

Umatilla County reports its first COVID-19 death

County to open contact tracing center in courthouse

By ALEX CASTLE AND JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITERS

Umatilla County reported its first death of a confirmed COVID-19 patient on May 1, as cases rose sharply in the county over the course of a week.

According to a news release from Umatilla County Public Health, the patient was a 76-year-old female who tested positive on April 14 and died April 30 at Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland, Washington.

“This is an incredibly sad announcement and one that we had hoped not to make in Umatilla County,” the department stated. “We encourage everyone to be respectful as a family in our community grieves.”

Umatilla County announced three new cases on May 5, bringing the county’s total to 73 cases. The county was at 45 cases one week prior.

Out of those 73 cases, the county reported that 39 cases have recovered, defined as going 72 hours without symptoms. Three of the county’s active cases are currently in the hospital.

Contact tracing center

Umatilla County is establishing a center to answer calls and coordinate COVID-19 investigations in its quest to begin reopening local businesses by May 15, commissioner George Murdock said May 5.

“I don’t want to get to the 15th and say, ‘Oops, the county wasn’t prepared,’” Murdock said.

The center is being set up this week on the third floor of the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton, Murdock said, and the county will be hiring “probably three to six people” to assist current county health staff to trace contacts of those who test positive for COVID-19.

The courthouse is being utilized to house the additional staff and ensure the health department staff can maintain adequate social distancing.

“We need to have the capacity to trace seven days a week,” he said. “We don’t want to put more people in our health department and put county employees at risk.”

The board of commissioners submitted its version of a multiphase plan to gradually lift some restric-



HH file photo

Umatilla County plans to open a COVID-19 contact tracing center on the third floor of the courthouse in Pendleton, pictured here.

tions starting May 15 to Gov. Kate Brown last week. Brown and the state have presented their own framework with criteria for reopening, which Umatilla County must meet in order to follow through with its plan.

The state’s criteria concerns hospitalizations due to the virus, personal protective equipment stocks, and the local capacity to track, monitor and respond to future infections and potential surges.

The state said last week it plans on hiring an additional 600 people to assist with contact tracing in order to more effectively monitor the virus’ spread when businesses begin reopening. But as the state works to hire and train those individuals, Murdock said the county felt the need to be proactive in making a plan of their own.

“The state continues to say it’s their plan to hire 600 new tracers,” Murdock said. “But like a lot of this, we haven’t seen those 600 tracers.”

Reopening plan

The large spike in cases over the past week in Umatilla County throw the county’s proposal to reopen some nonessential busi-

nesses on May 15 in doubt.

“What the epi curve shows is we probably haven’t quite peaked in Umatilla County yet,” Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said last week.

According to the “epi curve,” which can be found on the health department’s website and shows the particular date that an individual began showing symptoms of the virus, 18 of the county’s 56 confirmed cases as of April 30 began exhibiting signs of COVID-19 in the week after Easter Sunday between April 19 and April 26.

“The good and the bad is nearly all of them have been connected to existing cases in some way,” Fiumara said. “The good being that helps with our investigations, the bad is that means more people are interacting.”

While the health department’s contact tracing for each case has revealed residents are struggling to continue strictly abiding by social distancing guidelines, Fiumara said it may be a preview of what could happen when restrictions are eased.

On May 1, after Brown held a news conference outlining a plan to begin reopening some businesses

in some parts of the state as an unknown future date, Murdock maintained optimism that the county could still reopen with other rural counties in May, despite its higher numbers than the rest of Eastern Oregon.

“I feel reopening will be by region, and I feel that rural Eastern Oregon will be leading the charge,” he said May 1. “We can’t guarantee the behaviors of our citizens, but we can guarantee that we’re prepared to deal with any surge that comes from it.”

Though Fiumara signed off on Umatilla County’s plan before cases began rising more sharply, he said last week that he wasn’t as confident that the state will give the county the go-ahead after seeing the latest data.

