

Double standard on virus rules sparks meeting of Eastern Oregon commissioners

"You can protest but we can't go to church, you can protest but can't go to a ball game, you can protest but you can't have a fair or rodeo"

By David Sykes

Frustrated by Oregon Governor Kate Brown's refusal to enforce her own COVID-19 rules on the thousands of protestors marching daily in Multnomah County, while still demanding rural Oregonians follow her strict virus edicts, 12 county commissioners from seven different eastern Oregon counties met June 11 in Prairie City to discuss a "battle plan" to fight against the inequities. None of Morrow County's commissioners attended the meeting.

The meeting was organized by Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson following a June 5 phone conversation between the Association of Oregon Counties (AOC) and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), where a representative from the Governor's office said the state was not going to enforce COVID rules on the thousands of people who have been marching and gathering in Portland these past weeks in response to the police killing of George Floyd.

"We are trying to balance the rights of the protestors and the public health needs," said Leah Horner, the governor's advisor on jobs and the economy. "The needs of protestors are there, and we don't want to hinder that," she said. The COVID rules in Multnomah County say public gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited, so the thousands of people that have been gathering daily since May are grossly in violation of the governor's rules. Simultaneously those same rules have prohibited people across Oregon from attending all kinds of public gatherings, shutting down businesses to the point that some may go under, and demanding people stay in their homes. "In other words you can protest but we can't go to church; you can protest but can't go to a ball game; you can protest but you can't have a fair or rodeo. This is absolute insanity and now the OHA tells you if you can go to work or dinner with your friends," said Lake County Commissioner Albertson in the email invitation he sent out to 48 different county commissioners (including all three Morrow County commissioners) and other government leaders, mostly from eastern Oregon, to attend the meeting. (See end of this article for complete unedited email text). Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty is the current president of the Association of Oregon Counties and was on the call.

Also on the call was OHA physician Dr. Paul Cieslak, who in response

to a question from a county commissioner wanting to know whether, in an effort to halt the spread of COVID-19 virus infections expected from the Portland protest gatherings, all the protestors would be tested for the Coronavirus. The head of the national Center for Disease Control, CDC, has said protestors at the racial injustice demonstrations need to be tested to stop the virus spread. Dr. Cieslak said first he was not aware of the CDC announcement, and second OHA had no plans to do any testing. "I did not know this was CDC advice. We are not contemplating any testing," he said. Cieslak did not deny that the protest gatherings were causing a risk of higher infections among the general public. "There is a risk obviously when large numbers of people get together in close quarters," he said.

Cieslak was also asked if the OHA was planning "contact tracing" on the protestors. In public health, contact tracing is the process of identification of persons who may have come into contact with an infected person and subsequent collection of further information about these contacts in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. "We are not advocating contact tracing," Cieslak said. "Let's say we found out about a case and found out the person has been to one of the protests. It's going to be almost impossible to know who was near them at the protest," he said. Cieslak added that with people moving around a lot at the protests "a lot" would not have met the criteria to instigate contacting tracing which he says requires a person "to have 15 minutes of contact within six feet" of an infected person. He also said health authorities "are not going to be able to identify who the contacts were anyway."

Editor's note: Following is first the original email sent out to commissioners from Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson as an invitation to the Prairie City meeting, and then a reprint with permission of an article published in the John Day Blue Mountain Eagle newspaper about the subsequent meeting.

Good afternoon friends, colleagues and Brothers and Sisters in arms!

As you all know the last three months have been a trying time for all of us. We've carried a heavy burden forced upon us by fear and misinformation. It's been a roller coaster of emotions that has been a heavy burden for all of us to carry. We played by the rules and our freedoms

and civil liberties were stripped from us without a shot being fired. When I was a young man, I was bullied by three boys to the point I missed many days of school because of the fear of what they would do to me. My Dad was a man of few words but one day he said, "Sometimes you have to face your fears head on and you might take a few licks, but a black eye only hurts for a while but being a coward will last a lifetime!" He knew something was up even though I didn't tell him, I was ashamed of my fear and didn't want to tell him. It wasn't a week later at a basketball game the ring leader snapped me in the mouth with a towel and I knew at that moment it was time to stand my ground! I took the first two on and knocked them to the ground and the third one ran out the back door of the locker room. Was I bloodied and bruised? Hell yes! But I never had any more trouble with those three. I promised myself at that moment I would never let fear control my destiny. I'm telling this story of my childhood for a reason. We've been fearful of the unknown, of losing out on dollars for our communities, of not getting reelected, of the health of our community and a plethora of other demons that whispered in our ear. We've lost sleep, drank too much and isolated ourselves from the madness.

