

Hermiston car rebuild draws national attention

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

At age 13, Austin Phipps wasn't old enough for a driver's license, but he bought his first car anyway.

"The car was literally a bucket of bolts," he said. "It was put together with wood and screws. It wasn't even a complete car."

The 1968 Chevrolet Camaro Rally Sport had potential, though, and his father Bob Phipps, who owns Phipps Chevron in Hermiston, promised to teach him how to rebuild it.

Over more than seven years, Austin Phipps rebuilt every part of the car other than the exterior body and paint, which was done by Columbia Auto Body and Paint. He designed custom pieces for specialists to build and made his own parts from scratch, working through complications to create a sleek silver and red head-turner that has now been featured in Hot Rod



Austin Phipps poses for a portrait with his 1968 Chevrolet Camaro Rally Sport near his Hermiston home on Friday, Nov. 20, 2020.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

and other magazines.

"Building a car is how I express myself," he said.

Phipps has shown the Camaro at car-building

competitions over the past few years, and this month placed second in the nation in the "young guns" category (age 27 and younger)

at the annual SEMA Battle of the Builders. He said a television broadcast documenting this year's competition will be shown on the

History Channel in January 2021.

SEMA, which stands for Specialty Equipment Market Association, holds an annual trade show that draws tens of thousands of automobile aftermarket professionals to Las Vegas each year. The show includes a national competition.

This year, Phipps said, the main event was canceled but the competition moved forward in a different format, with competitors first going over every part of their car in a video interview before judges brought their top 12 cars and builders, including Phipps, to a site in Los Angeles for in-person judging.

Bob Phipps said he's incredibly proud of his son and the recognition he has received in the automotive industry in the past three years.

"It's been super cool," he said. "He's had a lot of doors opened to him and got to see a side of the industry

most people never will."

Bob's father started Phipps Chevron, a Hermiston gas station and automotive repair shop, in 1968, and Bob took over in 2000. He said Austin will take the shop over from him when he's ready to retire.

Austin is working on a complete rebuild of another car, a 1966 Chevrolet Nova, and Bob said he believes that rebuild will push his son to new heights.

Austin said the Nova will be a "top-notch" car when complete. He said he enjoys the challenge of solving problems as he works through rebuilds, and the satisfaction of being able to point to parts and say, "I made this. You can't find this anywhere else."

"I've definitely learned a lot about the business, learned a lot about myself, learned a lot about people in general," he said. "It's opened a lot of doors in the automotive industry and I've made a lot of contacts."

COVID-19 cases continue to rise ahead of holiday

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
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Oregon continued to set new records for COVID-19 cases day after day heading into Thanksgiving week, sparking concerns from state officials.

On Saturday, Nov. 21, Oregon Health Authority reported the state had broken its single-day record for reported cases for the second day in a row, with 1,509 new cases reported by county health departments around the state.

The health authority announced Friday, Nov. 20, that 412 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Oregon, a 142% increase since Nov. 1.

Umatilla County reported 143 new cases between Saturday, Nov. 21 and Monday, Nov. 23. In the 14-day period of Nov. 6-19, Umatilla County reported a total of 390 new cases, with 25% of the tests in the county coming back positive. Under the current metrics set by the state, the county needs to be at 80 cases over a 14-day period to return to in-person learning in schools.

To try to slow the spread of the virus ahead of the holiday, Gov. Kate Brown placed a two-week "freeze" on the state from Nov. 18 to Dec. 2. The freeze includes restrictions on businesses, places of worship, recreational facilities and other gathering places, and a ban on

social gatherings with more than six people or including people from more than two households.

She stated violators could potentially be punished with up to \$1,250 or 30 days in jail.

Oregon State Sheriffs' Association, the Oregon Association of Chiefs of Police and the Oregon State Police put out a joint statement saying they highly encouraged everyone to follow the restrictions put in place to protect Oregon's vulnerable residents. They said agencies planned to take an "education first" approach and only issue citations for gatherings "as a last resort."

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston told the

East Oregonian last week that officers would be able to use their own discretion in enforcing the law on gatherings, and he and other law enforcement officials in the area stated they weren't expecting to see tickets issued for gatherings on private property.

"If and when these calls come in, we're going to approach them with the same standards we deal with all along — with reasonableness," Edmiston said.

Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack issued a statement saying his office hadn't issued any criminal penalties for disobeying COVID-19 rules so far, and didn't expect to start during the two-week freeze.

"If citizens or businesses refuse to follow the safety recommendations, they could face civil litigation or fines from OSHA or OLCC. They will not be cited or arrested by any member of the Morrow County Sheriff's Office," he wrote.

On Friday, Nov. 20, the Oregon Health Authority announced it was making a significant adjustment to how it is counting test positivity rates in the state.

Previously, OHA was only counting tests performed on people who had not been previously tested. So, for example, if a person tested negative in July, and then again in November, the November test would not be included in the state's report

of COVID-19 testing totals. Now, OHA will include all tests.

According to OHA, that change in how the data is recorded moves Oregon's test positivity rate down from 12.9% to 6.7% for last week.

"When we recalculate our historic positivity rates using the new method, Oregon's test positivity rate drops significantly," OHA Director Pat Allen said in a news conference. "It goes from a shockingly high rate of almost 13% to an alarmingly high rate of nearly 7%. While the percentage is lower now, it's still above the level that would indicate declining spread and a safe level to fully reopen schools and businesses."

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