

Review:

Continued from Page A1

the past week. Meanwhile, Morrow County saw only three new cases reported in the past seven days, and no new deaths of individuals with COVID-19.

Schools progress toward normalcy: On March 23, the Hermiston School District announced that all grade levels would be returning to class full time, five days a week. This would start April 13. Families that were concerned about COVID-19 exposure in the classroom would be able to participate in the virtual academy Hermiston Online! instead.

April 2021

Umatilla awards: On April 2, the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce handed out its Distinguished Citizen Awards for 2019 and 2020. Janet Nagy Leitch was honored as Umatilla Citizen of the Year for 2020. Acapulco Mexican Food was named Umatilla Business of the Year for 2020. Marcelino Cruz was named Umatilla Citizen of the Year for 2019. Banner Bank was recognized as Umatilla Business of the Year for 2019.

Vaccine rollout expands: Oregonians over the age of 16, who were not qualified for the COVID-19 vaccine in any of the phases of the vaccine rollout, became eligible for a shot as of April 19. After moving through all of the specialized groups — most recently, essential workers and those with underlying conditions — the state had planned to make the vaccine available to everyone over the age of 16 on May 1. But on April 6, Gov. Kate Brown announced the new date will be April 19. Meanwhile, more contagious variants become more prevalent, and numbers indicated the country was beginning a “fourth wave” of the pandemic.

Construction begins on Hermiston schools: The Hermiston School District hosted a ceremony for a new, larger Rocky Heights that would be constructed in the current athletic fields next to the old school. It was planned for students to continue attending the old building for the 2021-22 school year while construction is underway, before transferring to the new school in the fall of 2022. After the Rocky Heights groundbreaking, school board members and other dignitaries traveled to a lot at the corner of East Theater Lane and Northeast 10th Street to break ground on Loma Vista Elementary School.

May 2021

Drought declared: The Morrow County Board of Commissioners formally declared a drought in the county and asked Gov. Kate Brown for state support. A letter from commissioners to Brown, dated April 28, describes conditions this year as “severe” and projected to continue. Despite the momentary relief brought by winter storms in February, the month of March in Umatilla County was the sixth driest on record in Pendleton and the second driest in Hermiston, according to Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Since the first of October 2020, precipitation in both Pendleton and Hermiston had been reported lower than normal. When interviewed near the end of April, Lohman said the month of April was shaping up to be one of the driest on record.

COVID-19 numbers announced: During the week of May 16, health officials reported three new deaths of patients with COVID-19 from Umatilla County. According to Oregon Health Authority, 34.1% of Umatilla County residents over the age of 16 had at least one dose of the vaccine to that point, compared to 64.3% statewide. Morrow County stood at 39.4%. The highest vaccination rate in Oregon at the time was Benton County, where 68.7% of individuals over the age of 16 at least



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

Children gather alongside Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann for the ribbon cutting July 4, 2021, of the new Funland Playground.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

Tito Munoz, 3, collects a candy cane from Santa Claus during a tree lighting ceremony Dec. 2, 2021, on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston. John Perkins, who plays the role of Santa Claus, has stage four pancreatic cancer.

partially vaccinated.

Honor walk: Hermiston High School seniors lined up on Thursday, May 27 for a class photo before the Honor Walk. There, they were invited to sign their name to a set of posters sitting on tables, with titles like “trade school” or “military,” to let people know what their plans were. The Honor Walk was a precursor to graduation, which will take place on Thursday, June 3.

June 2021

Graduation: Hermiston High School students of the Class of 2021 graduated at a ceremony on June 3. Cristina Cuevas, who served as the high school counselor to the Class of 2021, said there were 369 students in the class who walked at graduation. A few more still were finishing up, however, with another seven who have since qualified for their diploma or will within days. Students reflected on their school careers to that point, which were interrupted by the pandemic. Still, they reported good memories of friends, football games and more.

Troubles grow for Hermiston VFW: Oregon’s VFW leadership revoked the Hermiston post’s charter. The decision meant members of the post were then “at large” members of the VFW and had to have someone sponsor them if they want to join an adjacent post in Lone, Kennewick or Pendleton.

Heat wave: Hermiston had its hottest day ever recorded Monday, June 28, at 115 degrees, according to the National Weather Service, and immediately broke that record on Tuesday, June 19 with 118 degrees. The city’s previous all-time record was 113 degrees, set in 1961. Its previous record for June was 111 degrees.

Restrictions lifted: Oregon’s statewide COVID-19 restrictions were largely lifted on Wednesday, June 30, Gov. Kate Brown said in a press call Friday, June 25. After the deadline passes, statewide mandates on masks, social distancing and capacity limits of restaurants and venues were removed.

