

2021

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George Chadwick, leader of the Mormon Church's operations in Northeast Oregon, found that Grant County's food bank was in need of a boost and helped get the county's donation.

The state agreed to settle a Grant County-based lawsuit aimed at halting coronavirus relief money for Black Oregonians.

Great Northern Resources, a John Day logging company that listed Tad Houpt and Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer as agents, filed a lawsuit alleging race-based discrimination after being denied funding from the coronavirus relief fund set up to help Black-owned businesses.

Under the settlement terms, Great Northern received \$45,000, plus up to \$186,000 in fees for its attorneys.

Palmer told the Eagle in December of 2020 that he was not involved in the lawsuit, while Houpt declined to comment.

APRIL

State health officials reported that three COVID-19-related deaths were linked to an outbreak at a Prairie City nursing home, Blue Mountain Care Center.



Courtesy of Opsis Architecture

This conceptual drawing shows what the proposed aquatic center at the Seventh Street Sports Complex might look like.

Oregon Health Authority's data showed that 31 cases were associated with the outbreak.

The county's public health administrator, Kimberly Lindsay, noted that the total number of cases and deaths in the outbreak included some involving people outside the facility.

Rebekah Rand, Blue Mountain Health District's director of emergency services, and Lori Lane, health information manager, said there was no way to determine how the virus entered the care center.

Amid reports that care center employees had flouted coronavirus guidelines, Derek Daly, the CEO of BMHD, told the Eagle that he hoped staff members were following them but could not mandate what they do off the clock.

As COVID cases continued to soar, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that Grant County had the highest rate of infections per capita in Oregon and the worst vaccination rate in the state. The county's infection rate was 625 per 100,000 people, while the vaccination rate was 17.4%.

Later in the month, the county got some excellent news when Monument graduate Skye Fitzgerald, a filmmaker, earned his second Oscar nomination for his latest documentary, "Hunger Ward."

To end the month, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported a 9.5% increase in wolves statewide, with 10 in Grant County, up from seven the previous year.

John Day ODFW district biologist Ryan Torland told the Eagle that the agency did not believe that this was the total number of wolves in the county. Instead, it was what they considered a minimum population.

MAY

Tensions flared over COVID-19 — and so did misinformation. After Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders designating an "extreme risk" and banning indoor dining at restaurants in 15 counties, including Grant, to slow a spike in COVID-19 infections, several residents urged Grant County leaders to publicly proclaim the county would not comply with the restrictions.

Despite echoing many of

the valid opinions expressed in a letter signed by County Court members that went to the governor, many of the arguments made in the county relied on misinformation.

County Commissioner Sam Palmer incorrectly cited a Stanford University study stating masks were detrimental to long-term health.

However, according to Stanford's senior manager of media relations, Lisa Kim, the study's author, Baruch Vainshelboim, had no affiliation with the university when the journal Medical Hypothesis published the article.

"Stanford Medicine strongly supports the use of face masks to control the spread of COVID-19," she said.

She said Vainshelboim was a one-term, one-year visiting scholar in 2016 for "matters unrelated" to the 2020 article about face masks.

Palmer, a registered nurse, said the study looked like others he sees in medical journals he reads to stay current with changes in medicine.

"Maybe I should have done a little more homework," he said. "But I'll own what I did."

Palmer issued an apology to Myers, Hamsher and Grant County's residents for quoting the debunked study.

Still, as a "health care advocate," Palmer said he does not believe masks are the answer to curbing the spread of COVID-19.

Dr. Jeremy Kamil, an associate professor of microbiology and immunology at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, disagreed with Palmer's assertion.

"The preponderance of public health data is overwhelmingly in favor of how efficacious masks are at preventing the spread of flu and other respiratory viruses," he said.

Two hundred people attended a town hall at the Grant County Fairgrounds on May 12 to express their frustrations with statewide lockdown measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Dubbed a "nonpartisan effort," the event organizers stated in a mailer their goal was to let the county's elected officials know where the community stood on Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 mandates.

Almost unanimously, the crowd voted for Grant County's commissioners to adopt Baker City's Resolution No. 3881, which calls for the declaration of an economic, mental health and crime crisis due to the governor's COVID-19-related lockdowns and state of emergency.

In his view, organizer Bill Newman said the resolution does not have enough teeth, but will carry more weight as an official position.

"From the bottom of my heart," he said, "I think it's the right thing to do."

A few weeks later, organizers with Community Counseling Solutions and other county agencies abandoned a plan to buy a hotel and convert it into transitional housing after an emotional — and at times hostile — public meeting in the Trowbridge Pavilion at the Grant County Fairgrounds, where those in attendance voted down the project 75-50.

JUNE

A Mt. Vernon man on pre-trial release for sex crime charges was sent back to jail

in June and charged with 20 new sex-related charges stemming from incidents that occurred between 2015 and 2020.

Brogan McKrola, 22, faces a lengthy prison term if convicted on all of the new Measure 11 charges, which carry a minimum sentence of at least six years with no possibility for any sentence reduction.

In November, McKrola's plea hearing was rescheduled to Jan. 24.

Roughly 1,500 people turned out to commemorate the 100th year of Grant County's '62 Days Celebration, marking the discovery of gold in Canyon Creek in 1862.

Colby Farrell of the Whiskey Gulch Gang, which organizes the event, said at the time that it looked like it would be the county's first social gathering with eased COVID restrictions.

"This is really important that it could be the kickoff event in getting back to normal," he said. "It's a chance to get together finally after all this time and get back to being a community."

JULY

Grant County entered July in the grip of one of the worst droughts on record. The dry conditions prompted Gov. Kate Brown to issue an emergency drought declaration. According to the National Integrated Drought Information System, it was the driest year in 127 years, with 2 to 2½ inches less rain the average.

Nearly two-thirds of the county at that point was experiencing extreme drought conditions. Pastures were brown and barren, hay yields were low, and producers were selling off cattle to avoid the high cost of supplemental feed and forage.

Shaun Robertson, president of the Grant County Farm Bureau, told the Eagle that every rancher he talked to told him conditions were the worst they'd ever seen.

On July 13, the John Day City Council voted unanimously to overturn the city's ban on retail marijuana sales. The repeal paved the way for more grow sites and dispensaries in town, but there are still restrictions on where such operations can go. A city ordinance prohibits a dispensary or grow site within 1,000 feet of an educational facility, library, park, youth facility or other dispensary.

By year's end there still were no dispensaries operating within the city limits, although two cannabis retailers — Rocky Mountain Dispensary and Burnt River Farms — had announced plans to set up shop in town.

AUGUST

Local control emerged as a major issue for Grant County residents in August after Gov. Kate Brown reversed course on her June 30 executive order handing over public health decisions to counties amid a resurgence of COVID-19.

As the rapidly spreading delta variant sent COVID case counts soaring, the governor issued a flurry of new executive orders mandating masks in K-12 schools, inside state buildings and, finally, in all public indoor spaces in the state. Those moves quickly drew fire from Grant County leaders.

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