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Methow Valley News

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Photo courtesy of Methow Valley School District
Fourth-grade teacher Don Haley worked with students in class. The Methow Valley Schools have been providing in-person instruction since September.

Venable rips state's vaccination plans

MVSD leader says
'failure' puts staff at risk

BY MARCY STAMPER

Methow Valley School District Supt. Tom Venable has blasted the governor and state health officials for not immediately providing COVID vaccines for teachers and other school staff who've been "bravely providing

'in-person' instruction" to students since September.

In two starkly worded letters sent just two days apart last week, Venable accused Gov. Jay Inslee of ignoring risks to the district's staff, who were among the first in the state to return to the classroom.

"As a Superintendent, one of nearly a dozen others that have worked closely with their students, staff, parents and community to

safely reopen their schools, taking full responsibility for the lives of students, educators, their families, and our rural communities, I ask that you 'support' us in our effort to deliver on the expectation you've established," Venable wrote to Gov. Jay Inslee.

Assailing the "Get Ready" plan released by the state at the end of

See **SCHOOL**, A3

Watershed subdivision moratorium expanded after Ecology ruling

Exception policy
deemed unlawful

BY MARCY STAMPER

The Okanogan County commissioners have expanded the ban on subdivisions in the Methow watershed, eliminating an exception that had allowed people to create a new building lot from a parcel with an existing house on it.

The commissioners unanimously adopted the ordinance on Jan. 26.

The commissioners eliminated the exception after receiving a legal opinion in January on water law and the Methow Rule, which allocates a limited amount of water for specific uses. Last year, the county asked the state Department of Ecology for its interpretation of rules governing wells for what's called single-domestic use, which allows withdrawal of 5,000 gallons of water for a house, livestock and a half-acre garden.

The opinion by state Assistant Attorney General Alan Reichman, who handles matters for Ecology, found that the county's policy allowing division of a parcel of land with one existing home to construct an additional home is not lawful because it creates group-domestic use of water for two homes, not single-domestic use.

The commissioners accept that dividing an undeveloped lot to create two lots, each with its own well, would be a group water use, because water had never been withdrawn in the first place, Okanogan

County Commissioner Andy Hover said.

But they don't understand how Ecology and the assistant attorney general concluded that an "existing withdrawal is suddenly split when the land is subdivided," Hover said. A new lot starts from scratch, he said.

"One could argue that this provision of the ordinance does not allow water use that would conflict with the [Methow] Rule because the approval of a subdivision would only result in the construction of a single additional home that would have its own well (in addition to the existing home with its own well)," Reichman said. "However, this argument is flawed because approval of the subdivision would actually result in group domestic use."

The revised ordinance retains some exceptions. Land divisions that create parcels of at least 20 acres are permitted, because they're exempt from the state's subdivision code. For those lots, the determination of water availability is made when someone applies for a building permit, Hover said.

People can still divide land for agriculture or a non-residential use. And property that draws from the Columbia River, not the Methow River, is also exempt from the moratorium.

The ordinance commits the county to study water availability and the provisions of the Methow Rule. They'll also explore water mitigations that could enable people to build.

See **AG**, A2

COLD COMFORT



Photo by Marcy Stamper
Industrious visitors to the Grizzly Hut in the Rendezvous found a cool way to add some extra space.

State court backs Yakama Nation's comp plan appeal

Ruling vacates 2017
agreement with
Okanogan County

BY MARCY STAMPER

The Yakama Nation had every right to hold Okanogan County to a 2017 agreement negotiated in court over revisions to the county's comp plan and zoning code—but

the county missed every deadline for almost two years, the Washington Court of Appeals Division III ruled Feb. 2.

Because the county failed to meet any terms of a March 2017 agreement, the Court of Appeals sent the case back to Okanogan County Superior Court to vacate the agreement dismissing the Yakama Nation's original 2016 lawsuit over

See **APPEAL**, A2

'An opportunity we just could not pass up'

Local teachers will
spend two years at
Norway school

BY NATALIE JOHNSON

For Methow Valley School District teachers Tyler Slostad and Hana Baker, the Methow Valley has been a great place to put down roots, start a family and grow their careers as teachers.

But when a chance to fulfill a life-long dream comes along, you can't let it go. They'll spend the next two school years teaching at an international school near Trondheim, Norway, before coming back to the valley.

"I have a lot of family there. We have relatives near Oslo and a little further north," Slostad said. "It'll be great to run into them again."

Baker and Slostad will bring their children Tova and Haakon, in fourth and first grade, respectively, with them. The children will fit right in, their parents noted, since their first names are Norwegian. The kids are more excited than nervous, Baker said.

"The whole idea of them seeing how small the world is. ... I think that's just a really important part of our philosophy of life," Slostad said. "There's so much of a wonderful world to see."

Dream realized

Slostad and Baker got married in 2003 and have taught at the Methow Valley School District since 2007.



Photo courtesy of Slostad/Baker family
Hana Baker and Tyler Slostad, and their children Tova and Haakon, will travel to Norway starting next school year. Baker and Slostad will teach at an international school near Trondheim.

Baker teaches second grade and Slostad teaches sixth.

Slostad briefly taught in Guatemala before the couple moved to the Methow, and they've long wanted to teach at an international school.

"It was something we always wanted to do," Baker said. "We were waiting for our kids to be a good age to do it. ... We're super excited. It's something we wanted to do with them."

They started looking for positions

at international schools just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Last spring when the whole country shut down, we were interviewing with this school in Norway ... but we basically withdrew our applications," Slostad said. "We were worried we had kind of burnt that bridge with this school."

