

# Year

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Grant School District Superintendent Bret Uptmor said his district, like others around the state, had been working on a plan to return to in-person learning in the fall when the state took decision-making power away from local schools. Uptmor said local education leaders were in a better position to decide how to conduct classes safely than state officials in Salem.

Parents railed against the mandate at an Aug. 3 school board meeting, with some saying they would pull their kids out of school if masks were required. Casey Hallgarth, superintendent of the Prairie City School District, also expressed his dismay at the loss of local control over COVID safety measures in schools.

The Grant County commissioners wrote a letter to the governor asking her to return control of masking decisions to local school districts, although County Judge Scott Myers also noted during a County Court session that the county didn't have the power to simply take that control from the state.

On Aug. 4, the Grant County Court held its first meeting to talk about a plan to make a number of rural Oregon counties part of Idaho. A county ballot measure that passed with just over 60% of the vote in the May election requires the county commissioners to meet three times a year "to discuss whether it is in the best interest of Grant County to promote the relocation of the Oregon-Idaho border."

In a special election on Aug. 17, a proposed property tax levy to help fund the John Day Police Department went down in flames due to low voter turnout. The measure actually drew more yes votes (284) than no votes (169), but it fell short of the special election's double majority requirement because fewer than half the city's registered voters cast a ballot, so the result didn't count.

## SEPTEMBER

An effort to recall County Judge Scott Myers fizzled after it failed to garner enough petition signatures to make the ballot. Josh Walker of Seneca filed



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle, File  
Didgette McCracken, one of the founding board members of Grant County Cyber Mill, sits in the nonprofit's first location in Seneca on Nov. 19. The Seneca Cyber Mill offers public access to high-speed internet service for area residents.

a prospective recall petition with the Secretary of State's Office in June, accusing Myers of everything from "financial mismanagement" to "refusal to collaborate." The petition would have needed 578 valid signatures from registered Grant County voters to qualify for the ballot, but no signature sheets were turned in by the Sept. 8 deadline.

A push to end cooperative sports agreements between the Grant School District and out-of-district schools came to naught after the Grant School Board was deluged by opposition to the move.

The board had appeared poised to do away with the agreements 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, with most of them going to Prairie City.

But after parents and students pushed back with passionate testimony in support of sports co-ops, the school board wound up expanding the program, voting unanimously to allow a cooperative agreement with Prairie City for baseball in 2022.

The John Day/Canyon City Parks and Recreation District announced plans to put a bond measure on the ballot next year to help fund construction of a new aquatic center at the Seventh Street Sports Complex in John Day. Plans for the \$6 million project call for a six-lane, 25-yard competitive pool with

an 8,000-square-foot building to house a lobby, offices and locker rooms.

The city has received a \$2 million state grant to go toward the project, meaning the bond measure would look to raise roughly \$4 million. District officials say they're hoping to have the ballot measure ready in time for the May election, but the November election is also a possibility.

Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer announced his campaign to unseat Oregon's senior senator. Palmer, in his first term on the Grant County Court, is seeking the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate seat currently held by Ron Wyden, which is up for election next year.

In an interview, Palmer told the Eagle that, if elected, he would work closely with local officials and push for stronger measures to prevent catastrophic wildfires, tighter immigration controls, and more effective mental health and addiction treatment programs.

## OCTOBER

One of the biggest bombshells of the year dropped on Oct. 12, when the John Day City Council voted unanimously to suspend the city's police department.

It wasn't a complete surprise, of course: The city had been struggling for years to fund the department, whose annual budget is bigger than the city's entire property tax base, and a proposed levy to help pay for policing failed at

the ballot box in August.

Still, the end came sooner than expected: The council had talked about keeping it afloat till the end of the year while it waited to hear whether the city would receive a \$375,000 federal grant. But when the grant announcement was delayed, the council voted to pull the plug, and the city's two remaining police officers stopped taking 911 calls by Oct. 14.

That put the burden of providing law enforcement in John Day squarely on the Grant County Sheriff's Office, which had just four officers to cover the entire county, and touched off a tug-of-war between city and county leaders over law enforcement funding.

The city proposed a fund exchange: It would give the county \$300,000 a year for three years to help pay for law enforcement in exchange for an equal amount from the county road fund to pay for street improvements in John Day. To date there has been no formal response from the county.

Acting on an ethics complaint filed by the Blue Mountain Eagle, the Oregon Government Ethics Commission decided on Oct. 22 to launch an investigation into whether the Grant County School Board broke the law during an executive session on Aug. 19. (Board member Kelly Stokes, who did not participate in the executive session, was exempted from the inquiry.)

The newspaper took the unusual step of filing the ethics complaint after the board canceled a public meeting to discuss requirements to return to in-person schooling, including the governor's mandate that staff be vaccinated against COVID-19, then convened a hastily called executive session "to discuss confidential information." Based on a reporter's observation of the proceedings, the Eagle believed the board far exceeded the legal basis it cited for the closed-door session.

