

# Family disputes OHA report that COVID-19 was a cause of Wallowa County woman's death



By RONALD BOND  
Wallowa County Chieftain

SALEM — The family of a Wallowa County woman who died in December is disputing an Oregon Health Authority report that COVID-19 had anything to do with her death.

“Definitely not a COVID death,” said Josh Barnett, a Salem resident, of his mother, Theresa Malec, a former resident of Wallowa.

Malec died at Barnett’s home in Salem on Dec. 15, about two weeks after being diagnosed with liver cancer, Barnett said.

Barnett said there was a delay in the processing of her death certificate, and when he received it, he had some suspicion that her death might be called a COVID-19-related death.

On Jan. 27, OHA reported the death of a 70-year-old Wallowa County woman in its daily COVID-19 report. It said the woman died on Dec. 15 after a positive test on Aug. 4.

While OHA does not provide names on its report — and declined to confirm to the Chieftain if the death it reported was indeed Malec — Barnett said it’s not too difficult to make the assumption that the death in the report was his mother.

COVID-19, though, was not what killed her, he said, and her death certificate, which he provided to the Chieftain, shows that.

## Contracted COVID, but defeated it

Barnett said his mother — who earlier in the year had

defeated breast cancer before the unexpected liver cancer diagnosis — did indeed have COVID-19 in early August, but healed up only a couple days after receiving treatment.

“She got ivermectin and the (monoclonal antibody) infusion therapy. She was tired for a couple, three days,” he said.

Unprompted, Barnett also said Malec had not been vaccinated.

“She didn’t want to be vaccinated, but she did fight it naturally. She pulled through,” he said.

After overcoming COVID, Barnett said his mom had returned to much of her normal activities, and had been driving weekly to Walla Walla for treatment of her breast cancer before defeating it.

“They had given her the all-clear on the breast cancer,” he said.

## A new diagnosis

He said his mom sounded “really tired, winded,” in a phone conversation with her on Nov. 29.

The next day, she was in the emergency room in Enterprise, originally given a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, Barnett said. She was Life-Flighted that night to Walla Walla, where it was determined, instead, the diagnosis was liver cancer.

She also initially tested positive for COVID while at Walla Walla, Barnett said, but that positive test was followed by two negative tests for the coronavirus — the second about a week later — which enabled Barnett to get into the hospital to visit her.



Josh Barnett/Contributed Photo  
**Theresa Malec, a former Wallowa resident, died Dec. 15. Her family believes she is listed as a COVID-19-related death in Wallowa County, and is refuting the Oregon Health Authority's report.**

Barnett eventually took Malec to his Salem home, where she was put on hospice and died about a week later.

## The death certificate

The text on the death certificate made Barnett wonder if Malec would be classified as a COVID death.

The certificate — Barnett shared the document with the Chieftain and gave permission to publish the information in it — lists cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest and liver cell carcinoma as the causes of death.

Below that, it lists anxiety and breast cancer as significant conditions contributing to death.

Next to those, it states “history of covid 19 (2 negative tests).”

The funeral home that worked with Barnett said it had “never seen this on a death certificate, ever,” he said. “I had that feeling.”

His feeling was confirmed on Jan. 27 when OHA reported the 70-year-old Wallowa County woman’s death, which the Chieftain reported later that day. Barnett reached out the following day seeking to clarify the details.

## Seeking answers

Barnett said OHA was not forthcoming on details in an email response to his brother, Ty, who also had been seeking answers.

The OHA told the Chieftain it could not comment specifically on whether Malec was listed as a COVID-19-related death, and that it “cannot provide any specific information related to a person’s death or death certificate,” according to Tim Heider, OHA public information officer.

The OHA did confirm to Ty Barnett in an email Josh Barnett shared with the Chieftain that it does use the phrase “COVID-19-related deaths” and that it could mean a person who had COVID-19 died, but that it wasn’t necessarily the cause.

“The deaths we report each day include people who died with COVID-like symptoms, which in some cases means that a person did not necessarily die as a result of COVID-19. Sometimes public health cannot determine (the) exact cause of death, so our data focuses on people who most likely or definitely had COVID-19 and died, based on local reports,” the email stated.

The OHA’s Investigative Guidelines state that any of the following are considered a

COVID-19-related death:

- “Death of a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case within 60 days of the earliest available date among exposure to a confirmed case, onset of symptoms, or date of specimen collection for the first positive test;

- “Death from any cause in a hospitalized person during their hospital stay or in the 60 days following discharge and a COVID-19-positive laboratory diagnostic test at any time since 14 days prior to hospitalization; or

- “Death of someone with a COVID-19-specific ICD-10 code listed as a primary or contributing to it.”

Josh Barnett believes the numbers are inflated, and points to the fact that individuals who die directly from COVID or die of a different cause (but have COVID) are counted together.

“They’ve already admitted there is a difference (between) dying from COVID and dying with COVID,” he said. “I think they’ve been conflating the two on purpose to make the numbers look as bad as they can.”

“I don’t believe the state has been giving the right answers for a long time.”

As for his family, he said he wants the truth — whatever it ends up being.

“I just want the record straight in terms of being honest,” he said. “...I don’t want my family or anybody else’s to be used, not as a pawn, but as ‘chalk up another line to it.’ ... I know that OHA is saying it’s a COVID death when I was there the whole time. I know that’s 100% false.”

