

Steelhead Shortage | Inside **Kangal guard dogs on duty in Wallowa, 2A**
in Outdoors | **LG School District budget looking good, 2A**

THE OBSERVER SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896 **Weekend Edition**

SATURDAY-MONDAY • November 21, 2020 • \$1.50 Good day to our valued subscriber Robert Kuchler of La Grande

COVID-19 by the numbers

Union County now among most infected Oregon counties per capita

By Kaleb Lay
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — While COVID-19 cases pummeled population centers and coastal areas in Oregon and across the U.S. earlier this year, Union County went largely unaffected. Daily case counts regularly reported one or zero new coronavirus infections, and double-digit days were almost unheard of locally, with the exception of one outbreak related to a religious gathering.

That is no longer the case. COVID-19 infection rates continue to skyrocket around the country. Oregon went from a previous record-high 571 daily cases to now reporting more than 1,000 daily cases multiple times in the past week. Friday the Oregon Health Authority reported yet another one-day record high for new and presumptive cases — 1,306.

And as went the state and the nation, so went Union County. The county had another 17 cases Friday, bringing the county's total to 655. Union County now ranks among the most-infected counties in the state.

Local spread

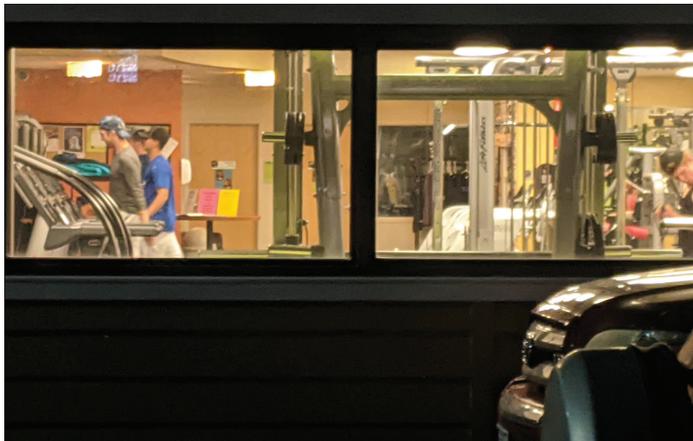
In the eight months between the beginning of March and the end of October, Union County's Center for Human Development, which serves as the public health department for the county, reported 493 total cases of COVID-19. Over the following 20 days, CHD reported an additional 162 cases.

Residents of Union County have seen a dramatic change in the month of November, during which cases have jumped more than 29%. Union is now the fifth-most-infected county in the state per capita. With a population of about 27,000, one out of about every 41 residents of the county has caught COVID-19.

Only Malheur, Umatilla, Morrow and Jefferson counties have higher rates of infection than Union. While population-dense counties such as Multnomah and Washington report a great many more total cases, coronavirus infections now are relatively more common within the rural population of Union County.

Multnomah County, for example, conducts an average of 26,630.3 tests per 100,000 residents, which is comparable to Union County's average. But

See, Numbers/Page 5A



Phil Wright/The Observer
Gym users forgo masks while working out Thursday night, Nov. 19, 2020, at Anytime Fitness, La Grande. The gym's owner is disregarding Gov. Kate Brown's orders to shut down for two weeks to help ebb the spike in the spread of COVID-19.

Flaunting the freeze

Anytime Fitness remains open, refuses to enforce mask mandate

By Kaleb Lay and Jade McDowell
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Anytime Fitness in La Grande is refusing to abide by state efforts to curtail the unprecedented spread of COVID-19, which claimed the life of its 800th Oregonian on Thursday, Nov. 19.

The fitness center has not closed its doors to comply with the "two-week freeze," which began Wednesday.

"If you're a member, you have access to the gym," Anytime Fitness manager Lynette Williamson said. "We are taking our chance. We're gonna remain open until something happens. We just decided we can't afford to do another shutdown and, you know, we can't have the members be set back in their workouts. We believe that we're essential and we have no contact tracing out of here, we have no cases coming out of our facility, so we're just going to remain open."

Williamson also said Anytime Fitness is not enforcing the wearing of masks, instead leaving the choice to its members. "No, we're not requiring that," she said. "We've got disinfectant, everybody's kind of distant. Everybody's socially distanced, yeah. But if you feel comfortable wearing one, that's cool too."

At least six males were using the gym for a span Thursday evening, none were wearing masks. They also were not staying at least 6 feet apart, the minimum



Phil Wright/The Observer
Vehicles fill the parking spaces Thursday night, Nov. 19, 2020, in front of Anytime Fitness, La Grande. The gym's owner is disregarding Gov. Kate Brown's orders to shut down for two weeks to help ebb the spike in the spread of COVID-19.

social distance the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health authorities recommend.

Cases continue to rise

Gov. Kate Brown on Tuesday signed Executive Order 20-65 to implement closures and restrictions on gatherings to slow the spread of COVID-19 in light of hospitals "sounding the alarm" they could be overwhelmed if cases continue on their upward trend.

"The cycle of this virus is such that

if we are seeing case rates topping 800-1,000 per day now, that means our hospitals are headed for very dark days ahead," the executive order states. "Actions taken now will help prevent lives from being lost — not just from COVID-19, but also from other diseases or accidents that lead people to need hospital-level care, which they would not be able to get if hospital beds and hospital staff are fully occupied with COVID-19 patients."

See, Freeze/Page 5A

Locals join in push for COVID-19 reform

Eastern Oregon officials seek to spur change of state's handling of pandemic

EO Media Group

Elected leaders from Eastern Oregon who signed a letter asking Gov. Kate Brown for changes to her approach to COVID-19 shutdowns said this was not in direct response to the current two-week "freeze." Instead, the letter was crafted over several weeks as an outline of what they hope to see happen as the state continues to address

fluctuations in COVID-19 numbers.

The letter, dated Wednesday, Nov. 18, and signed by 51 county commissioners and state legislators, asks Brown to allow restaurants and bars to stay open throughout the pandemic, to fully reopen schools, to reopen state agencies to the public and to allow religious leaders to use their best judgment in operating places of worship. It also urges her to allow local elected officials to work with county health departments to come up with their own versions of Phase 1 and Phase 2 for COVID-19 regulations.

"A one-size-fits-all approach

to shutting down the state was logical and appropriate in March when the onset of this pandemic was new and unknown," the letter states. "Over time, we have learned, adapted, adjusted and improved. Keeping counties and regions in a Phase II for an indefinite period of time is a one-size-fits-all approach that does not work any longer."

Counties seek autonomy

State Sen. Lynn Findley, a Republican from Vale, said he and other legislators had been working on drafts of the letter for about three weeks before sending it to the governor's office. The COVID-19 land-

scape in Oregon looks different now than when discussion of the letter began. On Nov. 1, Oregon Health Authority reported 524 new cases of COVID-19. Since then the state has repeatedly set new records for daily case counts, and on Friday, Nov. 20, reported 1,306 new cases.

Findley, whose district includes portions of 11 counties, said his main goal is to promote a "dialogue" between the governor, other state officials and legislators and local officials in rural counties. He said he wants the state to give more autonomy to city and county

See, Change/Page 3A

INDEX

Classified... 2B Horoscope... 3B Opinion... 4A
 Comics... 5B Letters... 4A Outdoors... 1B
 Crossword... 2B Lottery... 2A Sudoku... 5B
 Dear Abby... 6B Obituaries... 3A Weather... 6B

WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 27 low Partly cloudy
 Sunday 41/29 High clouds

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 3 sections, 22 pages
 La Grande, Oregon
 Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page 4A.



THURSDAY OPERATION SANTA

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