“If we’re trending upwards, I’m not sure the state is going to grant it,” he said of the county’s proposal. “And I’m not sure I can argue that. All we can really do is follow the data.”

The increase in cases is also correlated to the increased testing capacity, Fiumara said, and may continue as access improves.

“With more testing is going to come more cases,” he said.

Brown’s plan includes opening up testing criteria to allow anyone with symptoms of the virus to be tested within 48 to 72 hours. The plan is aiming to perform 30 tests per week for every 10,000 Oregonians.

Oregon Health Authority spokesman Jonathan Modie said the recent spike in cases in Umatilla County has caught the eye of the state, which intends to work with the county health department to try to mitigate further infections.

In Morrow County, the county announced its 10th COVID-19 case on May 5. Right now, four of the county’s cases have recovered, and the five that are still showing symptoms are isolating at home. According to a news release, eight of the county’s confirmed cases are in Boardman, one in Irrigon and one in Heppner.

Statewide, Oregon passed 100 COVID-19 deaths on May 1, and was at 113 confirmed deaths on May 5.

Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention listed 68,279 known COVID-19 deaths on May 5. The count surpasses the nation’s worst flu season in a decade, when an estimated 61,000 Americans died of influenza during the 2017-18 flu season.



Photo contributed by City of Hermiston

The city has finished paving East Theater Lane between Northeast Eighth and 10th streets, adjacent to the new phase of Cimarron Terrace (right) and land for a planned new elementary school (left).

City finishing up East Theater Lane paving

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston’s northeast edge is getting more shovel-ready every day as the city finishes a paving project on East Theater Lane.

The previously graveled section of road between Northeast Eighth Street and Northeast 10th Street will reopen as a fully paved road within a few days, according to a news release, after crews finish striping it.

The road project joins water and sewer projects that the city has completed in recent months to attract new housing to that section of town by reducing development costs.

Paving the road’s lanes of travel was funded through money the city receives through franchise fees and the state gas tax. The developer of the nearby Cimarron Terrace housing development, which is currently under construction, paid for wider asphalt and sidewalks on the south side of the road.

Mayor David Drozmann said in a statement that public investment stimulates private investment to help Hermiston grow in a sustainable way.

“Housing development has been a top goal of the city council for many years, and the combination of this road, the new water tower, and the future school is the foundation of a great Hermiston neighborhood,” he said.

In addition to benefit-

ing housing developers, the road project will be helpful when Hermiston School District builds a new elementary school along that stretch of Theater Lane. The new school is in the design phase after voters approved a school bond in November 2019.

The road is 25 miles per hour for now, but will be a school zone once the school is completed.

The school district partnered with the city and Cimarron Terrace to extend sewer services along Theater Lane while the paving work was going on. That sewer project pairs with a water project the city recently completed in partnership with Umatilla County, including a new water tower on the corner of Northeast 10th Street and Punkin Center.

“By coordinating the School District with Cimarron Terrace, we were able to save both significant costs by allowing them to install necessary sewer in Theater ahead of our paving,” Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said in a statement. “This now means that we have all urban-level utilities almost a half-mile further out into our Urban Growth Area, which will make housing development substantially more affordable in the future.”

To see the status of more projects in the city’s capital improvement plan, visit www.hermistonprojects.com.

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- Encourage Economic Development**
Umatilla County is rich in natural resources, from water to farmland to timber to energy, which are the cornerstone of our economy. I will be an advocate for these industries and jobs.
- Develop Transportation Infrastructure**
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- Create a More Livable County**
We can enhance the lives of residents by supporting public safety, maintaining strong lines of communication with elected officials, and supporting the development of a skilled workforce.

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The stimulus payments from the CARES Act, which can be up to \$1,200 per person or \$500 per child, are not counted as income.

The LIHEAP/OEAP program is open to the general public. Anyone wishing to apply, please call 541-276-1926 or 1-800-752-1139 for Pendleton office, or 541-289-7755 or 1-800-214-4776 for the Hermiston office. You can also reach us on the CAPECO website www.capeco-works.org