

BMCC lifts mask mandate ahead of fall term

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — No mask, no vaccine, no problem.

In light of the state lifting its mask mandate July 1, Blue Mountain Community College elected to make masks optional for students and staff ahead of the return to in-person classes in the fall term.

David Shellberg is BMCC's chief operating officer and the chair of the college's emergency response team, which has been providing the college with recommendations on its reopening policy. He said the group decided to lift its own mask rules because it wanted to align its policy with the state and local governments, where masks are no longer required.

Despite an overall drop in cases across the state, Umatilla County has continued to struggle with COVID-19. Over the past several weeks, the county reported several days where the daily case rate was comparable to the Portland metro counties. The county's vaccination rate is mired in the low 40s, even as the state as a whole is now reporting a 70% rate. Although Morrow and Baker counties' vaccination rates are slightly better, they are also well below the state average.

Shelberg said the team took the region's COVID-19 struggles under consid-



A sign on the door of Morrow Hall at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton advises visitors of the college's mask requirements on June 23, 2021. The college dropped its mask requirement on Wednesday, July 7, in an effort to more closely align with state guidelines.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

eration, but members also wanted to align their policy with what other community colleges across the state were doing.

While BMCC's fall term doesn't start until Sept. 22, the college's new mask policy went into effect almost immediately, on Wednesday, July 7. While masks are no longer a requirement, Shellberg said Blue Mountain will not discourage students who choose to continue wearing them.

"If it makes you feel comfortable, that's fine," he said.

Whether to keep a mask mandate in place has been an question that every higher education institution is trying to answer. According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, Oregon State University is opting to drop its own mask mandate while the University of Oregon and Portland State University will retain their mask policy.

But regardless of their decision, every four-year public university in the state is requiring students to receive the vaccine before returning to in-person classes. Shell-

berg said BMCC will have no such requirement.

He added that just because BMCC was lifting its COVID-19 restrictions didn't mean the college was no longer taking the virus seriously, nor did it relieve students and staff from the responsibility of keeping themselves or others safe. Shellberg said people who attend or work for BMCC will still be expected to self-monitor their health before coming to school and will be expected to stay away from campus if they're sick.

BMCC president to start Sept. 7

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — The start date and salary are set for Blue Mountain Community College's eighth president.

Having announced his hiring in June, the BMCC Board of Education unanimously voted to approve a contract with Mark Browning at a Wednesday, July 7, meeting. Currently the vice president of college relations at West Idaho College, Browning will begin working full-time at Blue Mountain Sept. 7. The college will pay Browning \$161,000 per year for his services.

Calling in to the virtual meeting, Browning said he was "absolutely thrilled and tickled" to secure the job and was excited to get to work.

The contract, which was negotiated between Browning and board Chair Jane Hill, also includes an expansive benefits package. Besides health insurance for Browning, his spouse and a dependent, he receives 20 days of vacation per year, a \$500 per month expense stipend and a vehicle and gas card for college business. Additionally, Browning will get free access to the college's weight room, athletic facilities and home games for seven years after his employment ends.

A first-time college president, Browning agreed to several training provisions. For his first year on the job, Browning

will be required to meet with a mentor or coach and a small group of board members.

Although Browning won't start working for Blue Mountain full time until September, his contract starts Aug. 1 to account for some college business. Interim President Connie Green told the board that Browning has agreed to take leave from his current job to attend an administrative conference in Oregon. During that time, BMCC will pay Browning \$617 per day.



Browning

Green said she will meet with Browning on a weekly basis during the transition process to catch him up on the college's operations.

When Browning takes the helm Sept. 7, it will be the first time Blue Mountain has had a permanent president since February, when former President Dennis Bailey-Fougner resigned abruptly, citing personal health issues.

Blue Mountain Community College has endured a tumultuous 2021, including multiple rounds of layoffs, an administrative reorganization and a significant decrease in student enrollment intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hill led the board through the presidential search process and one of her last acts as chair was to approve Browning's contract. Afterward, the board unanimously voted to shift Hill to vice chair and elevate board member Don Rice to chair.

IN BRIEF

Two arrested on charges related to explosives

BOARDMAN — Police arrested two men outside of Boardman Tuesday, July 6, on charges related to making and handling explosives.

The Boardman Police Department received a

report on July 6 that there were improvised explosive devices in a shed on a property on Shoemaker Road, which is just outside of the Boardman city limits, according to a press release. The report said one of the men suspected of making the explosives was on the scene.

When police arrived,

they saw a man throw three objects into a field. An Oregon State Police bomb squad out of Pendleton later determined the objects were dangerous destructive devices and made the devices safe, the press release said.

Police interviewed the man in the field until another man arrived, the press

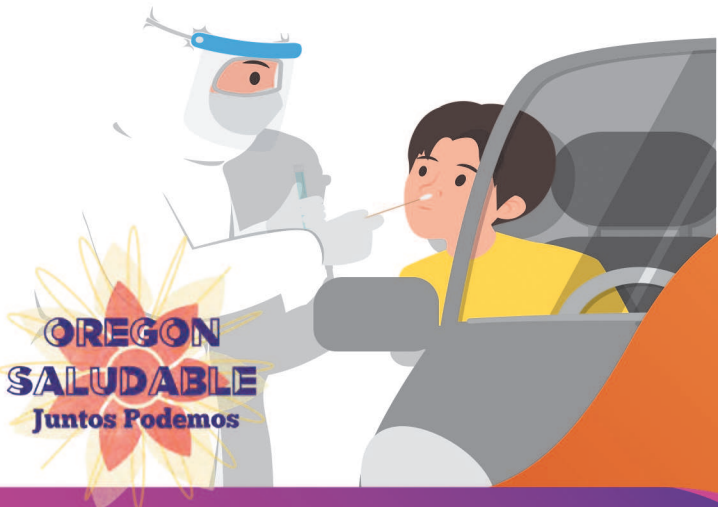
release said. They eventually arrested Adrian Lee Ahumada, 37, of Boardman, and Brenden Kane Strickland, 19, of Clarkston, Washington, on three felony counts each of unlawfully making and possessing destructive devices. Their preliminary bail is \$60,000 each.

— EO Media Group

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NO INSURANCE/IMMIGRATION
STATUS NEEDED

- Local drive-through model promotes safety.
- Free and confidential; no insurance or immigration status required.

SCAN TO REGISTER



Pre-Registration Available But Not Required. Results in 2 - 4 Days. <https://blogs.uoregon.edu/osjp/registro/>

UMATILLA ELECTRIC
BOARDMAN OFFICE
Friday's 3 P.M. - 6 P.M.

July 30
August 13
August 27

UMATILLA ELECTRIC
HERMISTON OFFICE
Saturday's 10 A.M. - 1 P.M.

July 31
August 14
August 28