2020 census: Hermiston tops 19,000

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

UMATILLA COUNTY — Hermiston's population surpassed the 19,000 mark. And in defiance of national trends, Umatilla and Morrow counties grew in the 2020 census.

In Umatilla County, Pendleton and Hermiston were neck-and-neck for the title of the largest city in Eastern Oregon in 2010. The U.S. Census Bureau released city and county population data Thursday, Aug. 12, revealing Hermiston turned its slight advantage into a solid lead, its 19,354 people edging out Pendleton's 17,107. Hermiston's 15.6% population increase prompted a celebratory email from Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan to the Hermiston City Council.

"From the raw population perspective, the (data) means that 62% of all growth in Umatilla County since 2010 has occurred within the City Limits of Hermiston, and 73% within Hermiston and Umatilla," he wrote. "My guess is that if we could run ZIP-code level numbers yet and include growth outside of city limits, the percentage attributed to the entire "west side" is probably well over 80%."

Hermiston Mayor Dave Drotzmann in a written statement said elements abound that contribute to the city's growth, such as "a can-do spirit, a supportive business community, strong schools, proactive housing development, an investment in infrastructure and a united sense of purpose."

"This city has always been a welcoming and inclusive community with an eye on the

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald
The population of the city of Hermiston has grown 15.6% over the past decade, from 16,745 residents in 2010 to 19,354 in 2020, according to data from the 2020 Census.

future," he continued. "We celebrate our diversity, and I'm happy to see so many people enjoying success in growing their families, businesses and lives here."

Around Umatilla County, many small cities saw solid growth.

While the city of Umatilla's growth slowed from the previous decade, it still grew at a 6.6% clip, while Stanfield also posted a growing population. Both Athena and Weston rebounded to post positive growth after the first decade of the 21st century that had them losing people, while Milton-Freewater's growth slowed consider-

ably to 1.4%. Just north of Pendleton, Helix and Adams posted successive decades of growth.

Most of Umatilla County's population struggles lay south of Interstate 84. Echo, Ukiah and Pilot Rock all lost people compared to 2010 and, for the latter two, it represented the second decade in a row that they shrunk.

But Umatilla County overall grew by 5.5% between 2010 and 2020 and Morrow County by 9.1%. George Murdock, the chair of the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners, said Umatilla County's 80,075 population was less than he expected.

"I would have to attribute it to the housing problem," he said, adding he would expect Umatilla County to post similar numbers to the Willamette Valley once it adds more homes.

The north-south divide is even more stark in Morrow County, which now has a population of 12,186.

Boardman and Irrigon recorded strong growth from 2010, while Heppner, the county seat, lost population for the second consecutive decade. Lexington's population stayed flat at 238, while Ione gained eight people.

Still, Morrow County's growth percentage was the highest growth in Eastern Oregon.

Given all the activity in Boardman and the Port of Morrow, Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair Don Russell said he wasn't surprised by the census' figures.

Census shows continued demographic shifts

Charles Rynerson, the coordinator at the Oregon State Data Center at Portland State University, also didn't find the growth in Uma-

tilla and Morrow counties surprising.

He attributed their growth to existing trends, mainly their status as a commercial and transportation hub in the region, in addition to its growing Latino populations.

When studying 2020 census data, age demographics stood out to Rynerson. Morrow and Umatilla counties have the highest share of residents under 18 in Oregon. But, like the rest of the state, the share of children fell from 2010 to 2020. Across the state and across demographics, birth rates are down.

"In a world where people are getting sick, and the forests are burning and floods are destroying things, I got to believe that it has some impact on young people's decision about bringing a child into the world," he said.

Umatilla and Morrow counties also are continuing to see their Latino populations rise. More than 1 in 4 residents now is Latino in Umatilla County, while 41% of Morrow County's population now is Latino, the highest in the state.

Four out of the five top Oregon counties with the highest share of Latino residents are outside metropolitan areas, and most of the rest of the top 10 are in suburban counties rather than urban.

No county in Eastern Oregon matched the state's 10% growth rate, and Grant County lost population. But by mostly staving off population decline in 2020, the region and the rest of Oregon defied the national trend. According to the census, hundreds of rural counties nationwide lost population, including in Alabama, Indiana and Kansas.

COVID-19 surge threatens to overwhelm local hospitals

By BRYCE DOLE
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — In many parts of Eastern Oregon, the pandemic never has been worse.