Today in a conference call with the AOC (Association of Oregon Counties) the OHA (Oregon Health Authority State of Oregon) director stated that he wanted to protect the protestors and they didn't have to follow the guidelines that we do! You can request the transcript from the AOC if you don't believe me. In other words you can protest but we can't go to church, you can protest but can't go to a ball game, you can protest but you can't have a fair or rodeo. This is absolute insanity and now the OHA tells you if you can go to work or dinner with your friends. Who gave them the authority to tell us how to live our life? YOU! Me, you and our fear. As for me the time has come to face the bullies that are abusing the ones I love, it's time to rise up and do the job that the helpless and fearful can't do. I'm asking you to join with me for a face to face meeting at noon at 254 NW Front Street Highway 26, Prairie City to talk about how we will draw up our battle plans. We can either live dying or die living!

Tough times don't last but tough people do!

Mark Albertson

Lake County Commissioner

Eastern Oregon county representatives fed up with governor's COVID-19 reopening plan

Lake County commissioner: 'We're oppressed by our state'

By Steven Mitchell Blue Mountain Eagle Jun 12, 2020

Those in attendance at the meeting: **Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson, Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer, Deschutes County Commissioner Tony DeBane, Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts, Wallowa County Commissioner John Hillock, Harney County Commissioner Kristen Shelman, Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage, Union County Commissioner Matt Scarfo, Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes, Jefferson County Commissioner Mae Huston, Jefferson County Commissioner Kelly Simmelink, Grant County Commissioner Jim Hamsher**

A group of Eastern Oregon county commissioners met unannounced Thursday in Prairie City to share common frustrations over Gov. Kate Brown's closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fed up with Brown's unilateral authority to reopen the state and control of how federal aid money will be disbursed, representatives from seven Eastern Oregon counties strategized about getting their voices heard in Salem and discussed what the consequences of standing up to the governor might be.

Commissioners from Grant, Lake, Deschutes, Wallowa, Harney, Union and Jefferson counties agreed county health departments should determine when counties are able to open and establish local guidelines.

Dubbed an "information seminar," organized by Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson, the event was not announced to the public or the media. The Eagle and Oregon Public Broadcasting negotiated their way into the event as some of the representatives were reluctant to enter the Prairie City Visitors Center.

"We did not know the press was showing up," Albertson said. "It's spooky, and it's, to be honest with you, it's spooky because all of us have been burned."

Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer said after the meeting he believes rural people and viewpoints are often mocked in the press and not taken seriously, much like he believes

state leaders in Salem ignore rural sentiments.

"I guess the main point is we're being culturally oppressed, because, I mean in rural counties, not one county in a rural area has received any money and very little help," Albertson said at Thursday's meeting. "And none of us have had direct contact with the governor."

The meeting came to be after months of conference calls with state health officials and growing frustrations with the governor's guidelines to combat the coronavirus outbreak that have wreaked havoc on local economies.

The tipping point, said Albertson, came after a recent conference call with the Oregon Association of Counties and the Oregon Health Authority. On the call, he said, a representative from a county asked if protestors, primarily in Portland, would be contact traced. According to Albertson, a health official on the call said that the protestors' cause was just and the state would not infringe upon their rights to peacefully protest.

The demonstrations in response to the death of George Floyd — an African American man who died May 25 after police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes — have occurred in rural and urban communities across the state. However, the commissioners focused primarily on large demonstrations in Portland where large crowds violated the governor's guidelines for social distancing.

Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts said an official, whom she did not identify, told her the state would "deal with it" if they saw an uptick in positive COVID-19 cases as a result of the protests.

"In other words, you can protest, but we can't go to church," Albertson said in an email to the commissioners after the OHA call. "You can protest but can't go to a ball game, you can protest, but you can't have a fair or rodeo."

Harney County Commissioner Kristen Shelman said the "top-down" approach of the governor's executive order does not sit well with rural residents. She said she was specifically concerned about the governor's guidelines requiring a COVID-19 vaccine or treatment before the final stage of opening, and possible requirements for vaccination.

"Within that executive order, we should all be rounded up and given the vaccine without our permission," she said.

"And it goes right back to the cultural oppression," Albertson said. "That is definitely culture. Us on this side of the mountain are not treated the same."

Albertson said it is no different than racism and religious discrimination.

"We're oppressed by our state," he said.

The commissioners said having to cancel their county fairs because of the guidelines has a big impact on rural communities.

"The fair is the one thing that brings all of our counties together," Palmer said.

Roberts said the closure of parks statewide impacts the culture in her county.

"They closed parks in the city of Portland. Why do they need to close the park in Enterprise?" she said. "We have 2,000 people in the whole town. Less than a third of them were kids. They couldn't go to the park."

Other commissioners pointed to canceled graduations, closed schools and rules about reopening businesses, which, they said, face unique challenges in rural areas.

Roberts said she wrote a letter asking Brown's office to lift all restrictions in Wallowa County by June 30. The county leaders went back and forth on a date and said each should be able to determine their own reopening guidelines.

Hamsher said the counties should wait a couple of weeks to see if the wave of protests would lead to a surge in cases. He said he hoped the state did not see an uptick.

"If we don't, then we might have more of a justification to open back up," he said.

According to Oregon's phased reopening plans, many activities can resume with limited social gatherings under Phase 2, which most counties in eastern Oregon are in. The third and final phase of reopening would bring the state back to normal, but it is not an option for any county until vaccination or treatment is available under the governor's guidelines.

Albertson said he questioned the reporting data coming from the state's health authority. He said he did the math and the chances of dying from COVID-19 are very low.

Roberts said the counties took the pandemic seriously and did everything the state asked them to do.

"We are prepared to meet the challenge in our community," she said. "Our medical people say they're ready, they're prepared."

The county representatives said they want their respective health departments to be the authority, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all guidance from the governor.

Hours after the meeting, the governor's office announced that it was putting a hold on reopening the state after 178 new cases were reported, according to the OHA's website. Half of those cases were in Multnomah and Clackamas counties. Only eight of those cases were in the seven counties represented at Thursday's meeting.

Morrow County 4-H/FFA showcased

The cancellation of Morrow County Fair will not stop local 4-H and FFA members from entering and displaying their livestock and projects for 2020. A showcase of Morrow County 4-H/FFA livestock and static projects will proceed August 16-22 at the Morrow County Fairgrounds. At this time, it is not a public event, but will be live streamed for viewing.

"The 4-H and FFA

members in our county have worked hard with their respective projects, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and we are working diligently to make sure they have the opportunity to show and sell their animals and present their talented works for view," said Morrow County 4-H educator, Erin Heideman. "The Extension Office, FFA Advisors, 4-H Leaders, Fair Board and Livestock Grow-

ers Association have all contributed in the planning stages of this effort."

A formal exhibition schedule will be distributed once all the moving pieces are in place, but for now, the general plan is to have one day species shows, similar to a jackpot show. Exhibitors will bring their livestock in the night before, show all day the next day and then go home. Members will also have

the opportunity to enter all other 4-H entries for cooking contests, fashion revue, photography, expressive arts, etc.

All market livestock projects will be able to be sold through a virtual auction on Saturday, August 22.

For additional information, contact Erin Heideman at erin.heideman@oregonstate.edu or 541-676-9642.

Have a news story or photo for the Gazette? e-mail editor@rapidsolve.net call 541-676-9228 or stop by the office on Willow St., Heppner Today