

School:

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during the six weeks, from places such as Three Mile Canyon Farms in Boardman to Fort Walla Walla.

Fun learning experience

According to Melissa Doherty, the middle school summer program coordinator, the summer school program was “really focusing on making education fun and the learning experience fun.”

The program was made possible by a \$250 million “Summer Learning and Child Care Package” that Gov. Kate Brown, Senate President Peter Courtney and House Speaker Tina Kotek introduced in March 2021.

“Our children are being really affected by this pandemic,” Courtney said in a press release. “We’ve introduced these summer programs because it has never been more urgent to invest in our kids. This summer, we want them to go outside. We want them to have fun. We want them to learn. We need to support their mental and physical health. These programs will get our kids back out doing the things they love.”

The funding is broken up into different categories, including summer enrichment and academic programs for grades K-12, summer activities, child care grants and early learning programs.

When the Legislature announced these pockets of money, Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney began thinking about the needs of the community and started conversations as a district.

“We have some staff members that put in a ton of time coordinating because it’s something different than we’ve ever done,” she said.

The resulting program



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

First grader Penelope Moon receives some help from teacher Yisel Amaya during summer school Thursday, July 22, 2021, at Sunset Elementary, Hermiston.

took a lot of different partners coming together, Mooney said. The coordinators at the elementary, middle and high school levels spent considerable time building the program, trying to be creative and thinking about ways to engage with kids in different ways to get them excited about school.

“It wasn’t just the Hermiston school teachers,” Kennedy said. “There was a mix of the teachers, our licensed subs, our classified staff, our classified subs, we had some EOU teachers involved and then we also had high school students. So it was a big collaboration of lots of different people from our community.”

Lots to offer

After COVID-19 had

taken away many in-person activities, Mooney said the district didn’t want the program to be all academic and strove to make it feel less like “summer school” and more like a summer program with a lot of different offerings.

Doherty agreed that many students didn’t want to attend “summer school” but said children are loving the program the school district put together and they’ve had really positive experiences. She mentioned that parents such as herself have had a very positive experience with the program as well.

Doherty’s daughter, who is in the program, didn’t want to go to summer school either, “but she loved it every day,” Doherty said. “She saw

how fun it was and is looking forward to attending the second session.”

According to Mooney, there were an estimated 600 students who enrolled in the program at the elementary level, 300 between Hermiston’s two middle schools and 300 at the high school level. It was so popular, Kennedy said, that some families that signed up for two weeks asked if their children could attend more.

“I think the kids have really enjoyed what they’re doing,” she said.

Additionally, the free child care starting at 6:30 a.m. with Champions, an after-school program that partnered with the school district, has been a draw to parents who work and aren’t able to watch their kids all day. When the

academic portion of the day finishes at 1:45 p.m. parents also have the option to enroll them in Champions after school as well.

According to Kennedy, Champions has hit a new level of popularity with the summer program. “Champions usually didn’t have too many students enrolled, but on any given day there’s about 200 students there at the after-school program with Champions,” she said.

And, when the program finishes Friday, July 30, the school district will continue working with Champions to provide care for kids until the first day of school on Aug. 30.

Bridging the gap

The summer program also is providing a bridge for students who are mov-

ing between elementary school and middle school. Normally, students have a move-up date between fifth and sixth grade, however, this couldn’t take place with COVID-19. While it can be an intimidating experience for students to move up a grade, the summer program helped bridge that gap, said Doherty.

While in past years there were often different requirements for summer school, this year it was open for all students enrolled in the Hermiston School District.

“This year it doesn’t matter who you are,” Doherty said. “What matters is you want to have fun.”

With the strong success of the program, many are hoping to take some of the lessons learned into the school years ahead by implementing more hands-on and experiential learning activities into lesson plans. And a summer program similar to the one taking place this summer may become a more permanent fixture for Hermiston School District.

Mooney said the district wrote in an extended summer school into their student’s investment account plan for next year and are taking lessons they’ve learned this year to provide opportunities for kids again.

“I anticipate that we will offer something similar next summer,” Mooney said, “that’s an expanded opportunity from what we’ve traditionally been able to offer with summer school.”

Kennedy and Doherty agreed they would love to see something like the summer program continue and believe it has been beneficial for both kids and parents.

“Learning is fun,” Doherty said. “Learning doesn’t just have to be in the confines of the book. Your only limitation is your imagination.”

Restrictions:

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tilla County reported 53 new cases July 23-25. Case reporting during weekends often lags behind the actual totals because of staffing and communications limits.

The Oregon Health Authority and the office of Gov. Kate Brown on July 26 referred reporters to the official press release that morning, statements during a press call last week and the new County COVID-19 Community Spread Report.

“There are no updates to add at this time,” said OHA spokesperson Rudy Owens.

Take action

Those trends, which public health experts say is being driven by the delta variant spreading rapidly in unvaccinated communities, were the topic of a press conference last week where Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen urged counties with low vaccination rates to “take action now.”

Allen singled out Umatilla County as having significantly high rates of infection and low vaccination rates — less than 40%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In a statement, Brown’s office also said it is “strongly recommending that local leaders consider implementing temporary measures such as masks and physical distancing.”

But Shafer and fellow county Commissioner George Murdock say they would be hard pressed to implement any sort of pandemic mandates to curb the spread of infection. They claim that enforcing the restrictions would be challenging in a community that has largely come to disdain restrictions like masks.

“If we tell (county residents) to wear masks all of a sudden, who’s going to enforce that?”

