

EDITOR'S DESK

COVID-19: Where do we go from here?

I felt a strong sense of déjà vu last week when I had to scramble to post information about a sudden, late-night announcement from Gov. Kate Brown about Umatilla County being sent back to the “stay home” phase of the pandemic.

It felt like March, when we had a constant parade of new restrictions to announce. I don't think anyone suspected that five months later we would be back to square one, but here we are.



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR

In many ways, we're actually in a worse position now, with more people sick and no rush of sudden financial help from Congress for closed businesses and laid-off workers. The *Hermiston Herald* survived the plunge in advertising revenues last time by cutting four of our seven remaining positions. I worry about what the future holds in this newest round of shutdowns, but I know many of our advertisers and readers are in an even worse position as “nonessential” businesses. We are working on plans to help with that, including free listings for businesses impacted by the shutdown.

Like most people, I have complaints about how some elected officials, from the governor to county commissioners, have handled aspects of this. It was frustrating to see week



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, File
Masked shoppers leave Walmart in Hermiston on Monday, July 6, 2020. Wearing a mask is one of the ways health experts across the world have said can help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

after week of troubling numbers for Hermiston with little real action to proportionately step up the response, only to slam the brakes on our economy overnight.

Whatever people's opinions on whether a shutdown is the right action, however, this is the reality we live in. We were told if we didn't handle reopening responsibly and our numbers started increasing too fast that reopening would be reversed. That's exactly what has happened.

We also know what will come next: Three weeks from the shutdown date, officials will evaluate a wide range of metrics for our county, such as the percent of COVID-19 tests that

are coming back positive (this keeps counties from trying to cheat the system by testing fewer people). If our numbers have improved enough, we get to move back to Phase 1. If not, restrictions stay in place.

No amount of venting on Facebook about how much you hate the governor will help reopen a single business or school in Umatilla and Morrow counties. The only thing we can control is our own actions in helping us get to a place where businesses can legally reopen and customers will feel it is safe to return.

Do whatever you think will help to get us there. Keep your interactions with people not living in your house-

hold to a minimum, and outdoors where possible. Work from home if you're able. Wear a mask and keep it securely on the whole time you're in contact with others. Be vigilant about hygiene and cleaning. Get tested if you think you might have COVID-19, and quarantine until the results are back. Cooperate with contact tracers. Commit to being a patient voice of reason and a good example.

I've lived in Hermiston seven years as of next month, and I've stayed so long because I've enjoyed my time here. Overall, this is a good community with good people in it. But our continued position as the coronavirus capital of Oregon is an embarrassment. No one in the rest of the state is talking about Hermiston's generosity or our can-do attitude. They're speculating why we have been particularly bad at protecting our nursing home residents and essential workers, and calling us ignorant.

Other former COVID-19 hot spots have reformed. New York City, once the face of COVID-19 for the United States, got the virus under control and is seeing a fraction of the cases they were this spring. The same is true of Italy.

We can do this. But we can't expect to keep going exactly as we have been and somehow see a different outcome.

COLUMN

Interning amid a pandemic

When I first arrived in Hermiston three months ago as an eager Snowden intern, I didn't know what working as a reporter for the *Hermiston Herald* and the *East Oregonian* would look like amid a pandemic.

The usual reporting I would have done, such as talking to people face-to-face, was no longer the routine. It was, instead, replaced with phone calls and email exchanges and distant tele-conversations. Loneliness set in, and I found myself missing the familiar.

Previous mentors told me the best way to learn about a community is to step into it, to walk around in the city and greet its residents and business owners, to intently listen to people's stories and watch the way their expressions shifted throughout conversations.

Instead, when I arrived, the streets were mostly empty. Most of the stores were shuttered or looked equally as abandoned. I understood the pandemic had changed the landscape of the city, but it looked very different in a small town than in a city like Portland.

I'd given myself a crash course on the history of the county, and tried to quickly understand its complexities and struggles, as well as its nuances and uniqueness. But no matter how much I read search results about the city on Google, I did not fully come to know these cities until I lived among their residents.

My reporting then became centered around discovering and understanding as much as I could through the articles I wrote and the conversations I had.

Although I couldn't report much face-to-face, I spent countless hours on the phone speaking with business owners, city officials and residents. I heard the worry in their voices whenever we talked about unemployment or the pandemic, but I also heard stories of joy and community.

I enjoyed the time I spent here in the city — the friends I made, my co-workers whom I called for advice, the residents and business

owners that I had the opportunity to talk to — but there were times where I didn't always feel like I fit in.



