

Grace period given to counties that fall to 'extreme' risk level

By GARY A. WARNER
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Counties that might fall back into the state's most restrictive extreme risk level for COVID-19 spread will be given a two-week grace period on heightened restrictions, Gov. Kate Brown announced Thursday, March 4.

The announcement brought added certainty for restaurants and other businesses in Umatilla County, which moved down from extreme risk for the first time on Feb. 26. The county ended up qualifying to stay in the high risk category, and Morrow County moved down from moderate risk to low.

Jackson and Malheur counties, however, were given a reprieve after Jackson County would have usually moved up to extreme risk and Malheur County



Jade McDowell/Hermiston Herald

A sign outside Hale's Restaurant in downtown Hermiston advertises indoor dining on Monday, March 1, 2021.

would have moved up from moderate to high risk.

Brown said the state's low overall infection rates and its steep trend downward since the winter holidays allowed for "a bit more time" for some state trouble spots. The state currently

ranks 49th of the 50 states in new infections per 100,000 people — only Hawaii scores better. With a positive test rate of 3.9%, Oregon is firmly on track for numbers to continue downward statewide, and 1 million vaccine shots have been adminis-

tered to residents.

The governor said she made the decision to waive the restrictions "recognizing the challenges businesses encounter when facing a switch back and forth between extreme risk and other risk levels," Brown said.

The drop to the higher risk level meant that restaurants could offer limited indoor dining, a key change during the cold, wet winter months that have stretched into March.

Higher numbers would have required a return to the tighter restrictions on businesses, dining, and activities. Brown's message did not include any changes to rules covering counties already in the extreme risk level.

Brown had announced Feb. 23 that 10 counties had dropped out of the extreme risk level, the highest of

the four-tier rating system that also includes high risk, moderate and lower. The higher the risk level, the more restrictions are in place on businesses, dining and activities.

It was a dose of good news after a period in which most of the state had been in extreme risk at one point or another.

"For the second time in a row, we are seeing great progress in stopping the spread of COVID-19 across Oregon and saving lives," Brown said on Feb. 23.

Risk level adjustments are made every two weeks. But measurements are taken every Friday and analyzed each Monday. The numbers are published weekly, with the period between reassignments called "the warning week."

With the next assignment of risk levels set to be announced March 9 and go

into effect March 12, state officials evidently saw some counties trending back up to extreme risk.

Brown's office did not say what counties were of concern. The "warning week" numbers indicate trends, but the final status would also be determined adding in the as-yet unknown statistics of this week through March 5.

The drop in infections was part of the recent good news that has seen overall new infections down their winter holiday period highs. A third vaccine, made by Johnson & Johnson has arrived in the state and the first 100 doses sent to each county, with a total of 34,000 expected to immediately follow.

But there was cautionary news as well. Two potentially more virulent and easier to spread versions of the virus showed up in Oregon.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

Hermiston Walmart working on remodel

The Hermiston Walmart is working on a remodel of the store that is expected to be complete in early summer 2021.

According to the company, the remodel has already added new flooring and will eventually include new signage and paint for "better line of sight and easier navigation," expansion of some departments including beer and wine, expansion of the online grocery service and remodeled restrooms.

A final completion date will be announced when it gets closer.

Boardman farmers named state corn yield contest winners

Two Boardman-area residents were among 506 state winners in the National Corn Yield Contest, sponsored annually by the National Corn Growers Association, according to a news release.

Nolan Mills of Boardman, placed first in the state in the H:Strip Till, Minimum Till, Mulch Till and Ridge Till Irrigated classes with a yield of 267.4469 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Pioneer P1089AMTM.

Vern Frederickson of Boardman placed first in the state in the I:Conventional Irrigated Class with a yield of 249.4356 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Pioneer P1077AMTM.

"Although the past year

posed numerous tests for all sectors of the American public, farmers continued to drive agricultural production in the face of incredible obstacles," the news release stated. "Through their efforts, NCGA members contributed valuable data that will help all growers face current challenges and those still to come."

The 2020 contest participation included 7,844 entries from 48 states. Of the state winners, 27 growers — three from each of nine classes — were named national winners, representing 12 states.

New podcast focuses on behavioral health

A division of Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc. has launched a new podcast exploring the intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice.

The podcast, titled "The Center Collaborative: Creative Solutions in Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice," aired its first episode March 3. It is produced by the Oregon Center on Behavioral Health and Justice Integration, a specialized division within GOBHI, a nonprofit serving rural Oregon.

The podcast series will feature guests from government, public safety, health care, the judicial system and the broader community, according to a news release.