## WEDNESDAY, FEB. 16 Grant County Republican Central Committee

• 3 to 5 p.m., the Outpost Pizza Pub and Grill, 201 W. Main St., John Day

Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer, who is seeking the GOP nomination to run for the U.S. Senate seat held by Ron Wyden, will talk about his campaign and answer questions from voters. The public is welcome.

## WEDNESDAY & THURSDAY, FEB. 16 & 17

**CyberMill open house**  
• 4 to 8 p.m., CyberMill, 300 Barnes Ave. (Highway 395), Seneca

Located in the heart of Seneca, the CyberMill is a free-to-use internet cafe with broadband access. With three computer terminals, big-screen video monitors, a conference room and other amenities, the facility is available for remote workers, entrepreneurs or anyone who needs a high-speed internet connection. Visitors can tour the CyberMill, learn what it has to offer and enjoy free refreshments. For more information, go to gcecybermill.com.

## SATURDAY, FEB. 26 Bingo night

• 5 p.m., John Day Elks Lodge, 140 NE Dayton St.

Fundraiser for the Grant Union High School Class of 2026 eight-grade class trip to the coast. Bingo \$5 a card. Pizza and snacks available for purchase. Raffle draw for a gun safe, smoker and other prizes. For more information, call 541-390-5790.

## SATURDAY, APRIL 2 Lake Creek Youth Camp Gala

• 5 p.m., Trowbridge Pavilion, Grant County Fairgrounds, 411 NW Bridge St., John Day

This third annual benefit for the nonprofit youth and family camp in Logan Valley features a tri-tip dinner, games, live music, drinks by Spitfire Cocktails and live, silent and dessert auctions. Tickets are \$25 at the door or \$20 in advance, available at several locations in John Day and Canyon City. For more information, call Aimee Rude at 541-206-2421.

*Do you have a community event in Grant County you'd like to publicize? Email information to editor@bmeagle.com. The deadline is noon Friday for publication the following Wednesday.*

# Downtown projects move forward

By BENNETT HALL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The city of John Day is moving ahead on several initiatives aimed at sprucing up the downtown business district and strengthening the connection between downtown and the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site.

In November, the City Council approved the sale of Gleason Park on North Canton Street to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department for \$222,000. The department plans to expand the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site on the 3-acre park property and add a number of improvements, a \$4.5 million project that will include a new interpretive center highlighting the history of Chinese immigrants who flocked to John Day during the city’s days as a mining boomtown.

The Kam Wah Chung expansion is expected to provide a significant boost to tourism, and city leaders want to take advantage of those extra visitors by making it easier and more inviting for them to explore John Day — and spend money at local businesses — during their stay.

In connection with that



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

**Plans are being developed for the Pit Stop, a parking lot with public restrooms and other amenities, on the former Wright Chevrolet lot at Southwest Canton Street and West Main Street in John Day.**

project, the city received a \$1 million state grant for infrastructure improvements.

At the Feb. 8 City Council meeting, City Manager Nick Green outlined a detailed proposal for how to spend that money:

- \$500,000 would go to sidewalk improvements, parking, signage and wayfinding markers along Canton and Main streets.

- \$250,000 would be used for landscaping and site beautification.

- \$200,000 would be spent on aesthetic improvements to Main Street busi-

nesses, which could include fresh paint, new signs, exterior lighting, façade enhancements, awnings, streetlight upgrades and murals. The city is preparing to apply for an Oregon Main Street grant worth up to \$200,000; if approved, it could double the value of the city’s investment.

- \$50,000 would go toward the cost of demolishing Gleason Pool and compacting the soil on the site. (The city set aside \$22,000 from the sale of Gleason Park to cover the remainder of the estimated demolition cost; the other \$200,000 from the sale will go toward the cost of the proposed aquatic center at the Seventh Street Sports Complex.)

“We’ll be able to stretch the value of the sidewalk improvements by doing the project concurrent with the 97 curb ramps that (the Oregon Department of Transportation) is replacing,” Green told the Eagle in an email.

“It will likely push us into 2023/2024, but we’ll still have them completed before the new (Kam Wah Chung) facility is operational.”

Meanwhile, the John Day Community Development Committee is gathering

comment on several related issues through an online survey that went out to local merchants and other stakeholder groups, including members of the Friends of Kam Wah Chung and leadership of the Blue Mountain Hospital District.

Among other things, the survey asks how the Pit Stop should be developed. The city-owned lot at the northwest corner of Canton and Main, the site of a former car dealership, already has a small building housing public restrooms.

Other uses under consideration for the property include parking, lockers where bicyclists and motorcyclists could store their belongings while walking around town, a public gathering space with picnic tables and firepits, and vendor stalls for selling food, beverages or retail goods.

The survey presents three options for using the rest of the space: parking only; parking in the back half with a public gathering space in front; or parking in the back with a public gathering space and vendor stalls along Main Street.

The second survey ques-

tion gauges attitudes about oversize vehicle parking on Main Street. Is it a problem? If so, could it be solved with measures such as “No Oversize Parking” signs and signs pointing the way to off-street parking areas? Should the city look for space to build one or more parking lots for oversize vehicles?

Finally, in connection with potential improvements to Main Street businesses, the survey asks if people would be interested in working with a city-provided consultant on design services.

The results of the survey, along with Green’s spending proposal, will be presented at the next meeting of the City Council, scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 22, at the John Day Fire Hall, 316 S. Canyon Blvd.

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