Nada Sewidan

Watching residents warring over wearing masks, or hearing some residents and county commissioner candidates say out loud that systemic racism does not exist — in those moments I felt I was the farthest from belonging here.

At the same time, though, I found protesters in the same community Saturday after Saturday march in the sun to fight against systemic racism. I talked to people who sewed masks for their fellow neighbors, and just as there were moments where I felt isolated, there were more moments of community. Some residents trusted me with their stories, some cried on the phone to me, while others passionately spoke of their businesses, friends and families.

I believe the most important part of this summer is that I learned about people who I never would have known. To connect with strangers, a reminder that sharing stories will always be one of the most important modes of discovery.

This is what I believe I've built here in the past three months, these countless moments of connection. Not simply a resume or a portfolio of clips for future positions, but real, human connection and understanding despite a difficult time.

I've dedicated so much of my time to journalism, and I'm excited to do the work that I love and respect deeply in the future, but one thing I know — I will always take my experience in Hermiston and Pendleton with me.

The past three months demonstrated, in remarkable and extraordinary ways, that despite uncertainties, there will always exist this humanness.

I'm left thinking about one important piece of advice my mentors have given me over the years: humanity in stories, first and always.

Nada Sewidan is the Hermiston Herald and East Oregonian's summer intern. She completes her internship on Friday, Aug. 7.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shutdown is tough, but necessary to contain coronavirus

In his recent open letter to Gov. Kate Brown, Hermiston Mayor Dave Drotzmann questioned Brown's decision to return Umatilla County to “baseline” from Phase 2 of reopening. Drotzmann admitted to “a surge” in COVID cases after reopening, but claimed we should not “flinch and shut everything back down.” The county reports a 1,500% increase in total cases since we went to Phase 2 on June 5. That's quite a “surge,” and it clearly doesn't meet even the Phase 1 metrics of “declining disease prevalence” and represents “a significant increase in cases.”

Drotzmann celebrated the fact we “only have 314 active cases,” but according to the recent study conducted by OSU, as many as 3,000 Hermiston residents may have COVID, representing 17% of the city's population.

Drotzmann also dismissed our county's death count at “only ... 23 deaths.” That number means Umatilla County has suffered 7% of all the COVID deaths in Oregon, despite having less than 2% of the state's total population.

Mayor Drotzmann is correct that we need more and quicker testing in our county, but he may be pointing his finger in the wrong direction.

It is well known that there is a nationwide testing crisis that desperately needs competent leadership from the federal government to solve. Testing and shutting down is not an either/or proposition.

We do need expeditious testing and better contact tracing, but we also need to shut down until we actually do flatten the curve — because that has not happened yet.

William Webb
Hermiston

Governor's education priorities contradictory

What Gov. Kate Brown meant during her education announcement:

- “There is clear evidence that children receiving instruction and support in school is far better for them academically ... fosters our students' social and emotional well-being, their overall health, and often their physical safety,” but ...
- “Providing nurturing in-person relationships and learning to our youngest children is absolutely critical to developing the reading and language skills and social development necessary for their long-term success,” but ...
- “Equity has to be at the forefront of our decision-making,” but ...
- “I will push, I will cajole and I will demand nothing but excellence from our districts and our educators,” but ...
- “Students are harmed by lost instructional time,” but ...
- “Distance learning cannot fully replace in-person instruction, especially for our youngest students,” but ...
- “We know that brain development and learning in the earliest years occurs primarily through nurturing and responsive interactions with adults and other children,” but ...
- “Many families across Oregon will struggle to make that (online learning) work not because they don't want to, but likely because all available adults work jobs with less flexible schedules, they are essential workers and their work requires them to leave their home,” but ...
- “As I've said before, all options are on the table to restrict the transmission of the virus, but it is really in the hands of Oregonians,” but ...
- “I will be closing schools and making unrealistic requirements for opening schools.”

Thank you for my first unit of study on our doublespeak governor.

Daniel Sharp
Hermiston

CORRECTIONS

It is the policy of the Hermiston Herald to correct errors as soon as they are discovered. Incorrect information will be corrected on Page 2A. Errors committed on the Opinion page will be corrected on that page. Corrections also are noted in the online versions of our stories.

Please contact the editor at editor@hermistonherald.com or call (541) 564-4533 with issues about this policy or to report errors.

SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters Policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for the Hermiston Herald readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters should be kept to 250 words.

No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

OBITUARY POLICY

The Hermiston Herald publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. Expanded death notices will be published at no charge. These include information about services. Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at hermistonherald.com/obituaryform, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com, by fax to 541-276-8314, placed via the funeral home or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818 or 1-800-522-0255, x221.