July 2021

Funland opens: Many people gathered in Hermiston’s Butte Park to celebrate the opening of a new play-

ground, which was the third iteration of Funland Playground. It was originally built in 1996 and burned down in 2001. Its replacement burned down in May 2019 in a suspected case of arson.

On July 4, Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann, alongside a large group of children, cut the ribbon on Funland Playground. A stilt walker dressed like Uncle Sam, a pair of pirates and Santa Claus were part of the festivities. Locals, who turned out to see the new playground, reported their pleasure. Slides, they said, were among their favorite new play structures, as was equipment shaped like various fruits and vegetables. Larry Fetter, director of Hermiston Parks and Recreation, too, expressed his approval of the playground, which were unique to Hermiston.

The Funland Playground features a variety of play structures, including three main zones: the Wild West, Adventure and Farmland. In addition to original playground structures, the playground features a soft, rubbery play surface that has been designed to complement the various areas of play.

The playground came with a \$1.75 million price tag. An insurance payout of \$752,000 from the previous playground paid for part of this cost. The Funland Fundraising Committee, in partnership with Hermiston Parks and Recreation, raised an additional \$810,000. Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions clubs, as well as others, helped fundraise for the project.

Due to Funland’s history with fires, the city of Hermiston has said the new structure was built with fire-resistant materials and features surveillance cameras to further deter vandalism.

The delta variant arrives: Fourteen delta cases were announced in Oregon and three cases were discovered in Umatilla County by mid-July. Experts added the three cases were almost certainly an undercount. Early research suggested the delta variant was two to three times as transmissible as the original strain.

Back to masks: Less than a month after Oregon lifted nearly all pandemic man-

dates, Umatilla County residents once again were being asked to mask up in public indoor settings to curb the spread of COVID-19. In a statement the last week of July, Umatilla County Public Health aligned with recent recommendations from the state and federal government that everybody, including fully vaccinated people, should wear masks indoors “due to a substantial increase in Umatilla County’s COVID-19 case rate.”

On July 26, The Oregon Health Authority issued a report showing that, from July 11-22, Umatilla County saw a case rate of 504 new cases per 100,000 people — by far the highest in the state. During that same period, 17.6% of all tests came back positive, the second highest in Oregon, just behind Morrow County’s 17.9%.

The masking recommendations also come as COVID-19 hospitalizations surge statewide and at some regional hospitals.

August 2021

Umatilla County Fair resumes: The Umatilla County Fair Kick-Off Parade returned for 2021. Veterans led the procession, which commenced rolling a little after 6:30 p.m. Aug. 7, along Seventh Street, turning onto Hermiston Avenue, looping around city hall and finishing on First Street and Locust Avenue. Thousands of attendees from all over the county lined the streets, clapping and cheering as participants passed. The fair schedule was Aug. 11-14 and would include attractions including carnival rides and animal competitions.

Population growth confirmed: The U.S. Census Bureau released city and county population data Thursday, Aug. 12, revealing Hermiston turned its slight advantage into a solid lead as the largest city in the county, its 19,354 people edging out Pendleton’s 17,107. 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. Umatilla County overall grew by 5.5% between 2010 and 2020 and Morrow County by 9.1%.

Greater Hermiston CityFest brings the faithful: Thousands of people crowded Hermiston’s Butte Park on Aug. 27 and 28 for CityFest. It was an event that featured speakers, music, bicycle stunts and more. CityFest had been delayed before, but organizers thought it should not be put off any longer. People involved in the event said they had seen depression and difficulties in their own church congregations. This event, they said, should help by creating some fun.

Oregon senator comes to Boardman: U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden visited Families First Childcare Center in Boardman on Aug. 31 and said he was impressed with it. The

center served 53 children and had “maxed out” its space at 255 Olson Road in Boardman. It has four classrooms for students, who are between six weeks old to 12 years old. The center filled a need in its community to care for children when their parents are at work.

September 2021

SAGE Center expands: The Port of Morrow announced it was starting development on the 12,500-square-foot Cultural Alliance and Training Center at SAGE as an expansion to the existing museum. The project was being funded from a \$4.3 million appropriation from the Oregon Legislature passed during the 2021 session. The SAGE Center originally opened in 2013 and is an interactive museum dedicated to the local agriculture and energy industries.

Sheriffs put their foot down: Eastern Oregon sheriff’s offices reaffirmed they would not enforce the mask mandates Gov. Kate Brown set in place. As well, a number of sheriffs across Eastern Oregon, including in Baker and Union counties, have addressed the matter in letters to the governor stating they will not be enforcing any mask mandates, though the governor never asked them to do so.

There is one exception — the sheriffs said they would continue to handle issues of trespassing wherein a patron of a business refuses to wear a mask after being asked to by the business — but that is the ultimate extent to which the law enforcement agencies have said they would intervene.

