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Steven Mitchell/Eagle file photo
Grant County Judge Scott Myers during a May session of the County Court. Myers told audience members during the Wednesday, Oct. 13, session of the court that in-person attendees are now required to mask up, with no exceptions.

County will now require masks

By STEVEN MITCHELL
 Blue Mountain Eagle

CANYON CITY — After months of not enforcing the state mask mandate at public meetings, the Grant County Court will now require in-person attendees to mask up when attending court sessions.

County Judge Scott Myers said Oregon Occupational Safety and Health warned the county it could get slapped with a \$5,000 fine after observing a Sept. 22 Facebook Live video stream of a County Court meeting that showed most people not wearing masks.

Aaron Corvin, a public information officer with Oregon OSHA, said in an email that the agency had received a confidential complaint on Sept. 22 regarding a session of the Grant County Court.

“Holding a public meeting with no masks or face coverings,” the complaint alleged. “This is streaming live on the Blue Mountain Eagle Facebook page.”

Corvin said no similar complaints had been filed this year involving Grant County.

In August, amid a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases, Gov. Kate Brown announced that masks, face shields or other face coverings would once again be required in indoor public spaces.

Nonetheless, some audience members at the Oct. 13 session pushed back on the face-covering requirement. Myers told them they would need to mask up or leave the courtroom, adding there would be no exceptions.

Prairie City resident Frances Preston told Myers she would pay the \$5,000 fine and that the court should not back down to Oregon OSHA.

Myers told Preston that he would not allow disruptions to the meeting and that she would have to wear a mask or leave the courthouse. Preston ultimately put a mask on.

Meanwhile, county residents John Rowell and Charlene Morris continued to defy the judge's order.

In a fiery exchange, Rowell asked Myers what he would do if he did not

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CLOSING THE COP SHOP



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle
Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley. Once the John Day Police Department closes up shop at the end of the month, the primary responsibility for law enforcement in the city will fall on the Grant County Sheriff's Office — which McKinley said is already stretched too thin.

John Day is suspending its police department. Now what?

By BENNETT HALL
 Blue Mountain Eagle

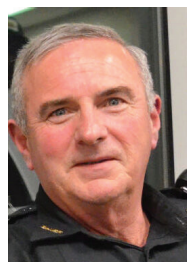
Law enforcement in John Day will look a whole lot different in the future, but for now, nobody seems to know exactly what shape it will take.

On Oct. 12, the John Day City Council voted unanimously to suspend the city's police department at midnight Oct. 31 (see related story, Page A3).

But the need to get everything ready for the shutdown meant the city's officers would have to switch from patrol duties to other activities, and they took their last calls from the county's 911 dispatch center on Thursday, Oct. 14.

The council's decision accelerated a process that has been discussed for years but that began in earnest last spring.

On April 6, in his annual budget message, City Manager Nick Green informed the council that the city did not have enough general fund revenues to cover the department's costs for the



EO Media
John Day Police Chief Mike Durr

coming fiscal year.

He presented charts showing that the department had been running a deficit for years, with expenses outpacing budgeted revenues by more than \$300,000 annually. After years of using fund transfers from other parts of the budget to prop up the police department, he said, the city had no more reserves to draw on.

Green presented the council with a stark choice: Either transfer local law enforcement functions to the Grant County Sheriff's Office by Sept. 1, or hold a special election for a five-year operating levy to help cover the department's budget shortfall.

The council voted to put a levy on the ballot for Aug. 17, asking John Day residents to pay up to 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation on their property tax bill, which would equate

to \$100 a year for the owner of a \$200,000 property.

City officials set about trying to persuade local residents to vote for the measure but faced vocal opposition from critics of the city's spending priorities — including a number of people who live outside the city limits, as well as former Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer.

In the end, the measure received 284 votes in favor vs. 169 votes against but didn't pass because of the special election's double majority requirement. Only 453 of the city's 1,168 eligible voters cast a ballot, according to County Clerk Brenda Percy, 132 short of the 50%-plus-one, or 585 ballots, needed for the result to count.

In a last-ditch effort to keep the department afloat, the city applied for a three-year federal policing grant of \$125,000 a year. Grant awards were supposed to be announced in October, but after the announcement date was pushed back indefinitely, the City Council voted to suspend police operations at the end of this month.

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Roughly 40-60% of local covered workers vaccinated

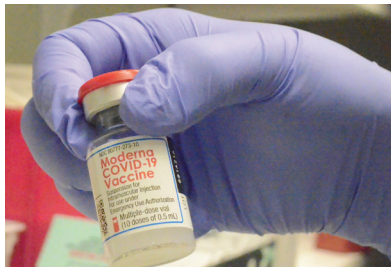
By STEVEN MITCHELL
 Blue Mountain Eagle

The vaccination deadline for health care workers, K-12 educators and certain state employees in Grant County arrived Monday, Oct. 18.

When Gov. Kate Brown issued the sweeping order this summer, her announcement was clear: Show proof of vaccination against COVID-19 on or before Oct. 18 or lose your job.

Since then, however, labor unions have worked on ironing out conditions of employment, thousands of workers have requested exemptions, and the state has granted new extensions for certain employees.

Although definitive statistics are hard to come by, vaccination rates for covered employees in Grant County appeared to be running



Eagle file photo
A vial of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

between about 40 and 60% based on available information.

Health care

As of Friday, Oct. 15, 60% of Blue Mountain Hospital's staff had been vaccinated, according to Var Rigby, director of human resources at the hospital. However, Rigby added that some of the staff had not yet submitted vac-

cine documentation, so the hospital anticipated that number to increase before the end of the day on Monday.

Rigby said just over 30% have opted for vaccination exceptions along medical or religious lines, adding that the number should increase as the hospital continues to receive employee exception requests before the deadline.

Rigby said the hospital anticipates losing fewer than 10 employees but emphasized that employees can still submit vaccine exception paperwork until the 5 p.m. Monday deadline.

Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County public health administrator, was out sick Monday and was unavailable to comment on how her department might be impacted by the vaccine mandate deadline.

School districts

Casey Hallgarth, Prairie City School District superintendent, said about 42% of his staff had been vaccinated and that 58% had opted for medical or religious exceptions.

“We have a directive from Gov. Brown, and we have to follow it,” Hallgarth said. “Some of our staff are for and some are against, but at the end of the day, we have to comply to keep our jobs.”

Hallgarth said there were several conversations with the staff and community about the man date, and his sense was that the majority felt getting the job should be a choice.

“Some people are upset because they are being forced to do something they might not believe in,” Hallgarth said. “And I think that is OK,

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