

# 15 Oregon counties heading back to extreme risk as COVID-19 spikes

Indoor dining shut down in Grant County through May 6

By Gary A. Warner  
Oregon Capital Bureau

A steep surge in COVID-19 cases will lead to the shutdown Friday of indoor dining and other severe restrictions in 15 counties, Gov. Kate Brown announced Tuesday.

The 15 counties include Grant, Baker, Clackamas, Columbia, Crook, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, Lane, Linn, Marion, Multnomah, Polk and Wasco. The restrictions, including a ban on indoor dining and reduced capacity indoors, will last through May 6.

Oregon on Friday reported over 1,020 new infections, more than double two weeks ago — the sharpest spike of any state.

The spread of more contagious variants is outpacing vaccinations, which now top 1.1 million out of the state's 4.3 million residents.

"In the race between vaccines and variants, the variants are gaining ground and have the upper hand," Brown said during a Friday morning press call.

During a period last month



PMG file photo

Gov. Kate Brown

when cases were dropping, Brown ordered an exemption from the harshest restrictions if the state was under 300 hospitalizations for COVID-19. There are currently 305 confirmed or presumed COVID-19 patients hospitalized in Oregon, although only 276 have tested positive.

The rising infection rates will almost certainly pass the threshold this weekend. Brown said she would announce Monday if she was re-imposing limits that include a ban indoor dining and cutbacks on gathering sizes, business hours and other public activity.

If a return to extreme risk levels is warranted, it will occur at the end of next week, without the prior "warning week" to give counties more time to prepare for changes in the rules.

"Essentially this is your warning," she said.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said the drive to vaccinate Oregonians has varied widely across the state. Over 50% of the adult population has at least one shot of vaccine in Hood River, Lincoln, Benton, Deschutes and Multnomah counties.

The counties with the lowest vaccination rates are Lake,

Umatilla, Gillam and Douglas, where less than 35% of adults are vaccinated.

Increasingly the "under-vaccination gap" is driven by personal choice instead of availability of shots, Allen said.

Softening demand could be caused by vaccine hesitancy or outright opposition. The one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine was again approved for distribution on Friday after a pause ordered by the Food and Drug Administration.

The agency and the Centers for Disease Control investigated a small number of incidents, including the death of an Oregon woman, among the 7.5 million people vaccinated with the shot. The renewed use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine will now come with a warning of extremely rare blood clots.

Health officials across the nation have worried that Americans would become too focused on a tiny number of adverse outcomes instead of the larger and more lethal threat of COVID-19. Vaccination delays give the virus time to spin off more variants, including those that started in Britain and South Africa, driving up infection and death rates.

Allen mentioned con-

certs, family gatherings and seeing loved ones without masks as parts of life that everyone — including himself — wanted to return to as soon as possible. The fastest way of getting "back to normal" was to be vaccinated soon, he said.

Brown said she realized any new restrictions would whipsaw Oregon's already turbulent business environment during the pandemic. The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan approved by Congress would be tapped to soften the economic impact on proprietors and companies affected by a new order.

The number of new virus infections in Oregon has risen 58% in the last 14 days, the steepest of any state, the New York Times reported Friday.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top contagious disease expert, said the upswing in infections exceeded the state's most pessimistic scenarios.

"If that spread continues unabated, our hospitals risk being swamped by virus-stricken patients," he said.

The "fourth surge" of the pandemic has some reason to be less pessimistic than earlier spikes, said Dr. Renee Edwards, chief medical officer at OHSU Healthcare at Oregon Health and Science Uni-

versity and advisor to Brown. "This will be different," she said.

The vaccination of three out of four people 65 and older, who made up the majority of people who were killed by the virus, means this spike will impact a relatively younger and healthier group of unvaccinated people. The result will be that, while infections and illness could climb steeply, deaths will not.

Edwards said the restrictions would likely be needed for no more than three weeks, when the increasing vaccination levels will cap the usual exponential growth of the COVID-19 spikes.

While hoping that COVID-19 cases can be low enough to lift most restrictions by July, Brown said that would not be the end of the fight.

After California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced this week that students at the massive University of California and California State University systems would have to show proof of vaccination before being allowed to return to classes in the fall, Brown said Oregon would most likely follow suit, but said she was not yet ready to issue the order before consulting with university and community college leaders.