COVID-19 infection is spreading at an unprecedented rate in Umatilla and Morrow counties. Week after week, both counties report COVID-19 case counts that dwarf previous pandemic surges. And as the latest surge continues unabated, commissioners in the two counties declared a state of emergency last week, opening the door for state help as area hospitals fill with patients.

"With the new delta variant, it's much more transmissible and many more people are getting sick with COVID than we've ever seen in the past," said Morrow County Commissioner Don Russell, who added, "There's a lot of people who have been vaccine resistant. With the new delta variant, they have to reconsider that. You need to put your personal biases behind you and look at the science."

Hospitals in both counties are facing a serious influx of patients and are finding it nearly impossible to transfer patients to other medical facilities for a higher level of care, officials say.

"Plainly put, there are little to no beds to transfer patients to," Caitlin Cozad, a spokesperson with Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, said in an email.

And if the surge doesn't diminish soon, officials are worried the hospitals could be overwhelmed.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara pointed to Jackson and

Josephine counties, where COVID-19 patients are exceeding hospital capacity and health care workers are treating people in the hallways because they've run out of beds. Fiumara said he is worried the same could happen in Umatilla County.

"We could end up with people who need care and can't get in to receive it, whether it's a vehicle accident or a heart attack," Fiumara said. "I'm dreading when we get to the point when somebody dies in the parking lot or the waiting room because there wasn't anywhere for them to go. We're not there yet. I just don't want to get there."

As of Thursday, Aug. 12, only two intensive care unit beds were available in hospitals across Region 9, an area that encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Malheur counties, according to the state.

Stare down with delta

Last week, 17 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 at Good Shepherd, a sharp uptick from the five who were hospitalized earlier this month. Every day, the hospital is using a month's worth of oxygen due to the latest surge and will "carefully monitor our usage while working closely with our (oxygen) supplier to keep up with the demand," Cozad said.

As of Aug. 12, 40% of Good Shepherd's 30 patients had COVID-19.

As hospitals across the Northwest fill with COVID-19 patients, hospitals in Umatilla and Morrow counties are sending some patients to facilities further and further away for higher levels of care, including Bend, Boise, Reno or San Francisco.

"The strain is tremendous on hospitals in our region due to this surge," Cozad said.

All this is taking a toll on health care workers, officials say.

"This pandemic has waged on far longer than many of us thought it would," Smith said, "and at the point when we felt like it was starting to get better, it has only gotten worse."

Fiumara said public health employees are similarly exhausted and was sympathetic for what hospital workers are experiencing.

"It has got to be extremely frustrating to see people coming in for what is a preventable situation," Fiumara said. "Because they chose not to take the steps needed to avoid it. This is a preventable disease now."

The dire conditions at hospitals come as the counties report some of the highest COVID-19 infection rates statewide. Umatilla County reported more than 400 cases for three straight weeks — totals that are far

higher than any of the county's previous surges, according to state data.

Morrow County last week expected to report its highest weekly COVID-19 case count since the pandemic started, with more than 100 cases, according to Russell. The two ZIP codes encompassing Irrigon and Boardman reported the most new COVID-19 cases per capita in Oregon during that week, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

Cases rise among youth as vaccinations increase

Fiumara said young people are increasingly making up the majority of cases, and many are falling seriously ill, a national trend that bucks previous understandings of how the pandemic affects

youths. Regional hospitals, he added, are reporting that more young people are falling seriously ill than ever before during the pandemic.

The state last week reported a 35-year-old Morrow County woman with COVID-19 died in her home. In Union County, a 19-year-old woman became Oregon's fourth resident younger than 20 to die with COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

The Umatilla County Public Health Department has not recently combed through data to determine how case rates compare among vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

Recent data from the Oregon Health Authority shows the percentage of vaccinated people contracting COVID-19 is increasing as the delta variant spreads, but the vac-

cines still are highly effective against preventing severe illness and death, health officials say.

In July, 50 out of Oregon's 55 COVID-19 deaths were among people who were either unvaccinated or partially vaccinated, according to the state. The state also reported more than 90% of Oregonians hospitalized within two weeks of their positive tests weren't fully vaccinated.

But amid the latest surge comes a glimmer of hope, Fiumara said. For four straight weeks, Umatilla County reported increased COVID-19 vaccinations.

In mid-July, the county saw less than 600 people vaccinated in a single week. Last week, that number jumped to nearly 1,000 people, according to county health data.