

WE ARE Hiring!
Employment
 advertising section for job-seekers
 SEPTEMBER 2021
 Brought to you by Baker City Herald
 Baker, Grant, Morrow, Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties
 THE OBSERVER HERALD EAST OREGONIAN CHIEFTAIN

The Blue Mountain **EAGLE**
 Grant County's newspaper since 1868

GO! EASTERN OREGON
 Learn Heritage
 Elgin Opera House opens 'Matilda' Oct. 1
 SIDE BREWING
 1270 Washington Ave - La Grange, OR 97030
 www.sideabber.com

HELP WANTED! SPECIAL SECTION | SECTION E

Wednesday, September 22, 2021

153rd Year • No. 38 • 14 Pages • \$1.50

MyEagleNews.com



Blue Mountain Eagle/Steven Mitchell
Billy Colson, Prairie City's athletic director, principal and teacher, listens during last week's Grant School Board meeting.

School board votes unanimously to keep co-op

By STEVEN MITCHELL
 Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — On Wednesday, Sept. 15, Grant School District officials voted unanimously to allow a cooperative agreement with Prairie City for baseball in 2022.

The school board had seemed poised to do away with cooperative sports agreements altogether after receiving an Aug. 18 letter from Grant Union High School's volleyball, basketball, wrestling, track, and cross country coaches urging them to end the co-ops amid a flurry of students leaving the district — mainly to Prairie City.

However, after multiple public

comments in favor of the cooperative agreements, the board reversed course.

Hayley Pomeroy, the mother of Cyrus Workman, the lone Prairie City student who plans on playing baseball for Grant Union High School in 2022, made an impassioned statement to the board via Zoom.

Pomeroy said she was born and raised in Grant County and told the board that her son was born with congenital heart disease and could not play football. The cardiologist, she said, would not clear him to play. However, she said, Workman was OK'd by his doctor to play baseball and basketball.

Without a cooperative agreement, Pomeroy said, Cyrus would not get to play baseball.

Pomeroy asked the board if they would approve a policy that promoted a "gang mentality."

She said the coaches state in their letter that the district should only provide sports at Grant Union for Prospectors.

"Is it because of geographical territory?," Pomeroy asked. "Is it because Panthers wear orange and Prospectors wear red?"

Pomeroy asked the board if the proposal to end cooperative agreements was to improve the board's "inability to retain students."

She also asked if a coopera-

tive agreement was in place for the softball team. If so, why is one not in place for the baseball program? Indeed, the board approved the softball team's 2022 agreement.

"Is that not a conflict with your student rights and discrimination policies?" Pomeroy asked the board. "It's OK for the girls, but not for the boys."

Cyrus' grandfather Mike Workman said rural communities need cooperative sports agreements to help give young people opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise.

Workman said the only consideration he could see for not co-oping

See Co-op, Page A14



Eagle file photo
Grant County Health Department staffers sort COVID-19 rapid tests last year during a testing event.

Grant county officials fear vaccine staffing backlash

By STEVEN MITCHELL
 Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — With roughly a month before state COVID-19 vaccine mandates kick in Oct. 18 for some workers in Oregon, county health and education officials said the county faces an uncertain future when it comes to staffing in some areas in Grant County.

Grant County officials in health and education have reached out to staff ahead of Gov. Kate Brown's pending deadline for some worker classes to get vaccinated or lose their jobs if they cannot provide a valid medical or religious exemption.

Kimberly Lindsay, the county's public health administrator, told the Eagle that throughout all of Community Counseling Solutions, which oversees public health in Grant County and Hepner, just two of their staff of 200 people have said they would not get the vaccine and will leave the company after the deadline. One of those staffers, she said, is from Grant County.

That number could grow, however. Lindsay noted that there are four weeks left before the deadline and that she has only heard from 75% of her staff so far.

See Vaccine, Page A14

WHERE ARE THE WORKERS?



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group
Restaurateur and business owner Tyler Brown poses for a photo inside Sumpter Junction, one of his restaurants, on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. The restaurant has been closed since March 2020 following statewide shutdown orders that shuttered businesses across the state to fight the pandemic. Sumpter Junction has yet to reopen due to a lack of workers.

Manufacturing, hospitality among worst hit industries

By JAYSON JACOBY, SAMANTHA O'CONNOR and ALEX WITTWER
 EO Media Group

T Tyler Brown's family owns one restaurant in Baker City that hasn't served a meal since before the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Baker County.

But the Browns' challenges to keep enough workers to run their two other restaurants are so daunting that they can't begin to plan the reopening of the closed business.

That's the Sumpter Junction restaurant, off Campbell Street near Interstate 84. The Browns closed the restaurant in March 2020. Inside rest the memories of customers who once frequented the restaurant, told quietly by a single butter knife resting on the edge of a booth table.

A newsstand is stacked high with Baker City Herald issues blaring the headline "Coronavirus Closures." They're dated March 14, 2020. It was three days before Gov. Kate Brown banned dining inside restaurants. It was the last paper delivered to Sumpter Junction.

During much of the rest of that year, and continuing into 2021, the number of customers at Baker County's various restaurants was limited due to the county's COVID-19 risk level.

Those restrictions meant it wasn't feasible to reopen Sumpter Junction, Tyler Brown said.

Risk levels and restaurant limits ended June 30, but Brown said it remains a struggle to keep a sufficient workforce to operate Barley Brown's Brew Pub and Tap House, separate establishments, both owned by the fami-

Worker Shortage



THIRD IN A 5-PART SERIES

ly's Windmill Enterprises LLC, on Main Street in downtown Baker City.

In fact, Brown said the situation has worsened in the past month or so since the governor required people to wear masks in most public indoor settings, including restaurants.

Brown said he has lost a couple employees who simply refuse to continue working while required to wear a mask throughout their shift.

"I know it's frustrating for everyone," he said. Wearing masks isn't the only thing that discourages workers, Brown said.

It's also stressful for employees to enforce the mandate with customers, some of whom refuse to comply.

"It definitely wears on (employees)," Brown said.

In addition, Brown said he recently had four employees, all of whom are fully vaccinated, test positive for COVID-19.

Although none had severe symptoms, they had to miss work for 10 days, which forced a reduction in his restaurants' hours.

The surge in COVID cases driven by the more contagious delta variant has affected other restaurants in Baker City.

Dairy Queen, for instance, posted a sign on its window stating that the restaurant would be closed for two weeks, starting Sept. 3, due to staffing shortages resulting from COVID-19. Dairy Queen is slated to reopen, with regular hours, on Sept. 18.

Some employers have attributed the workforce shortage to expanded federal unemployment payments.

But even though those benefits ended in early September, Brown said he's not optimistic that this will result in an influx of potential workers.

The scarcity of workers has had an obvious effect on the restaurant sector, with many businesses, in Baker City and elsewhere, reducing hours, and in many cases closing altogether on some days.

Hungry for workers

Among Eastern Oregon counties, Baker County saw the largest percentage decrease of workers employed in the leisure and hospitality industry, dropping nearly 17%, or 120 workers, between July 2019 and July 2021. Harney

See Workers, Page A14

