

County remain at extreme risk for virus

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Clatsop County will remain at extreme risk for the coronavirus through Feb. 11, with slight modifications to restrictions prohibiting indoor activity at restaurants, bars, gyms and entertainment venues effective last Friday.

The modifications announced by Gov. Kate Brown allow for a maximum of six people indoors at facilities over 500 square feet in counties classified at extreme risk. One customer and one employee are allowed in smaller indoor facilities. Indoor dining will still be prohibited.

"Most of the state remains in the extreme risk category," the governor said in a statement Tuesday. "This is an important reminder for all Oregonians to continue to do their part by abiding by the health and safety guidelines in place. Until vaccines are widely available with high participation rates, the surest way to lower our risk and open our businesses and communities is to continue practicing the measures we know are effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19 — wear your mask, keep physical distance from others, avoid gatherings, wash your hands often and stay home when you are sick."

"The science has shown us that outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities when it comes to the spread of COVID-19, which is why we have clearly delineated guidance between indoor and outdoor activities," Brown said. "We have seen over the last several weeks that Oregonians have largely complied with risk levels to the point that we have not seen a surge in hospitalizations that would have jeopardized hospital capacity. This means we are able to make these adjustments for extreme risk counties, which should assist both businesses and Oregonians as we continue to work to stop the spread of COVID-19."

Clatsop County, which has been at extreme risk since Jan. 15, is among 25 counties



R.J. Marx

Firefighter Katie Bulletset helps replenish the supply at a Seaside Fire Department mask giveaway last Thursday.

that will be at the highest risk level until Feb. 11, including Columbia County and the rest of the Portland metro area. Tillamook County will be moved from extreme risk to lower risk.

Counties with a population of 30,000 or more are evaluated for risk based on virus cases per 100,000 over two weeks and the test positivity rate for the same period.

Counties at extreme risk have a case rate exceeding 200 or more per 100,000 people, and may have a test positivity rate of 10% or higher.

As of last Saturday, Clatsop County had 203 cases per 100,000 over a two-week period. Test positivity was 5.9%.

Restrictions

While indoor dining is still prohibited at bars and restaurants in counties at extreme risk, the governor's modifications allow outdoor dining pods and an adjustment to tents. A maximum of six people are allowed to use lottery terminals indoors.

For gyms, indoor pools, museums, theaters and other entertainment venues 500 square feet or larger, a maximum of six customers are allowed. For smaller indoor

facilities less than 500 square feet, only one customer and one employee are allowed for services like personal training. Outdoor dining is allowed for up to 50 people with an 11 p.m. closing time. Tables must be limited to six people from two households.

Outdoor entertainment, recreation and fitness facilities can operate with a maximum capacity of 50 people.

Indoor and outdoor social gatherings will be limited to six people from two households.

Grocery stores, pharmacies, retail shops and shopping malls can operate at 50% of capacity.

Churches can stay open at 25% of capacity or 100 people indoors, whichever is smaller, and 150 people outdoors.

Businesses are required to have employees work remotely, if able, and close offices to the public.

Only outdoor visits will be allowed at long-term care facilities.

Over the past month, political and business leaders on the North Coast have called on the governor and the Oregon Health Authority to end prohibitions on indoor activity in counties at extreme risk.

Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones sent a letter to the governor on Dec. 31, endorsed by Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer and Seaside Mayor Jay Barber, arguing that the prohibitions are unnecessarily burdensome on businesses, and that capacity should be the same as counties at high risk — 25% or 50 people, whichever is smaller.

David Reid, the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, sent a similar letter to the governor and health authority in early January requesting evidence to support the need for the prohibitions.

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners also supported eliminating prohibitions in a letter to the governor on Jan. 13.

"The easing of the restrictions does not address the original question that mayors and businesses across the state have been asking: Where's the data to justify the tightest restrictions — even these new restrictions," Balensifer said.

"Officials have been and are asking — begging — for the cold, hard data behind the decisions being made about their futures, livelihoods and even their lives. Why does the state scorn officials for seeking information?"

The Oregon Mayors Association Board of Directors, which includes Balensifer, called for the extreme risk category to be eliminated altogether.

"While we fully acknowledge that COVID-19 is a threat and that preventative and protective measures are critical, we respectfully request increased communication and consideration, including data sharing," the board wrote in a letter to Brown last Tuesday. "We, as a body, request a release of data on the efficacy of the full closures, specifically of eating and drinking establishments, indoor recreation and fitness establishments as required in the 'extreme risk' category. To date, no such data or cogent rationale has been forthcoming."

