

Pandemic

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march into 2022 with a tally of 273 million infections worldwide and 5.4 million deaths — led by over 800,000 in the United States.

In January 2021, some forecasts predicted the virus would be under control by June. It felt that way in July, when Oregon reported 92 deaths — the first monthly total to fall below 100 since June 2020, at the beginning of the crisis. A two-week respite around the Fourth of July gave a glimpse of what could pass for normal life.

Delta quickly crushed the hope. By Labor Day, delta peaked. The spike would bottom out in October. No, Thanksgiving, Christmas, March 2022. The steep line plotted on a graph that took two months to peak became a stretched out slope with bumps back up on the way down.

This time, there would be no hiatus. Delta dropped, then at the beginning of December surged in parts of the nation — driven by crisis fatigue of people who now gathered more often indoors, in larger groups, with varying levels of the official guidelines for masks and social distancing. Delta took two months to jump from where it was first seen in India to all 36 counties in Oregon. Omicron was reported in southern Africa on Nov. 22 and was officially in Oregon by Dec. 13.

Attempts to calculate when

the pandemic was slowing or receding have led to futility.

After 612 people died in December 2020, the tally slowly dropped with the arrival of vaccines late that month. The worst seemed over.

When delta broke the record with over 900 reported deaths in September, then slid to 640 in October and 249 in November, the path forward looked much brighter.

'A gut punch'

But the virus is a living, morphing shape-shifter. What it is today, it isn't tomorrow, much less a month or a year from now.

Today, nearly three out of four people in Oregon are vaccinated — the 12th-highest rank among 50 states.

A New York Times survey on Saturday of federal, state and local data showed that since the pandemic began, Oregon has had the third-lowest rate of infections and sixth-lowest rate of deaths of the 50 states.

But forecasts come with more caveats this December. The omicron variant may be less lethal. May be milder in most cases.

But new information can make current information grow old and out-of-date very quickly.

In June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it was fine for people with two vaccine shots to meet in small groups with others whose status was the same.

Delta was tagged as "the pandemic of the unvaccinated" — and was in the most severe cases.



Dean Guernsey/Bulletin file photo

Volunteer Lauren Tolo carries ice at a cooling station on Hunnell Road in Bend during a heat wave in June 2021.

The vaccinated made up less than 5% of the hospitalized and about 1% of the dead.

Omicron could be held at bay in the United States by the dominance of the delta variant. Instead, it is pushing it aside.

"Fully vaccinated" meant two shots of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or one of Johnson & Johnson. Now a booster of the first pair is the marker for maximum protection, while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been shelved amid caution over its effectiveness and side effects.

"Exactly one year ago, this week, we came together to celebrate the first COVID vaccinations in Oregon," Brown said Friday. "We watched with excitement, and frankly a huge sigh of relief, as health care workers from across our state received their first dose."

One year later, the new year opens with omicron. "A gut punch," said Dr. Renee

Edwards, chief medical officer of the Oregon Health & Science University.

In the streets and stores of Oregon, the sign of the pandemic as of late has been, at most, people wearing masks. In some parts of Oregon where going maskless is a sign of skepticism of the science or political belligerence, even that symbol is absent.

Health workers prepare for more

But health workers across the state say inside hospitals, exhausted doctors, nurses and other medical and health staff deal with an undulating but never absent stream of sickness and death. Now, they must prepare for more.

Cloaked by privacy laws, the state daily issues a ticker of deaths — people reduced to which county they lived in, when they became sick, when and where they died, their gen-

der and age and if they had the catch-all "underlying conditions" that made fatality more likely.

With a few exceptions that attract a public obituary or a level of fame that makes it impossible to conceal their identity, the daily list of names, faces, stories and suffering of the dead remain unknown to all but family and hospital staff who watch as they pass.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's chief epidemiologist, gave a mournful soliloquy on Sept. 16 when Oregon passed 3,500 deaths from COVID-19.