"One serious issue led to us creating this podcast," Chris Thomas, podcast host and Behavioral Health Jus-

tice Manager at OCBHJI said in a statement. "Nobody was talking about what was working. We want this podcast to shine a light on partnerships that are moving the dial, leading to better solutions and outcomes for people who may become involved with the justice system due to experiencing behavioral health, intellectual/developmental disabilities, or neurocognitive concerns."

The podcast can be found on major streaming platforms, ocbhji.org/podcast and Oregon Center on Behavioral Health and Justice Integration's social media pages.

Commercial rent grants available

The state's Commercial Rent Relief Program opened on Monday, March 8 for small businesses and their landlords affected by COVID-19.

Landlords with tenants that are businesses with 100 or fewer employees that have fallen behind on rent for a commercial property can jointly apply with their tenant for up to \$100,000 in rent relief per tenant, with a cap of \$3 million per landlord.

The funds come from the \$100 million allocated for landlord relief by the Oregon Legislature's Emergency Board in January. For more information visit the Business Oregon website at oregon4biz.com/Coronavirus-Information/CRR.

House wants fast track for foreclosure moratorium

By PETER WONG
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

House Speaker Tina Kotek says she wants to see a legislative fast track for an extension of Oregon's moratorium on residential foreclosures.

An overall moratorium ended on Dec. 31. House Bill 2009, which the House Business and Labor Committee heard last week, would be retroactive to Dec. 31 and extend the moratorium to Sept. 1. But the new version would apply only to a set number of residential properties — the bill proposes five, although an amendment would raise it to 10 — and commercial property would be excluded.

Kotek, a Portland Democrat, is a chief sponsor of the bill along with committee Chairman Paul Holvey, D-Eugene.

Kotek said lawmakers should have passed the extension during the Legislature's third special session on Dec. 21, 2020. The original moratorium, first imposed by an executive order of Gov. Kate Brown, was passed in a special session on June 26, 2020.

"From my point of view, we should have done it during the third special session to extend it. It's been well-worked," Kotek told reporters during her weekly availability on Monday, March 8.

"We are pushing Chair Holvey to move it as soon as possible. It is something people need certainty on in terms of how their mortgage payments will be handled in the situation we are in right now. We need to keep people housed, so it is a priority."

Kotek's call coincided with near-final congressional action on President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief plan, which includes \$10 billion nationally for homeowner assistance.

Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, said she isn't sure what Oregon's share would be, although it is likely to exceed \$100 million if it is distributed according to population. "That federal aid would be in addition to \$30 million for homeowner assistance contained in a \$500 million state plan unveiled Monday, March 8," Fahey said.

Fahey sits on the Busi-

ness and Labor Committee and also leads the Housing Committee.

The state bill would allow one extension by Brown to Dec. 31, through an executive order, but only if she gives notice by Aug. 16.

Banks and credit unions oppose or question the need for state legislation, given that 70% of Oregon mortgages already fall under a federal moratorium that is scheduled to end June 30.

But housing advocates in support of the bill mentioned the Household Pulse survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, which ranks Oregon 17th among the states in terms of people reporting they are behind on rent or mortgage payments and are at risk of eviction or foreclosure within two months.

Oregon's 38.1% of 153,402 surveyed online put it below Idaho (15th) but ahead of Nevada (19th). California and Washington ranked lower. The margin of error is 12.4 points, which means that the actual ratio of people at risk could be as low as 1 of 4 — or as high as 1 in 2.

New doctor joins Good Shepherd Urgent Care

HERMISTON HERALD

Good Shepherd Health Care System has welcomed Dr. Stewart Swena to Good Shepherd Urgent Care.

Swena joins several other doctors at the urgent care clinic, located at 1050 W. Elm Ave. in Hermiston.

The clinic is open seven days a week for urgent care, and also provides primary care Monday through Thursday.

According to a news release, Swena had already been working in medicine in Hermiston for "many years," most recently in Good Shepherd Medical Center's emergency room for the past 10 years. He originally came to Hermiston to work with Dr. Douglas Flaiz at Family Health Associates.

The release states he is board certified both in



GSCHS/Contributed Photo
Dr. Stewart Swena

Family Medicine and Lifestyle Medicine, with more than 20 years of primary care experience. He completed his residency at Florida Hospital Medical Center in Family Practice after obtaining his Doctor of Medicine from Loma Linda University School of Medicine.

Swena said in a statement that primary care medicine is important to the health of a community, and seeing how most of the patients who have died of COVID-19 had chronic diseases or other risk factors helped inspire him to get back into primary care.

"With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when you look at the risk factors for severe disease and chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, coronary disease, COPD; all of those can be helped significantly and in some cases reversed with Lifestyle Medicine," he said.

To schedule an appointment, call 541-567-2995 or visit www.gshealth.org/good-shepherd-medical-group/good-shepherd-urgent-care.

Good Shepherd Urgent Care also accepts walk-in patients.

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