Sandcastle contest goes virtual again

A June event altered by the pandemic

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

CANNON BEACH — A sandcastle competition that usually draws thousands of visitors to the North Coast will go virtual again this summer because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The event usually acts as a kickoff to the summer tourism season, but with vaccine distribution still unfolding slowly across Oregon and Clatsop County in the state's extreme risk category, there was some question about whether people would feel comfortable gathering in large groups even several months from now.

If there's suddenly a "miracle cure and COVID is no longer a concern," the competition may move ahead as normal.

But, said Jim Paino, the executive director for the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce, "We're trying to be realistic about that."

For now, organizers are planning an event that is not contained to one day or even one location and can safely include many people.

The 57th Annual Sandcastle Contest will begin June 5 and run through Sept. 6. Entrants can build their sandcastle anywhere: in Cannon Beach, at a local beach if they live elsewhere on the coast or even in a

sandbox in their backyard. People will submit photos of their creation for judging.

"Really the whole world is available to build your sandcastle," Paino said.

Contest organizers do not allow any kind of preservatives, adhesives or colors.

"We want the event to be really eco-friendly," Paino said. "When the tide comes in and washes them out, we're back to our normal beach."

Last year, organizers had to quickly change plans when it became clear — between early concerns about the coronavirus and then Gov. Kate Brown's restrictions on large gatherings and events — that even pushing the contest into September wouldn't work. The contest was held online, but organizers ended up only having a few months to figure out what they would do.

This year, they are hoping to get word out earlier and even find ways to hold some of the traditional events that were a part of the contest, such as live music.

The event usually draws around 50 sandcastle entries with teams and builders constructing often elaborate sculptures out of what is naturally available on the beach: mostly sand and water. Thousands of people typically descend on Cannon Beach for the single-day event.

This year, contest organizers still hope to award medals to winning sandcastle entries.

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Classrooms: 'My education is being jeopardized'

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week and as much face-to-face time with their teacher as possible," Pacific Ridge Elementary principal Juliann Wozniak said.

Second- and third-grade cohorts are set to begin the week of March 1 and fourth and fifth graders could return to in-person classes March 15. Students enrolled in comprehensive distance learning may continue to do so.

Sixth grade students could return to the middle school for in-person instruction on Feb. 22, with seventh and eighth graders set to begin March 1.

March 16, the first day of the third trimester, will be the first day of school for high school students.

In-person classes will require mandatory wearing of masks, a daily physical screening and completion of a self-screening form, strict seating charts and on-site virus testing if required by state metrics.

Gyms and indoor athletic facilities may be opened with some constraints, including masks and physical distancing, Seaside High School principal Jeff Roberts said. With enclosed space of 500 square feet, four separate groups may be on-site at any one time, limited to six student athletes and a coach for a 45-minute timeline for those sessions.

A screening process will be required.

"We have to be partners," Roberts said. "We cannot be irresponsible in our own behaviors to jeopardize what we are all trying desperately to work for. To prevent the spread of this virus, to not only get your kids but keep your kids in school safely has to be a community effort."

Starting Monday, the dis-

trict will offer any student interested in any activity to sign up with coaches to participate. First grade teacher Tracey Wright sought a delay of in-person classes until all staff have received access to the second vaccine, which, she said, is unlikely to occur until March 8.

John Edwards, whose wife is a teacher, expressed concern of the risk of COVID-19 and of discomfort among staff members. "My family has been impacted by this pretty severely, death, severe illness," he said. "I'm more worried about the general community, the relationship between the staff, the students and the school board."

An emotional plea from sophomore Abby Nofield urged a return to in-person classes.

"I'm 16," Nofield said. "I miss my teachers. I miss my friends. It is so hard to see community members who do not have the best interest in the students. I'm missing out on a high school education."

"I am missing out on the opportunity to stay in a classroom and learn," she continued. "This year has been so difficult for so many teachers, so many students. But my education is being jeopardized."

School board members voted unanimously to approve the district's reopening plans, both for in-person learning and athletic participation.

"I get that teachers are dedicated," board member Lori Lum Toyooka said. "I feel like we need to get a little outside of our comfort zone and get the kids back to school. It's been 11 months. The great thing is, kids are adaptable. It's time to get back to the classrooms as proposed."



R.J. Marx

Principal Juliann Wozniak, right, at the desk at Pacific Ridge Elementary School. The school will resume in-school instruction Feb. 16.

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