

Plan to reopen Oregon due next month

By **DICK HUGHES**
FOR THE OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

By the week of May 4, Gov. Kate Brown could have a firm plan for reopening parts of Oregon's economy, probably starting with rural counties.

Brown held a conference call Monday afternoon with county commissioners throughout the state.

"Commissioners are under tremendous pressure in their counties to reopen for business," Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said afterward.

"I felt like it's actually progressing. The conversation about opening up, with the notable exception of large groups, is almost progressing more quickly than I had anticipated."

He added, "Now, by moving right along, we're talking about mid-May or so."

Brown expects to release a more detailed draft plan next week. It will not contain dates for when businesses might reopen and social distancing restrictions might be eased. Instead, it will require meeting criteria that Brown announced last week, combined with President Donald Trump's recommendations.

Each Oregon county also would have to certify that it had adequate hospital beds to handle a surge in COVID-19 cases and sufficient personal protective equipment for medical personnel and first responders.

Unlike in some states, Brown is focusing on a regional approach.

"The main thing the governor told us is that there clearly are counties, particularly in Eastern Oregon and Southeastern Oregon, that have zero cases or maybe one case, and they should be prioritized for reopening in a way that's consistent with maintaining public health," Nik Blosser, Brown's chief of staff, said. "So, how quickly can we do that and what's the framework we need for them?"

Umatilla County is not one of the Oregon counties with only one case. The county was up to 27 confirmed cases as of Monday, with more than half of those patients still sick.

Blosser said the governor's Medical Advisory Panel was working through plans this week on comprehensive testing, contact tracing and isolating people with coronavirus; allowing non-emergency medical and dental procedures to resume; and the specific metrics required statewide and regionally for that reopening to recur.

Dr. Bob Dannenhoffer, the Douglas County health officer, said he knew of no Oregon county that was yet meeting all criteria laid out last week by Trump for initial reopening. Dannenhoffer is a member of Brown's panel but emphasized his views were his own, not the panel's.

Late last week, county commissioners of Baker, Deschutes, Grant, Malheur, Harney, Jefferson, Union, Lake, Wallowa, Wasco and Klamath counties asked Gov. Brown for "a conversation about partly opening up Eastern Ore-



Ryan Brennecke/EO Media Group

A closed sign is posted in the front window of L & K Barber Shop in downtown Bend.

gon." Not every commissioner signed on to the letter sent to the governor. All three Deschutes County commissioners signed it, along with two Jefferson County commissioners.

Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, noted that new cases of COVID-19 are declining in Deschutes County but the coronavirus will not disappear for a long time.

"We need to learn how to live with the virus and still continue

on. The current shutdown and having 300,000 Oregonians essentially unemployed because of it is completely unsustainable and is going to cause serious problems — catastrophic problems, I would say — with the state being able to fund important programs," he said. "I think we really need to look at a county-by-county opening of the state."

Oregon Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants

Pass, agreed that the state must learn to maintain both public health and a healthy economy. The place to start is with rural health care.

"Our hospitals in rural Oregon are really hurting right now. They need to get back to work, both for their income but also for all those people who need their hip replaced, bypass surgery, all that stuff," he said.

Two Eastern Oregon lawmakers proposed using Harney County as a pilot project, citing its lack of confirmed COVID-19 cases, its small population and its isolation from other communities.

"This is not a proposal to open businesses. This is a proposal to recognize the health hazards and the health risks and work through those and mitigate restrictions and allow people to return to some of their prior freedoms," said Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale.

He and Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, put together a proposal that includes ideas for how the community could mitigate health risks and how specific types of businesses could enforce social distancing.

"We've got a little more work to do it, but not a lot. And we hope we can get the governor to agree with running a pilot," Findley said. "If we can't make a pilot work there, we can't make it work anywhere."

Dick Hughes is a freelance journalist who has covered Oregon politics since 1976. Contact him at thehughesisms@gmail.com.

Umatilla's downtown getting a needed makeover

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

After years of planning, Umatilla's main thoroughfare is finally getting an upgrade.

The Oregon Department of Transportation has started work on an overhaul of Sixth Street, from Yerxa Avenue next to Columbia Harvest Foods down to the bridge over the Umatilla River.

The project will include reconstructing the road to better withstand the heavy truck traffic along Highway 730 that it sees each day.

City Manager David Stockdale said the project will bring streets, sidewalks, curbs and crossings up to accessibility standards in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

There will also be decorative touches, such as stamped concrete that looks like red brick, new

landscaping and new lampposts with arms that can hold banners or hanging flower baskets watered automatically with a built-in irrigation system.

At intersections, sidewalks will "bulb out" to the point where parking spaces end and the lane of travel begins, creating a visual cue for drivers to remember they're going through a town and to slow down.

"As a driver, it makes it far easier to see pedestrians," Stockdale said.

Sixth Street isn't closed completely during the project, Stockdale said.

Traffic is just being rerouted to the center lanes. Businesses can stay open, and customers can still access their parking lots or park on side streets.

The project is set to be com-

pleted on Oct. 31. Stockdale said that timeline included an extra two weeks built in for contingency, but that two weeks has been "gobbled up" by some delays in the supply chain caused by COVID-19.

Since Sixth Street is part of Highway 730, and therefore under the jurisdiction of ODOT, the state is paying for 88% of the \$6 million project, Stockdale said.

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