patrolling in John Day," Green said.

### Show me the money

While a majority of residents and city councilors at the meeting favored keeping the department, there was less consensus on the levy and budgeting for the department.

John Day resident Hank Lissman said the police department is doing well, but the levy needed to fund the department would have consequences.

"That 10 to 15 cents is going to use up my whole raise in my property tax before I buy groceries, gas and anything else," Lissman said. "I don't know the answer to the question (of funding), and I know it's a terrible problem."

John Day resident Dusty Williams asked if the greenhouse, which is paying for one employee, was making enough money to cover an employee at the police department.

"We're trying to find funding for the police department," he said. "Well, there's several employees right there that their wages and their benefits may pay



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz

**Pam Durr speaks in support of the John Day Police Department on April 8.**

for the police department. I'm all about people having jobs ... but we're talking about the police department here. I would rather have a police department than buy a head of lettuce at Chester's (Thriftway)."

Williams also asked about the number of city employees.

Green said, when he got to John Day, there were 22 city employees, and now there are 18. However, when Green started, the dispatch center and its several employees were still under John Day until the dispatch center transitioned to its current agreement away from the city. Green said four employees are in city hall, but there were two when he started. Several of the employees in city hall are part-time workers as well.

John Day Mayor Ron Lundbohm said there were minimal vegetables in the winter, and there was an opportunity to implement a greenhouse with the help of a grant. He said there are plans

to transition the greenhouse into a cooperative and that the interest in the greenhouse generated interest in the city and in internship opportunities with Eastern Oregon University.

Juan Vargas said, in watching the town hall, he noticed that there were many opinions, with both the city and residents being defensive. He said, while many residents see that the city is trying to grow the population in John Day through these projects, he thinks the city also needs to prioritize them.

He said both groups need to come together to find the best solution and prioritize important projects first, while setting aside other projects to be finished while the important projects are completed.

"I think what we need to do as a community is focus together with a bit of understanding and figuring out what projects are critical now and what needs to be done now," Vargas said.

"Right now, I think it's agreed by the community at large that the police department is a critical project. As a community we've got to stick together and figure this out."

Tim Rude, who lives in Prairie City but owns a business in John Day, said he knows that grants are beneficial, but there is an added cost involved with getting grants. He said more job opportunities are another source to target for bringing people in for growth.

Councilor Elliot Sky said an opportunity that John Day has is targeting high-paying remote jobs with broadband. Sky said, where the city may not have the infrastructure for physical local jobs, they have the potential for people moving here for remote jobs while paying taxes.

"I think one of the obstacles that you guys are up against is the majority of the people in this community are from a conservative base," Rude said. "The people that have been here forever are

timber, ranching, trucking... I think as a community, a lot of the people here are those people. What you're saying, I disagree with. It's true from a remote side of things, (but) we don't want this to be Bend. We want this to be Grant County."

John Day resident Rich Lallatin said he is in support of keeping the police department and in favor of looking for a long-term funding solution. He said he would be willing to vote for temporarily increasing his taxes to pay for the department, but stressed that it would be temporary because of the rising costs.

"The only other option is to increase the amount of people paying taxes," Lallatin said. "In other words, John Day has to grow or it will lose the police department. We're at a point now where we either grow or we die."

No decision was made, but Green said the city will need to decide by the April 27 council meeting.

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**Remember: sex without consent = sexual assault**

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