State law allows journalists to attend executive sessions, from which members of the general public are excluded, but not to report on what is said unless the discussion strays from the specific parameters cited by the public body to justify the closed-door session. The ethics panel has 180 days to complete its investigation.

The Grant County Conservatives held a rally on Oct. 30 at the Grant County Fairgrounds, where about 100 people gathered listened to a dozen speakers rail against

all levels of government and drum up support for conservative values and political candidates. The event served as a fund-raiser for the group's fledgling political action committee, GCC-PAC.

Among the speakers were Paul Sweany, one of GCC-PAC's directors; Ethan Kowing, a state trooper from John Day who was placed on leave after posting a video from his patrol car protesting COVID-19 mask and vaccine mandates; Sandie Gilson and Mike McCarter, two of the leaders of the Greater Idaho movement; and Alsea School District Superintendent Marc Thielman, a Republican candidate for governor.

## NOVEMBER

November brought news of uncooperative and downright hostile behavior toward contact tracers working to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Grant County. Public Health Administrator Kimberly Lindsay and clinic manager Jessica Winegar discussed the problem in detail at the Nov. 10 session of the Grant County Court.

Contact tracers increasingly find themselves the target of verbal tirades from people who are deliberately flouting pandemic protocols designed to protect the community from COVID-19, they told the commissioners. One contact tracer has been driven to quit by the abuse, Lindsay said, and another avoids going out in public because of high hostility levels.

November also brought word that Dayville had received enough federal funding to finish work on two major capital projects. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Program awarded the city two grants totaling \$170,000 to finish renovating the Dayville Community Hall, a century-old structure that residents have spent years raising money to repair.

Work on the hall includes shoring up the roof trusses, putting on a new roof, installing new electrical wiring, blowing insulation into the walls and completely rebuilding a rickety 1950s addition.

USDA Rural development also came through with \$79,800 to complete the fund-raising to build a new fire hall for the town's volunteer fire department. The old one had to be torn down after a fire truck backed into it in June 2020, damaging the building beyond repair.

Both projects should be finished next year.

The county's first Cyber Mill opened Nov. 16 inside a former restaurant in Seneca, offering free (at least for now) access to high-speed internet service. Fast, affordable internet access can be hard to come by in the town of 165, one of the more remote communities in Grant County.

The facility is the brainchild of the nonprofit Cyber Mill Grant County, which plans to open two more locations next year in Prairie City and John Day. The project is part of a larger push to extend broadband internet access throughout the county.

The Grant County Digital Network Coalition, a government consortium that includes

the county and the cities of John Day and Seneca, is using a \$1.8 million state grant to support Cyber Mills in its member cities and help fund Oregon Telephone Co.'s push to extend fiber optic cables from John Day to other Grant County communities.

On Nov. 18, the Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services announced that John Day had been approved for a three-year, \$375,000 grant to help pay the salaries of police officers. The only problem was that the city had suspended its police department in mid-October.

The news touched off a debate about whether the city should accept the grant and reboot its police department, even though the money would not solve the department's long-term funding issues, or seek federal permission to transfer the money to the Grant County Sheriff's Office, which has been forced to assume responsibility for law enforcement services in John Day since the police department was mothballed.

## DECEMBER

Like so many other cherished community traditions, the Carrie Young Memorial Dinner and Auction was forced to go virtual in 2020 due to concerns about spreading COVID-19. But, also like many of those other gatherings, it came back in person in 2021 as restrictions were eased.

This year's shindig brought several hundred people to the John Day Elks Lodge for a spaghetti feed and silent auction to honor Young's memory by raising money to provide Christmas presents and simple necessities such as groceries and heating oil for elderly Grant County residents. According to preliminary figures, the 2021 edition brought in just under \$50,000, a new record.

As the year drew to a close, Grant County recorded its 17th COVID-related death. The Grant County Health Department announced that the most recent fatality was a 91-year-old man who died at Blue Mountain Hospital in John Day on Dec. 4 after contracting the disease.

Grant County continues to have one of the lowest vaccination rates in Oregon, hovering at around 50% of the adult population compared to the statewide average of about 80%.

John Morris, an outspoken critic of plans to build a new community swimming pool in John Day, filed an appeal of a conditional use permit for the project granted by the John Day Planning Commission.

Morris claims the commission was biased and prejudicial in voting to grant the permit because he was not given the same opportunity to provide testimony as the 15 people who spoke in favor of the proposed aquatic center.

In a recent interview, Morris told the Eagle he's still not sure whether he's for or against the new pool, but he feels the city and the John Day/Canyon City Parks and Recreation District "have not been up front with the public" about financial details of the \$6 million project.

## IF YOU LOVE SCHOOLS, LAYER UP



Layered health and safety measures like getting vaccinated, wearing face coverings and improved airflow and circulation, can keep Oregon school doors open through the challenges of COVID-19 this winter. Learn more at [Oregon.gov/readyschools](https://Oregon.gov/readyschools).



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Wishing you a  
Happy New Year. We hope  
it's your best year ever!  
We appreciate your business & support.



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