

Grant County calls on governor to return local control

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Decrying one-size-fits-all mandates to mitigate COVID-19's spread, Grant County Court members penned a letter to Gov. Kate Brown urging local control Aug. 23.

The county said the state granted local control in late June only to have it snatched back a month later with Brown's announcement that face coverings would be required in all kindergarten through 12th-grade schools in the fall.

The court members contend that, during that month, the county had only seven infections. Cases have increased since then, however. According to the Grant County Health Department, the county has had 106 positive cases since Aug. 16.

The court members' letter states that Grant County is a large, "frontier county" covering 4,500 miles, with wide geographical separation between towns.

The letter states, since March 2020, each school district has followed the recommendations of local and state health authorities. The court points out that

when two districts had an outbreak in their respective communities, they immediately implemented distance learning, contact tracing and followed the recommendations of the Grant County Health Department.

The court members tell the governor the county stands to lose "many" educators, support staff and volunteers should the state continue with its vaccine mandate for educators and health care workers.

The court states the districts currently have "several" vacant positions. Many of these positions, the court says, have been challenging to fill long before the governor's vaccine mandate.

"Losing additional school staff will make in-person education next to impossible," the letter says.

The court points out too that many parents have not enrolled their children in in-person classes due to the mask mandate. The court members said that state school funding—based on the number of students enrolled—will fall to levels that could force the schools to close their doors.

The commissioners urged the governor to allow either a



Eagle file photo

From left, County Commissioner Sam Palmer, County Judge Scott Myers and Commissioner Jim Hamsher during the Aug. 4 mandated meeting to discuss moving the Oregon-Idaho border.

vaccine or weekly testing for educators.

The commissioners said scores of teachers and parents had expressed concern about how the mask mandate affects children mentally and emotionally and how critical it is for a child to learn by hearing sounds correctly and seeing the movement of the mouth and tongue when making sounds.

"This is especially true for children with special needs and those with hearing loss," they said. "We understand the safety of our children is paramount, but so is their education and mental health."

The court members said, if the vaccine mandate goes

through as presented concerning health care workers, the county stands to lose a significant amount of health care workers and support staff.

They said Blue Mountain Hospital struggles to fill vacant positions without the mandate.

The commissioners state the safety of the county's citizens is in jeopardy and the county has just one hospital. The other, they said, is 70 miles away.

"It is unfair to create a health care crisis in rural communities by mandating a vaccine," they said.

For her part, Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County's public health administrator, said that while she had been meeting weekly with

the county commissioners, she did not know they had sent the governor a letter to push for local control.

In terms of vaccination rates among healthcare workers, Grant is tied with Harney County for the lowest percentage of health care workers vaccinated in the state at 46%, according to Oregon Health Authority. OHA notes that the licensing boards reports the vaccination information on the county of employment for the licensee. OHA said that some licensees in border states could have vaccinations in other states that are not captured in its data. Additionally, the report noted, vaccination rates closely align to the population's overall vaccine rate.

Currently, Grant County's overall vaccination rate is at 45% as of Aug. 30.

In general, Lindsay said she supports local control. However, she hopes that if Brown were to grant the county local control, public health recommendations from local leaders—which would be the health department—would be followed.

The Oregon Health Authority reported 98 hospitalized

COVID-19 positive patients as of Aug. 30 in Grant County's region seven, which it shares with Deschutes, Harney, Klamath, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake and Wheeler counties.

With the New York Times COVID-19 Data Tracker reporting seven-day average case count at eight per day, Grant County Judge Scott Myers said on Thursday that Brown makes a good argument for social distancing and other safety measures, but he said, she does not make a good argument for mandatory vaccinations.

"Individuals should be able to make their own medical decisions, and parents should be able to decide what is best for their children," the court said. "It is not up to the government to decide what is best for an individual or their children regarding medical matters."

Myers said he would roll up his sleeve for the booster shot like he did for the vaccine when health officials offer it to his respective demographic.

