

Dog Park:

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originally hoped to hold a ribbon cutting for the playground on Memorial Day, but Fetter said construction delays now have the playground slated for completion mid-June, with an official opening celebration held on July 4.

The new playground is made of a compressed plastic that will be less vulnerable to fire than the previous, wooden playground that burned down in 2019. It will sit over a colorful rubber-like surface instead of wood chips, and features will include everything from a train to a pirate ship. The project also adds a restroom and concessions stand building, and an additional picnic shelter.

After Funland is wrapped



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Malibu, a golden retriever, looks up from a dog bowl while exploring the Hermiston Bark Park during its "grand unveiling" on Friday, April 30, 2021.

up, Fetter told the city council recently, the department can focus on a renovation of Riverfront Park that will add a new, larger playground to replace the former structure damaged by floods in February 2020. The new playground and a new park-

ing lot will be moved to the south side of the park, which is mostly protected from flooding, while sod will be laid over the north side where the currently parking area stands.

Fetter said the city plans to open the Hermiston Fam-



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Dogs, and their owners, arrive at the Hermiston Bark Park for its "grand unveiling" on Friday, April 30, 2021.

ily Aquatic Center this summer, and the parks and recreation department is focusing

more of its summer recreation programs on outdoor activities, which have

been deemed by scientists to lessen the risk of spreading COVID-19.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Lines sit empty at a Umatilla County Public Health mass COVID-19 vaccination site in Pendleton on Friday, April 30, 2021.

Vaccines:

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would avoid getting the vaccine if possible. The findings are similar to a separate survey from Quinnipiac University, which found 45% of Republicans say they don't plan to get a vaccine.

According to a *New York Times* survey of nearly every U.S. county, vaccination rates and interest was lower on average in counties where the majority of residents voted to reelect former President Donald J. Trump, leaving some areas with more vaccines than there is demand.

That trend appears to be present in Umatilla County, where voters largely favored Trump and where vaccine rates have long ranked lowest in Oregon, despite reporting some of the highest infection rates in the state in recent months.

And this week, the county health department asked the state to briefly withhold vaccine shipments as demand is rapidly declining.

With case counts rising on average over the past few weeks, the county was moved from moderate risk back to high risk this week, bringing greater restrictions on businesses and gatherings, and raising concerns among officials who say local businesses can't withstand the constant shifts.

New cases tied to unvaccinated residents

Officials say newly reported cases are coming almost entirely from residents who have yet to be vaccinated.

"I think it's frustrating to me that I get calls over and over and over again from people who want us to open up the county, open up large events, and have us start moving back to where we were," Murdock said. "But we can't order people to get vaccinated. It's such a contradiction to hear all day, every day, from people that want us to go a certain direction, there's a path to go there, and they don't want to go down it."

Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director, said the county lacks concrete data showing vaccine hesitancy falls along party lines, but added, anecdotally, that appears to be the case.

"We hear nationally that the Republican white man is the least likely to be getting the COVID vaccination right now," he said. "And we know we have a decent sized population of white Republican men in this county. And so the assumption I make is there's probably something there."

However, Fiumara noted that some Hispanic and Latino residents, as well as people from some religious

groups, are also hesitant to get vaccinated.

To combat this, Fiumara said county health officials are working to create new ways to inform specific groups about the importance, safety and efficacy of vaccines, though he didn't provide specifics.

'Mind-boggling' resistance to vaccine

For the commissioners and Fiumara, what is "mind-boggling" is the vaccine is now seeing reluctance from Republicans when it was, in fact, designed under a Republican administration.

With Operation Warp Speed, an effort that saw vaccines developed at an unprecedented rate with billions of dollars from the Trump administration, the former president repeatedly said vaccines would be the solution to the pandemic and took credit when they were cleared for use in November 2020.

The Biden administration, however, promptly took steps to hasten the rollout after the election and drove the development of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which has reached nearly 7 million Americans despite being paused briefly after six women reported blood clots. The vaccine has now been cleared by the Food and Drug Administration with a warning label noting the potential for rare blood clots.

"This really isn't about Republican or Democrat, this is not a control move, this is not many of these conspiracy theory items that are fun and off-the-wall sometimes," Fiumara said. "It's much more straightforward. It's about protecting yourself and protecting those around you, because they're the ones who end up suffering if something goes wrong."

By getting vaccinated and speaking out about vaccinations, Shafer said he's looking to shift the stigma with some hopes the county can make progress toward reopening in time for summer events.

"I want our county to be open," he said. "I don't want any restrictions in place because of our numbers. And the way to do that is the vaccine."

Fiumara said despite the county's low vaccination rates, he's optimistic that more and more people will get vaccinated as the rollout continues. Even now, he said health officials are seeing people change their minds.

"I think people are recognizing that this is our path out of here," he said. "People who were more on the fence aren't so on the fence now that millions and millions across the country are receiving it with very low side effects or down side."

BMCC board approves layoffs

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

By a 5-2 vote, the Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education approved reducing the college's staff by 14 positions, including seven layoffs, at a special board meeting on Friday, April 30.