Each morning, he would look at the internal reports of new deaths coming in from around the state. Some made him cry. Some made him angry. Some made him feel something worse.

"Some mornings, I am numb to the pain, suffering and death that the numbers represent," he said. "A mother, a father, a son or daughter, brother or sister, grandmother or grandfather, a best friend, a neighbor, a beloved co-worker. Every one of them was loved and every one of them leaves behind grieving loved ones."

Sidelinger said he longed for the day the pandemic is over and hoped people would not forget what it had extracted from everyone.

Since he spoke, more than 2,000 more people have died in Oregon.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, a top fore-

caster of the pandemic at the University of Washington, said Friday that the reports will continue past Jan. 1.

It reports that the official worldwide death toll will hit 6.26 million by March 1 — though postmortems in months and years ahead will show deaths at double that number.

In the United States, IHME expects fatalities to reach 880,000 nationwide by that date. When statistics catch up, historians will likely see that deaths in the United States topped 1 million in mid-February.

The flow of reports to Sidelinger's desk in Oregon each morning won't stop either. IHME puts the likely official count on March 1 passing 6,400 reported deaths. The real number will eventually be closer to 9,100 after the review of fatalities is done after the pandemic ends.

When that will be is unknown. The forecast stops at March 1. The list of variants ends for now at omicron.

How many more Greek letters tagged to COVID-19 variants in 2022 is in a future that won't be known until next year this time.

Whether the pandemic will die out — or fires burn, smoke billow, political violence flare — won't be known until this time next year.

The past three years show that predicting the future of this era of trouble is difficult and often foolish.

Check back next December to find out.

Grant

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"It was totally unaffordable on a \$300,000 tax base," Green said at the meeting.

Several councilors voiced their agreement.

"It's not feasible" for John Day to maintain a police department, Gregg Haberly said. "We don't have the money."

"We put it to a vote of the people, and the people told us they were not willing to pay for a police department," Dave Holland added. "We gave them the opportunity to make the decision for themselves, and they made it."

Even though the councilors seemed to agree that John Day can no longer afford its own police department, they also seemed to agree that the Sheriff's Office needs more funding to provide adequate law enforcement services both within the city limits and in the county as a whole.

Asked what it would take to do that, Sheriff McKinley responded he would need to add at least three more patrol deputies. To match what the John Day Police Department had at full strength, he pointed out, he would need to add four deputies and a secretary.

City-county feud

The city has offered to provide some additional money for the Sheriff's Office through a fund exchange but has not yet received a response from county officials. The other unanswered question hanging over the Dec. 14 City Council meeting was whether the county will ever respond.

The city's proposal goes like this: John Day will pay the county \$300,000 a year for three years (essentially all of the city's property tax revenues) for law enforcement services in the city limits. In exchange, the city wants the county to pay it the same amount from the county road fund, to be used for street improvements to serve new housing developments that could broaden the tax base for the whole county.

Green delivered the proposal in person at the Oct. 13 session of the Grant County Court, a contentious meeting that Green stormed out of after County Judge Scott Myers insisted on having the proposal in writing.

The city submitted a written version of the proposal on Nov. 8, but the matter still has not been taken up by the County Court. In an interview with the Eagle late last month, Myers called the proposal "terribly one-sided" and said there was no point discussing the idea until the City

Council had decided what to do with the COPS grant.

At the Dec. 14 City Council meeting, McKinley said he didn't think the county would agree to a fund exchange but added he's been trying to get county officials to at least discuss the matter with the city.

Multiple councilors expressed their frustration with the county's silence on the issue.

"I am so sick of hearing it is both parties' fault when they refuse to talk to us," Shannon Adair said. "You can't have a conversation when one party won't come to the table."

For his part, McKinley made it clear he was tired of being "stuck in the middle" of the policing debate.

"We are such a small area. We've got to get past this stuff or it's not going to work," he told the council.

"I think these two bodies are going to have to solve it, and that's what they were elected to do."

Etc.