“Business and property owners have a right to set ground rules for how people behave in their businesses,” Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack said. “When a person becomes disruptive because of this issue, in that situation, it’s not really a mask mandate. It becomes an issue of trespassing or harassment, and we would get involved in those situations as a matter of law.”

October 2021

Harvest Festival returns: Over 1,000 people attended the Morrow County Harvest Festival Oct. 2 at the SAGE Center in Boardman. The festival had been on hiatus in 2020 due to the pandemic. Live music, mule-drawn wagon rides, food and children’s activities were present. There also was a pinewood derby race, which was new to the festival.

Peer centers opened: The Oregon Washington Health Network, on Oct. 6, opened three drop-in peer centers in Hermiston, Pendleton and Milton-Freewater. The centers began offering low-barrier access for individuals and families that are struggling with substance use. The Hermiston Center is at 165 S.W. Third St.

Social media troubles: Local students reported suffering from social media. Sites like TikTok, YouTube and Facebook proved addictive for people. Some young people even report being “hooked” and that social media use has caused them harm. These claims come as a national conversation has been occurring regarding social media. Recent revelations from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen and a Wall Street Journal investigation sparked national outrage has reinvigorated discussions over how the platforms influence teenage mental health.

Vaccine mandate: More than 2 out of every 5 workers in Umatilla and Morrow counties were subject to the state’s vaccine mandate that started Oct. 18. Large regional employers such as CHI St. Anthony Hospital, the Pendleton School District and the Hermiston School District reported high vaccination rates among their staff, with most unvaccinated staff granted a medical or religious exemption to stay on or with their employer.

Halloween celebrated: Crowds of people turned

out for local Halloween events. It was a big year for many people, who were enjoying experiences that had been canceled the year prior because of the coronavirus pandemic. Hermiston hosted events, including Treats on Main & Beyond. Local businesses handed out candy to costumed trick-or-treaters. Also on Oct. 30, Stanfield’s Fall Festival & Haunted Library activities including games and “trunk-or-treat” provided much fun.

Chief on leave: The Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District placed its fire chief, Steve Potts, on paid leave on Oct. 19 amid an investigation into an “internal matter. Scott Stanton, chief of Umatilla Fire District No. 1, took charge of the department after Potts was put on leave.

November 2021

Church serves as a role model: On Nov. 7, Pastor Patty Nance conducted a service that was like the other ones had at Hermiston First United Methodist Church in the preceding months. On that day, as with every service during the pandemic, every congregation member was wearing a mask. During the entire service, the only time anyone removed a mask was when speaking at the front of the church, behind a lectern or at the altar. This came at a time mask-wearing had become politicized, and some television evangelists had decried both masks and vaccinations. Nance said, “Jesus would have masked.”

Veterans Day: Special events in Umatilla County were held Thursday, Nov. 11 to honor local veterans for Veterans Day. In Hermiston, around 140 veterans shared food and camaraderie during an annual breakfast at the Hermiston Community Center. Also, the Echo School District organized the Veterans Day Parade & Assembly in downtown Echo, beginning with a parade in the morning and an afternoon assembly honoring former servicemen and women.

Hermiston VFW goods sold: After years of troubles with the Hermiston branch of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the post became history. Oregon VFW officials on Nov. 20-21 held a final sale of whatever was left in the old VFW Hall, 45 W. Cherry Ave.

Thanksgiving meal served as drive-thru: Containers of roast turkey dinners with all the trimmings were distributed on Nov. 25. The Community Fellowship Dinner provided more than a thousand meals, given to people in their cars.

December 2021

A special Santa: John Perkins bravely continued his work as Santa Claus with an appearance Dec. 2 at Hermiston’s annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony. Perkins, 70, has stage four pancreatic cancer. The Umatilla resident drew high praise from children at the event, as well as event organizers.

Funland Playground defended: By early December, Hermiston’s Funland Playground had already been subject to minor vandalism and wear. Brandon Artz, the new parks and recreation director, wanted the public to feel safe that it would be protected. The playground is protected with cameras and alarms, he said. Also, it will soon get a new fence.

Bank robbery: Clifford Uptegrove, 58, of Yakima, was arrested on charges of first-degree robbery, first-degree theft and felony fleeing and unlawful use of a weapon. The robbery for which he was arrested occurred Dec. 17 just before 3 p.m. at Umpqua Bank, 450 N. First St., Hermiston.

Hermiston police took the lead in the chase, Edmiston said, and police video shows the suspect pulled over, and to prevent him from fleeing again, a Hermiston officer in a pickup parked against the driver’s door and pinned him in.

“They they took him out at gunpoint,” Edmiston said.