The move represented a slight improvement from a previous projection that anticipated 11 layoffs as a part of 16 staff reductions, but BMCC administrators maintained the cuts needed to happen so the college could stabilize itself as it attempts to recover from a sustained period of declining enrollment exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

BMCC will lay off five supervisory employees that covered areas like grants, student success, admissions and marketing. The college is also laying off a business instructor and a web content specialist.

"This is a really hard list," interim President Connie Green said. "These are real people with real lives that made an impact on students."

After the meeting, Green said the college was able to reduce layoffs and position eliminations by negotiating with the union and also permanently cutting some unfilled positions from the budget.

While only one faculty member is being laid off, the college is cutting six vacant teaching positions in subjects like math, Spanish and biology in addition to one administrative position.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

The Blue Mountain Community College Board of Education voted 5-2 on Friday, April 30, to approve the reduction of the college's staff by 14 positions, a move that will include seven layoffs.

Board Chair Jane Hill gave the college's two union presidents time to make brief remarks. Pete Hernberg, the president of the Blue Mountain Faculty Association, used his time to try to save the business instructor's job.

Hernberg argued that eliminating the position would actually lose the college \$280,000 instead of saving them money due to a loss of enrollment resulting from a decrease in business offerings to students.

"This is extremely damaging to our students," he said.

John Fields, the college's vice president of instruction, said there was a "difference in interpretations" of what the college would lose or gain from laying off business fac-

ulty, while Hill defended the administration's recommendation.

"We have a job to provide stability," she said.

Board member Kim Puzey suggested the college solicit donations from the college's unions or start GoFundMe pages to help save the positions.

"I'm throwing any noode that'll stick to avoid losing this much talent," he said.

But Green said BMCC needed to look for a way to sustainably operate, and while fundraising drives could help in the short term, it couldn't offer a long-term solution for the college's fiscal issues.

After about a 30-minute discussion, the board voted 5-2 to approve the staffing cuts. Puzey and board

member Heidi Van Kirk voted against the motion.

The latest round of staff reductions nearly completes a rough 12-month period for BMCC. The college cut 23 positions in May 2019, five positions from its corrections education program earlier this spring, and now another 14 reductions.

In an interview after the meeting, Green said she understood the impact the cuts would have on the services the college offers and morale.

But she added that the restructuring the college is making at the supervisory level and the new initiatives BMCC is starting would put the college on the path to success.

"BMCC is choosing opportunities over closing," she said.

House passes bill erasing requirement for pseudoephedrine prescription

By PETER WONG
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Oregon would no longer require a prescription for medicines containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine under a bill that has cleared the House.

House Bill 2648 went to the Senate on a 54-4 vote on Wednesday, April 28.

The requirement for a prescription was written into law in 2005, when people were buying medicines containing pseudoephedrine — a precursor

chemical — for use in making methamphetamine, a powerful stimulant that is illegal. Oregon was the first state to do so.

"We had a meth-lab problem and it was really bad," Rep. Bill Post, a Republican from Keizer and the bill's floor manager, said. "It worked. Meth labs went way down to almost nothing."

The law made it harder to obtain some medicines commonly used for colds and allergies.

But since then, methamphetamine manufac-

turing has switched from homegrown labs to Mexico. Methamphetamine remains illegal, although under a ballot measure Oregon voters passed last year, possession of small amounts is no longer a crime.

Ephedrine is banned as a performance-enhancing drug by college sports and some professional sports leagues.

House Bill 2648 retains some restrictions on access to such medicines. People can obtain them by showing a photo

identification to establish age — the minimum is 18 — and receive them from behind the store counter. In addition, purchases are tracked by a system known as the National Precursor Log Exchange (NPLEx).

Mississippi, the only other state that required a prescription, recently passed a similar bill.

The Oregon bill, if passed by the Senate and signed by Gov. Kate Brown, would begin the new requirements on Jan. 1, 2022.

Oregon bill speeds siting of emergency shelters

By PETER WONG
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Cities and counties are empowered to waive some requirements to allow the siting of emergency shelters and temporary housing under a bill that is headed to Gov. Kate Brown.

The Senate passed House Bill 2006 without amendments on a 26-1 vote Monday.

The bill allows local governments to waive

design, planning and zoning requirements for shelters or housing operated directly by them, by organizations with at least two years' experience, or by nonprofits that partner with either one.

Shelters still have to comply with some building codes and health and safety requirements. They must have access to transportation and cannot be placed in hazardous zones, such as federally designated floodplains.

This bill revives legislation that passed in the first 2020 special session (June 24-26) of the Oregon Legislature. But its waivers ended 90 days later on Sept. 28. This bill's waivers end on July 1, 2022.

Sen. Deb Patterson, D-Salem, said the shortage of housing has worsened during the coronavirus pandemic and the 2020 Labor Day wildfires. She said cities often resist state requirements.

"But this bill is differ-

ent," Patterson, the bill's Senate sponsor and floor manager, said.

"Multiple cities have come out in support of the bill because they recognize the need in their communities — in every community — for us to take steps toward alleviating the suffering of our neighbors who have lost their housing. It should not take an emergency for us to recognize this need. But we are in an emergency now. We must act."