## Oregon gets sixth congressional district — but where?

State receives first congressional seat in 40 years

By Gary A. Warner  
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon will add a sixth congressional seat in the 2022 election, the U.S. Census announced Monday.

Where it will go is to be determined. Monday's announcement is the apportionment of the 435 House seats to the states. Based on population changes in the past 10 years, states can gain or lose seats.

Oregon is one of the winners, receiving its first new congressional seat in 40 years.

Among the losers is California, which will have to give up one of its 53 seats in Congress — the first time in its history it hasn't gained seats or stayed the same.

Six other states will get new seats. Texas gets two seats. Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina each received one new seat.

Besides California, states that lost a seat were New York, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Democrats currently hold a 218-212 majority in the House. Five seats are vacant.

How the district lines will be drawn differs from state to state. Oregon is among 33 states where the legislature controls all or most of the process. Eight states — including California and Washington — use independent commissions to do redistricting. Two do a mix.

Data from the U.S. Census required to draw districts that meet federal and state voting rights laws won't arrive

until late August or September, up to six months behind schedule. Census officials said the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the counting of the population and the ability of staff to compile the numbers.

The Oregon Supreme Court ruled April 9 that the Legislature will have until Sept. 27 to submit maps for the state House and Senate seats, as well as congressional districts.

If they cannot agree on new districts, legislative districts would be drawn by Secretary of State Shemia Fagan, while congressional seats would be determined by a special judicial panel. If Fagan's maps are found wanting under legal review, the Oregon Supreme Court would draw the lines itself.

Bend had the largest population growth in Oregon — about 25% — over the past decade.

The other largest concentration of growth was the ring of suburbs around Portland, with Gresham, Troutdale and Sandy showing strong population increases, with less dense population growth in the south towards Estacada.

On the west side, smaller but dense clusters of growth are in Beaverton, Newberg, Tigard and, to the north, St. Helens.

Congressional candidates do not have to be residents of the district they represent, and reapportionment has led to "district shopping" for congressional seats.

One name to take out of the mix for Oregon's new congressional seat is Gov. Kate Brown, according to her longtime political consultant Thomas Wheatley. He said after the census announcement that Brown is not interested in running for the seat.

"I don't even see a crack" of interest from Brown, Wheatley said.

## Legislator alleges harassment by fellow lawmaker

Republican representative accuses Democrat of sexual harassment

By Gary A. Warner  
Oregon Capital Bureau



Rep. Vikki Breese Iverson, R-Prineville

Rep. Vikki Breese Iverson, R-Prineville, has gone public with her allegation that she was sexually harassed in texts from Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie.

Breese Iverson said Tuesday that she was the previously anonymous lawmaker who accused Witt of sexual harassment. She said she was speaking out after the bipartisan House Conduct Committee rejected a recommendation that Witt be removed from chairmanship of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. Witt later stepped down from the chairmanship but remains on the committee.

Breese Iverson is a member of the committee and the formal conduct complaint filed against Witt says the incident occurred during a meeting on April 12. Details of what happened have not been fully divulged, but Breese Iverson said Tuesday that Witt had sent her inappropriate texts.

One text included a reference to a "quid pro quo," a Latin term still used in business and politics that loosely means "a favor requiring the return of a favor."

"The fact Representative Witt chose to sexually harass me leaves us no room for any future ability to have real discussions regarding committee business

including who presides. The panel on Friday included Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, and Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, who are co-chairs of the committee. Other members who attended were Rep. Raquel Moore-Green, R-Salem, and Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland. Noble presided over the hearing.

Witt appeared and spoke briefly to say that he was "shocked and surprised" by the allegations. Breese Iverson did not take part in the hearing.

The lawmakers were unanimous in approving the ban on communication. But all agreed they did not have the power to remove Witt and were uncomfortable asking Kotek to force Witt out as chair because it could violate rules about presumption of guilt.

"This process is not supposed to be punitive," Fahey said.

House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby, criticized the committee for not taking a firm stance on safety measures for Breese Iverson.

"Co-chair Fahey's rejection of the independent investigator's recommendation to temporarily remove Chair Witt from his committee shows a shameful disregard for the pressing need for interim safety measures to protect the victim," Drazan said in the statement.

In her letter to Kotek, Breese Iverson said the House had failed to follow its own rules in not acting to issue "interim safety measures" as outlined in the Legislature's Rule 27, which ensures a "safe, respectful and inclusive workplace."

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