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THE YEAR IN REVIEW

2021



Blue Mountain Eagle, File
Todd McKinley was sworn in as Grant County's new sheriff in January.



Blue Mountain Eagle, File
Grant County resident Athena Moline tells John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom to read the Constitution at a town hall event in John Day.



Contributed photo
Terry and Sharon Smith were declared missing after their Mt. Vernon-area home burned in 2018.

A month-by-month look back

The year 2021 dawned with such promise: With a vaccine finally available, hopes were high that the COVID-19 pandemic would soon be under control. But vaccination rates stalled and the rapidly spreading delta variant pushed case counts — and fatalities — back up. Now the even more contagious omicron variant has arrived in Oregon. There was plenty of other news to report in 2021 besides COVID, of course, and the Eagle was there to cover it. Here, then, is a month-by-month recap of stories from the year just ending as we get ready for the new year to come.

By STEVEN MITCHELL
and BENNETT HALL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JANUARY

Grant County swore in Sheriff Todd McKinley to kick off the year. McKinley, in his second bid for sheriff, unseated incumbent Glenn Palmer in November of 2020 by over 600 votes.

Having lost by just 57 votes to Palmer in 2016 — 2,208 to 2,065 — McKinley said he was “pleasantly surprised” by the margin by which he was elected Grant County’s new sheriff.

A longtime Grant County resident, McKinley took over the office where he began his policing career.

He was a reserve in the Grant County Sheriff’s Office under Palmer’s predecessor, Fred Reusser, in 1998 and got hired on as a full-time deputy in 2001, working alongside Palmer until 2015 and serving as undersheriff for a time.

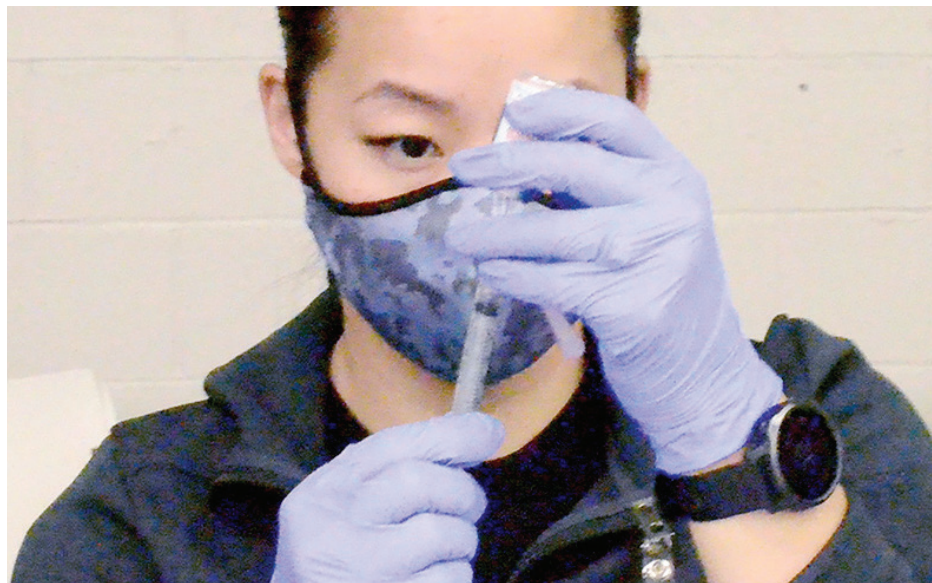
Over the years, the relationship soured, and McKinley took the helm of the Parole and Probation Department in 2015.

He said he appreciated the voter turnout in last year’s election.

“It was great to see Grant County show up,” he said. “This is the people’s office.”

The county also swore in a new Circuit Court judge, Rob Raschio.

Later in the month, after reappointing 20 incumbents to various boards and committees,



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to dominate the news in 2021.

County Court members considered replacing a Budget Committee member who voted against increasing county commissioner salaries in the 2020 budget cycle.

The County Court members asked two-year incumbent committee member Bob Quinton to reapply for his seat as they considered another applicant, Prairie City Public Works Director Chris Camarena.

County Judge Scott Myers warned the commissioners that appointing Camarena could create a direct conflict of interest because County Commissioner Jim Hamsher, who

is also Prairie City’s mayor, is Camarena’s immediate supervisor.

Quinton said he believed that Hamsher and Palmer wanted him off the committee because he and the other two at-large committee members opposed increasing the number of hours the county paid them for.

Hamsher and Palmer both said that was not why they considered Camarena for the position.

“When you get appointed to a committee or board, it’s not a lifetime appointment,” Hamsher said after a County Court session.

Palmer said at the time that someone he did not name went to the courthouse to apply for the Budget Committee and was told they could not.

“If you’re a taxpaying citizen in this county and there’s an opening on a board, you should have the right to apply for it, just like everybody else,” he said. “And if nobody applies for it, we’ll look at the reappointment.”

For his part, Camarena said he did not know Quinton had been on the Budget Committee and that he contacted the county because he thought the committee had an open seat.

Camarena said he was unaware of the commissioners’ request for a pay increase and would recuse himself if any potential conflict of interest came up, including the commissioners’ pay.

On Jan. 13, the court members voted unanimously to reappoint Quinton.

FEBRUARY

County Court members and local health officials challenged the state’s decision to place the county into the heightened COVID-19 risk level requiring local businesses to enact more significant restrictions because of an Oregon Health Authority data reporting error.

Public Health Administrator Kimberly Lindsay said the state incorrectly reported a backlog of 31 positive COVID-19 cases as occurring on Jan. 15. She said those cases did not happen within the two weeks that dictated the risk categories.

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Local officials brace for omicron

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle



Blue Mountain Eagle, File
Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County’s public health administrator, during a session of Grant County Court.

As Gov. Kate Brown extended Oregon’s state of emergency due to the fast-spreading COVID-19 omicron variant, Grant County’s top health official weighed in on what the variant’s impact could be on the county.

Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County public health administrator, said in a Dec. 20 press release that data from the United Kingdom and Denmark shows that since the first cases were detected roughly three weeks ago, cases have doubled every two to three days.

In a Dec. 22 phone call, Lindsay noted that a recent Wall Street Journal article clar-

ifies that those who have not had COVID-19 recently and have waning natural immunity or have not had the booster or are unvaccinated might experience the effects of a bad cold. But, she added, people with immune issues or older folks from more vulnerable populations stand to be more seriously impacted.

What is less clear about omicron, she said, is whether it is intrinsically less virulent than earlier versions of the disease. She told the Eagle the new variant is hundreds of times more transmissible than the delta variant, and she said she is hearing that the mutations of the variant are incredibly high.

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