The COPS grant was just one item on a packed agenda at the Dec. 14 meeting. In other action, the council:

- Approved an amendment to the urban renewal agency's budget that adds a \$2.3 million loan from Business Ore-

gon. The money will be used to finance land development costs to incentivize the construction of 100 homes in three housing projects: Holmstrom Ranch, Ironwood Estates and The Ridge.

- Accepted the urban renewal agency's annual report.

- Adopted a supplemental budget to appropriate grant funds received by the city.

- Heard a presentation on the city's audited financial statements. Auditor Robert Gaslin said he found no signs of fraud or any other issues with the city's finances.

- Authorized the city manager to solicit design proposals for a new aquatic center at the Seventh Street Sports Complex and discussed an appeal filed against the project (see related story on Page A2).

- Reviewed design concepts for the Pit Stop, a development proposal for a city-owned lot on the southwest corner of Main and Canton streets. New restrooms have been built on the lot, but there was a lively debate on what else should go there. Sherrie Rininger, owner of Etc. boutique and president of the Chamber of Commerce, argued that the space should be used to provide off-street parking for oversized vehicles. Other competing potential uses include bike lockers,

food carts, picnic tables, seating areas and a fire pit.

- Heard an update on the wastewater treatment plant project, including a \$3 million provisional grant from the state to fund the "purple pipe" water reclamation system.

- Heard an update on the Airport Industrial Park and Innovation Gateway Business Park. The council also voted 6-0 to accept a letter of intent from Councilor Adair to purchase 2.5 acres in the Innovation Gateway Business Park (Adair recused herself from voting on the matter). Adair and her husband, Jeremy, want to build a distillery, brewery and hotel on the property. The matter will come back before the council at a later date for a final decision.

- Heard an update on the sale of the city's Gleason Park and Gleason Pool property to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department for expansion of the Kam Wah Chung State Historic Site. The state has agreed to pay the city \$22,000 for the 3-acre property. Green noted that the Oregon Parks Commission recently approved \$3 million-\$5 million in bonds to fund the new Kam Wah Chung Interpretive Center and the Legislature has given the city \$1 million for infrastructure and site connectivity improvements in connection with the project.

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Merry Christmas

from our family to yours!

May your holidays be filled with laughter and joy this season.



Solutions, CPAs

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Horses

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occurs in areas of gentle slopes that most foraging species, including wild horses, permitted livestock and wildlife, prefer," she said.

Kern also noted that sheep are permitted to graze in the territory for a portion of the year, but the permittee has not grazed sheep on the allotment in several years "because of a lack of forage availability."

The coalition filed the suit after the May approval of the Ochoco Wild Horse Herd Management Plan, said Kern.

"The government will file a

response to the complaint later in December," said Kern. "No schedule for briefing the merits of the case with the court has been set."

Gayle Hunt, president and founder of the coalition, a non-profit, said the smaller-sized herd won't have enough genetic diversity and the herd numbers will drift lower due to predation by cougars and wolves. A larger population will overcome predation and severe weather events, she adds.

According to Hunt, a retired employee of the Forest Service, higher numbers of wild horses will absorb predation, benefiting other wildlife. She added that the horses help to create and

maintain additional water and mineral access shared by other animals in the national forest by pawing at the ground.

"The horses have made water available in winter and summer when other sources have dried up or frozen over," said Hunt. "They paw very skillfully and relentlessly. They not only enhance sites as part of their own necessary habitat components, they also do the work for many, many other animals."

When asked whether or not predators could endanger the herd, Kern said that while wolves, cougars and bears do occur in the territory, predation on horses would be a "rare

or abnormal occurrence" and likely to occur only on young, sick or injured horses.

"There is little evidence of predation on the herd as a factor affecting population growth," said Kern. "There have been no confirmed cases of predation on horses by wolves to date."

The Forest Service had planned to start the gathering and removal of horses in October, but plans were shelved because of supply chain problems. Kern said she hopes the work can begin in early 2022 and the litigation against the Forest Service is not delaying plans to remove horses.

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