"I'll take it before they tell me to take it like I did when they offered the first two," he said.

Grant County's state representatives urge governor to reconsider vaccine mandates

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

State Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and state Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, implored Gov. Kate Brown in a letter to reverse a mandate that health care and school workers get the COVID-19 vaccine.

The state lawmakers representing Grant County argued that the governor's orders would trigger a wave of resignations that officials say could shutter ambulance service in the Vale area, close the Jordan Valley school system and leave the rural hospital in Burns with a skeleton staff.

Findley said Thursday, in Grant County, the Monument School District reports three of the six teachers are not vaccinated and have "very little desire to do so."

Findley said these scenarios are playing out across rural Oregon.

"When you take a school with six people and if you lose half of them you don't have enough to do it," he said.

During this year's general session, Owens introduced legislation that Findley co-sponsored that would have prevented any public body—state, local or special government—from issuing a requirement for proof of vaccination from COVID-19. But, to the rural lawmakers' dismay, the bill never left the committee or received a hearing.

"The impacts these vaccination mandates will have on rural schools, health care providers and hospitals, prisons, public safety, and social and public services will be severe," Findley noted. "These mandates will result in more harm than good and will have an opposite effect than desired."

Meanwhile, the Oregon Health Authority reported 102 hospitalized COVID-19 positive patients as of Aug. 26 in Grant County's region seven, which it shares with Deschutes, Harney, Klamath, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake and Wheeler counties.

Findley said people need to be educated and have an "informed discussion" on the severity of the virus.

"Social media is not doing anybody any favors, and people need to get educated with the facts and have a discussion," he said. "People don't like top-down, top-driven mandates. They want to be understanding, and I think we're doing a terrible job with education and getting folks involved in making an informed decision."

"This is not a debate about the reality and dangers of COVID-19 or the Delta variant, or the efficacy of the vaccine," said Owens. "This is about a gross overreach of

authority that is legally, ethically, and morally wrong. The decision to get the COVID-19 vaccine is a personal and private conversation and choice between the individual and their healthcare provider."

Findley said the letter's purpose was to establish a dialogue with the governor's office to lessen the impact of the vaccine mandate in rural communities and look at meaningful exemptions that are viable.

"I hope cooler heads can prevail," he said. "What we have attempted to do in the letter is build some off-ramps and say let's have some dialogue and figure out how to lessen the impacts."

In a Monday email, Gov. Kate Brown's Deputy Com-

munications Director Charles Boyle told the Eagle that Brown's goal is to keep schools, businesses and communities open:

"Our hospitals are full, and our doctors, nurses, and health care workers are being stretched beyond their limits. Hospitalizations have increased nearly 1000% since July 9. The vast majority of Oregonians hospitalized for COVID-19 are unvaccinated. People are dying right now when we have safe, effective, and free vaccines readily available. The Governor is responding to a public health crisis. Elected officials should be calling on their constituents to wear masks and get vaccinated."

Masks now required at outdoor events

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown has expanded a mandatory mask order to include large outdoor gatherings as well as indoor gatherings.

The new rule went into effect Friday and includes everyone aged 5 and over regardless of whether or not they are vaccinated. Masks will be required in outdoor public situations. Brown also is recommending outdoor masks for private gatherings, though they are not mandatory.

"The delta variant is spreading fast and wide, throwing our state into a level of crisis we have not yet seen in the pandemic," Brown

said in a Tuesday afternoon announcement. "Cases and hospitalizations are at a record high."

The immediate impact will be on those going to outdoor sports events, fairs and large gatherings. The new rule will be in effect for the Oregon State Fair in Salem and for the Pendleton Round-Up Sept. 11. Masks will be required for any college football game as well. The Oregon Health & Science University forecast last week that the highly contagious delta variant would lead to skyrocketing case rates that won't peak until early next month.

Epidemiologists around the nation have noted an increase in infections that cannot be traced to indoor spread.

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