

## UPDATES

### Extended jobless benefits reduced

HERMISTON HERALD

Beginning Dec. 13, the Oregon Employment Department has announced that its Extended Benefits program will be reduced, from up to 20 weeks of benefits to up to 13 weeks.

Extended Benefits provides extended unemployment insurance benefits during times of high unemployment rates in the state. According to a news release from the department, based on federal guidelines, if the average unemployment rate in the state is below 8% but above 6.5%, then up to 13 weeks of additional benefits are available. If the average unemployment rate is above 8%, the number of additional weeks of benefits increases to 20. Oregon's rate is now below 8%.

"We know the benefit extension has been a critical safety net for many Oregonians, and this reduction in available benefits will be painful," said David Gerstenfeld, acting director of the Oregon Employment Department, in a statement. "We are calling on our federal elected leaders to help Oregonians and pass legislation that will allow us to quickly provide benefits to those still facing hardships. We stand ready to implement any new or continued benefit programs as quickly as possible, so that Oregonians are able to make ends meet while the pandemic continues to spread."

Some Oregonians who have already received 13 weeks of EB may be able to receive Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits before that program expires on Dec. 26, 2020. Oregonians can apply for PUA through the employment department's online claims system.

Other COVID-19 help is also set to expire soon, including Oregon's moratorium on evictions, which will expire at the end of 2020.



Line crews from Umatilla Electric Cooperative lower the Hermiston Christmas tree onto a trailer for its journey from a Hermiston home to Festival Street in downtown on Monday, Nov. 30, 2020. Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

# Holiday cheer

## Christmas events planned for Hermiston

By JADE MCDOWELL  
NEWS EDITOR

COVID-19 may have canceled a lot of things in 2020, but it is not canceling Christmas in Hermiston.

The city is making an effort to provide some holiday cheer despite restrictions on gatherings.

On Monday, Nov. 30, the city installed its annual giant Christmas tree on the festival street downtown. With the help of equipment and workers from Umatilla Electric Cooperative, the city removed the tree from a local home and brought it downtown, where it was "planted" on Northeast Second Street next to city hall, in preparation for decorating.

City residents won't be able to gather in person to celebrate the tree's lighting this year, but Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter said the city plans to livestream a tree-lighting event on its social media platforms from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 3. The program will include caroling, reading Christmas stories and Santa Claus throwing the switch to light the tree.

"It will be a little like the old radio days, sitting by the fire lis-



Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center General Manager Al Davis swaps out an extension cord while working on the Festival of Lights display at EOTEC on Tuesday, Nov. 24, 2020. Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

*"IT LOOKS NICE. WE'RE KIND OF EXCITED OTHER PEOPLE GET TO ENJOY IT."*

— Brenda Smith, Hermiston. Brenda and Whitley Smith donated the city's Christmas tree, which had grown too big for their yard.

tening to the Christmas program," Fetter said.

Afterward, people will be able to come down on their own time to take photos with the tree, which will be lit up each night throughout the month.

This year's tree was donated by Brenda and Whitley Smith of Hermiston, from their yard. Brenda said the tree was there when they bought the house about 29 years ago, and it's "grown pretty big" in the years since. The Smiths were concerned about its growth into the nearby power lines, Fetter offered to take it off their hands for free and give it new life as the downtown Christmas tree, they took the offer.

"We decided it was probably time to let other people enjoy it," Brenda said.

She said she drove down after UEC removed the tree and installed it downtown, and she was proud to see it there.

"It looks nice," she said. "We're kind of excited other people get to enjoy it. We've enjoyed watching the birds in it. They'll be surprised

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John Lauck hands Thanksgiving meals to drivers at the drive-thru Community Fellowship Dinner in Hermiston on Thursday, Nov. 26, 2020. Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

## Community group serves 1,100 meals

By BEN LONERGAN  
STAFF WRITER

A small army of volunteers descended on Hermiston High School on Thanksgiving Day to help serve roughly 1,100 meals for the annual Community Fellowship Dinner.

The board of the Community Fellowship Dinner has been planning its holiday meals since at least August, working to navigate the potentiality of a shutdown on indoor dining or other limits to gatherings.

"We planned for a shutdown," said Jan Cassens, the kitchen manager and vice-chairwoman of the

Community Fellowship Dinner.

In addition to navigating restrictions on gatherings and dine-in service, Community Fellowship Dinner prepared for a potential increase in demand for food with fewer people traveling and economic hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We increased by about a third," said Cassens. "Last year we did 945 meals and this year we planned for 1,500."

With 1,500 meals comes a hearty supply of food and volunteerism. Cassens said she and the

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