Murdock said.

OHA pointed to county officials as the proper authorities to determine the public health risk and take actions. Edicts from Salem would be counterproductive, said OHA Director Allen.

Allen said an “I don’t care what you think, you have to get vaccinated” message from the governor or the health care agency might just reinforce divisions over vaccinations.

Allen had cited the “highly political” nature of the COVID-19 debate as a reason for locally focused responses. In addition to

the Pendleton Whisky Music saw at least 12,000 people at the Pendleton Round-Up Grounds. Fiumara said at least 30 cases in four counties — Umatilla, Union, Morrow and Walla Walla — have been traced directly back to the concert.

“My sense is that number’s going to go up,” Fiumara said.

The recent cases from Whisky Fest has county officials alarmed with more large summer events coming up, including the Umatilla County Fair and the Pendleton Round-Up. Murdock said county officials met with

ple. Fiumara said 92% of COVID-19 cases in Umatilla County since May 1 were from unvaccinated people.

If case counts remain at their current levels, Fiumara said he would ask the commissioners to issue recommendations for the businesses to limit capacity and for people to wear masks.

Shafer and Murdock — each of whom have been vaccinated — have encouraged people to get the shot and maintain that it’s the best way to stop the spread of COVID-19.

“The ultimate solution is the vaccination,” Murdock said.

Murdock noted the county has taken a variety of measures to encourage vaccinations, including on billboards, advertisements and making staff available for people who want to get the shot.

However, if cases continue to rise, officials believe that the state could still step in and reinstate restrictions.

“Being near the bottom, in terms of vaccinations, and being near the top, in terms of cases, we make ourselves very vulnerable to a mandate or any kind of intervention,” said Murdock. “So that’s why we’re going to continue to advocate for vaccinations.”

But the state maintains that decisions should come from a local level — a responsibility that county officials were pursuing for months before restrictions were lifted.

“A localized pandemic demands effective localized public health interventions, not a statewide response,” Allen said.

Over the past week, Umatilla County surpassed another pandemic milestone of 9,000 cases, rising to 9,231 on July 26. In all, the county has reported 92 COVID-19 deaths since the pandemic began.

— *EO Media Group reporter Gary Warner contributed to this feature.*

Tower:

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the Pittsburgh Paint Company.

Along with updating structural issues and painting an additional “STANFIELD” on the other side of the tower, the team decided to add programmable lights to the tower. The illumination was red, white

and blue lights for Fourth of July, but can change the colors for various events, holidays and special occasions, such as blue and gold for Stanfield High School’s graduation.

Morris is glad residents wanted to keep the water tower, and they were able to keep an important part of the town alive.

“This is us,” he said.

Irrigon gets a new, safer path

By **NICK ROSENBERGER**
HERMISTON HERALD

IRRIGON — Irrigon residents, parents and students can expect a safer method for arriving at school with the construction of a new multi-use pathway along the west side of Division Street from Highway 730 to Southeast Wyoming Avenue. The city is aiming to complete it before the start of the school year.

According to the Irrigon Public Works Department, the Division Street project will provide a “clear and safe area for bicyclists and pedestrians, a needed safe zone especially for children going to and from school.”

Division Street previously had no sidewalk or path for pedestrians or students going to school, with cars driving past a couple of feet away.

“Kids would ride their bikes down the middle of Division,” said Aaron Palmquist, Irrigon’s city manager.

The street was a safety issue and dangerous, said Palmquist, noting a child had been killed in a motorcycle accident several years prior.

A path like the one under construction has “been needed for years,” he said.

Palmquist said he has been working on implementing some sort of path since 2013, when he became city manager, but it had been a challenge to secure funding for the project. Finally, in July 2015, the city made an official application to the Oregon Department of Transportation for Statewide

Transportation Improvement Program funding. The funding became available in the 2018-21 biennium and they started construction this year.

Palmquist said the path was about safety and a “very strong community need and desire.”

The 10-foot-wide multi-use path, with a price tag of about \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million, will allow walkers and cyclists a safer opportunity to travel between 730 to Southeast Wyoming and tie into their “safe school route.”

Along with the addition of a flashing beacon on Division Street and barriers that separate the road from the path, the city recently added 12 street lights that light up the road and intersection. Previously, “It used to be dark all the way,” Palmquist said.

Additionally, Palmquist hinted at another project going up to bid in November that will go from First Street through 14th Street and connect with the Division Street pathway.

While it’s likely more than 30 students made the trek during the school day without the pathway, Palmquist said, many parents were afraid to have their children walk the dangerous road. He said there has been much excitement from parents and kids for the pathway and he expects the number of pedestrians and students walking to school will increase.

“It’s exciting to finally see it come to pass,” Palmquist said.

“BEING NEAR THE BOTTOM, IN TERMS OF VACCINATIONS, AND BEING NEAR THE TOP, IN TERMS OF CASES, WE MAKE OURSELVES VERY VULNERABLE TO A MANDATE OR ANY KIND OF INTERVENTION.”

— George Murdock, county commissioner

government leaders, Allen said civic and faith leaders could help by urging vaccination.

Getting vaccinated

Meanwhile, social gatherings and summer events continue to spur outbreaks. Fiumara said nearly 70 cases came on July 16, six days after

the Round-Up and Happy Canyon board to discuss new messaging to encourage people to get the shot.

Fiumara attributed the recent surge directly to the state reopening and lifting masking and distancing restrictions on June 30. And the vast majority of the cases are coming from unvaccinated peo-