

Flu season revs up early in Hermiston, elsewhere

By KATHY ANEY
STAFF WRITER

Flu season got rolling in a big way this last couple of weeks.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates 2.6 million cases of flu, 23,000 hospitalizations and 1,300 flu-related deaths already this year.

One indicator of whether flu is here is the percentage of flu samples testing positive.

"It hit 10% two weeks ago," said Dr. Ann Thomas, public health physician for the Oregon Health Authority. "That's when things take off. It's still trending upward."

Flu has sickened more than 1,300 Oregonians. Last year, by this time, fewer than 400 cases had been confirmed. Nationally, 1,300 people have died, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Umatilla County hospi-



HH file photo

Greg Bonner, left, receives a flu shot from Blue Mountain Community College nursing student Dariann Scott during a drive-through flu shot clinic on Oct. 14 in Pendleton.

tals and schools are experiencing more flu-like illness.

St. Anthony Hospital spokeswoman Emily Smith said the hospital emergency department has seen 50 positive cases so far this season, with activity reaching a new high this week. Over 80% of patients with confirmed flu had not been vaccinated and

all of the cases tested as type B influenza. The hospital is restricting visits by children to the birthing center.

School attendance has fallen because of illness in Pendleton schools.

"We're down a little bit from normal," said Pendleton School District Superintendent Chris Fritsch.

"We're hovering around 80% attendance."

Sherwood Elementary School Principal Rhonda Smith said illness has definitely touched her school. On a recent day, attendance was 78%.

"We have quite a few kids who have been sent home or stayed home with an illness and some teachers have been absent too," Smith said. "Our custodians have gone through the building and done extra disinfecting."

Teachers are encouraging students to wash their hands.

Hermiston School District Communications Officer Maria Duron said flu is top-of-mind at schools in her district. Attendance is slightly lower than last November and December, going from about 93% in 2018 to 91.5% this year.

Duron said the district sent a newsletter to families describing prevention mea-

asures and giving guidelines for keeping sick students at home. She said teachers are reminding students to wash hands and use hand sanitizer throughout the day.

"Students are being sent home at the first sign of illness regardless of temperature," Duron said.

And county-wide, "we're definitely seeing some spikes," said Joe Fiumara, director of Umatilla County Public Health.

Fiumara pointed to a Oregon Health Authority graph that illustrates influenza-like illness observed in clinics and hospitals around the state. An orange line representing Eastern Oregon shoots sharply up in mid-November, dips, and then shoots higher to almost 7% by last Friday. In comparison, the rest of the state hovers between 2% and 4%. Nationwide 3.2% of patient visits were because of flu-

like illness, according to the U.S. Outpatient Influenza-Like Illness Surveillance Network.

Fiumara urged caution as people head into Christmas.

"This is definitely the season for sharing," he said. "There are a lot of things going around right now, not just the flu. Stay at home, cover your cough, wash your hands."

Thomas urged people to take precautions to protect themselves and also people who are at risk, such as those with chronic conditions, the very young and old and pregnant women.

Even if it isn't the best vaccine, it's the one we've got, Thomas said, and even in a year when the vaccine is not a good match, it can reduce severity and prevent hospitalization and death.

"That's a win," Thomas said. "It's not too late to get a shot."

Panda Express opens to lunchtime crowds



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Hermiston residents wasted no time lining up for lunch after Panda Express opened its doors on Friday at 1530 N. First St. At noon the restaurant was full and a line of cars extended from the drive-thru window through the parking lot, while traffic backed up on Highway 395 while turning into the parking lot. The "fast casual Chinese" restaurant purchased the former Stockman's Steakhouse building this summer and tore it down to build the new building.

Umatilla County approves project management firm for jail remodel

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County now has some help as it moves forward in planning the \$1.6 million renovation project of its jail.

The board of commissioners unanimously approved a contract of up to \$150,000 with the Pendleton-based Wenaha Group on Dec. 18 to help manage and oversee the project, which is aiming to better accommodate inmates facing medical issues, drug addiction or mental illness at the Umatilla County Jail.

"I think it makes a lot of sense to let somebody else take this on to help move the ball forward," Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan said at the meeting. "We want to make sure we're thinking of everything, and an extra set of eyes is one of the best ways to do that."

Rowan has lobbied for a remodel of the jail since 2017 and finally got his wish when the Oregon Legislature allocated funding for the project in one of its 2019 capital construction

billings this summer.

The project's funding isn't expected to come in until 2021 and for now the county is continuing to look for an architect for the project, a process they've started but have not made any decisions on yet.

The \$150,000 for the contract with the Wenaha Group isn't included in the \$1.6 million from the state.

The board initially proposed the contract with Wenaha Group, which has worked with a number of school districts in the region in completing past construction projects. Last week, the Hermiston School Board selected Wenaha Group to lead its \$82.7 million bond project that was approved in November to replace Rocky Heights Elementary School and construct a new elementary school.

"I'm a very strong proponent of having a professional management firm to help oversee the project," county chair George Murdock said, citing his previous experience and difficulties in trying to navigate construction projects for school districts.

Commissioner Bill Elfering raised

concerns about the possibility of the added oversight also adding costs to the project.

"We have a track record of staying within budget for our projects," Rowan said in response. "I'm not sure why that would change now."

Originally built in 1999, the jail held an average daily population of 135 inmates at first. Not only has the average daily population risen to above 200 today, but more and more of the inmates at the jail experience mental illness or substance abuse issues.

The plan is for the jail to be remodeled within its existing footprint with an increased capacity in its booking area and nine new cells intended for detox, medical and holding purposes.

Ultimately, the county and Rowan are trusting the Wenaha Group will help ensure the renovation is successful in creating a better resource for the inmates who need it.

"They'll help make sure the end goal is reached that whether (the inmates) are in a medical, mental or drug crisis, we can get them to a stable point," the sheriff said.

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR
LOYAL CUSTOMERS FOR MAKING
2019 A GREAT YEAR!
HERE'S TO AN AMAZING



PETROLEUM

MCP Hermiston • 345 N 1st Place • 541-289-5015 • mcpcoop.com

| Moro 541-565-3737 | Bend 541-382-4751 |