But in December, the school contacted them again and asked if

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ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Feb 11	Feb 12	Feb 13	Feb 14	Feb 15	Feb 16
21°	22°	23°	26°	35°	32°
8°	8°	14°	22°	27°	17°
Afternoon Snow	Morning Snow	Cold	Snow & Ice	Cloudy	Snow Showers

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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NORWAY

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they'd be able to teach from the 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 school years.

"It's an opportunity we just could not pass up. (I'm) Looking forward to taking a big bite out of life and growing a lot and being able to come back to our friends and this amazing valley we have lived in for the last 12 or 13 years now," Slostad said. "(There are) a lot of kids and a lot of families we're going to miss and we hope for a lot of visitors."

The Fagerhaug International School teaches about a 50/50 mix of local Norwegian students and international students and has teachers from all over the world. Baker and Slostad will teach the same grades they do now.

"The teacher that's leaving from the second grade position Hana is taking is actually from South Africa," Slostad said.

The teachers will finish this school year, then pack up their belongings, rent their house out, and head to Norway.

Commitment and support

The international school requires a two-year contract from its incoming teachers.

Slostad and Baker are able to commit to making the trip, then coming home, partly because of a supportive environment at the Methow Valley School District.

The district is in its fourth year as an authorized International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program, for kindergarten through sixth grade, and a Middle Years Program, for

grades seven through 10.

"What we have not wanted is to find ourselves limited by our geographic location," Supt. Tom Venable said.

The program makes the district attractive for teachers interested in international opportunities. One position recently attracted 50 applicants, he said.

The Fagerhaug International School is also an International Baccalaureate school.

"That network supports our ability to design and implement highly engaging units of study that cultivate the development of students that can think critically, with an open mind, take on the perspective of others and engage with a world that's broader with the Methow Valley," Venable said.

As part of that, The district allows teachers to take up to a two-year leave of absence to teach abroad.

"You're guaranteed a position back with the district," Baker said. "We feel so, so lucky to be in a district that supports that."

Slostad and Baker aren't the first to take advantage of the program. Kelly Wiest, a first-grade teacher and now the district's coordinator for its International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program, traveled to India to teach several years ago.

"We're super appreciative of the board and the administration for providing this opportunity for teachers," Baker said. "... We're excited to go and have this adventure and experience this different culture with our family and then come back to this community we love."

SCHOOL

From Page A1

January, which creates a system for vaccinating teachers in the Puget Sound area and Spokane—where almost all education is still being conducted remotely—Venable asked Inslee to allow all K-12 educators already providing in-person instruction to be vaccinated right away. Venable signed his second letter saying, "Desperately Seeking Your Leadership."

He followed up with a third letter this week in Q&A format, providing more information for Inslee about rates of in-person learning in Washington and vaccine prioritization for educators in other states.

State Sen. Brad Hawkins (R-12th Dist.) also wrote twice to Inslee to demand vaccines for educators. Believing he'd successfully made his case when the state put school employees in Phase B2, Hawkins declared Statewide School Employee Vaccination Day on Feb. 1. But on further scrutiny, the state's vaccine graphic shifted the timeline for that phase from February to spring/summer, Hawkins said last week by email.

The letter Hawkins and others in the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee sent to Inslee in January was based on the existing graphic, which started Phase B2 in February. On Jan. 18, when school employees were made eligible in B2, Hawkins thought their vaccinations were right around the corner, he said last week.

"The current graphic, showing 'Spring/Summer' is obviously vague and has resulted in school employees being pushed out. I think Governor Inslee and the DOH [Washington Department of Health] pulled an 'executive branch switcheroo' with the timeline and it's very frustrating," Hawkins said last week by email.

The terminology for the phases has also changed. What used to be called Phase B2 is now 1B, Tier 2, according to DOH's emergency communications consultant, Franji Mayes. The timeline in DOH's new graphic shifts Phase 1B, Tier 2 to spring/summer, instead of February. Phase 1A has two tiers, and Phase 1B has 4 tiers, she said.

The new timeline means that some teachers won't be eligible until after the school year is over, Venable said. "That's just

unacceptable," he said.

Tracking the shots

School employees will be eligible for vaccines once at least 50% of all Washingtonians who are currently eligible (health care workers, residents of long-term care facilities, people over 65) have been vaccinated, said Katy Payne, Communications Director for the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

DOH is not currently tracking the percentage of eligible people who've received the vaccine. As of Feb. 1, a total of 8.33% people in the state had received their first dose, according to DOH. In Okanogan County, almost 14% of the total population had been vaccinated as of Feb. 1, according to Mid-Valley Hospital in Omak.

The Washington Post has been tracking vaccine administration using data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the states. As of Feb. 7, the newspaper said Washington had vaccinated 32.4% of its prioritized population. The state currently has enough vaccine doses to cover just 39.6% of the prioritized population, according to their data.

Venable pointed to other states, including Oregon and California, that prioritized educators as front-line workers. In Oregon, educators are eligible for a vaccine before people who are age 80 and older.

Some local educators and child care providers have qualified for vaccines. At Little Star Montessori School in Winthrop, staff who screen students with COVID symptoms or who work in learning environments where student masking is not an option were able to get vaccinated, Executive Director Dani Reynaud said. That guideline is now on hold while the clinics await more vaccine doses and other communities catch up, she said. Little Star is still waiting to learn when the rest of its teachers and child care providers become eligible.

The Washington Education Association (WEA), the union that represents educators, also wrote to Inslee and the state secretary of health in January to demand that all educators—those currently in schools and those yet to return to in-person settings—have access to the vaccine, regardless of age.

In a follow-up letter, WEA said the state shouldn't leave it to school districts to ensure workplace safety, particularly without adequate testing and

with highly contagious COVID variants spreading.

The fact that 200,000 students across the state have been doing in-person learning with "minimal in-school transmission" shows that "onsite instruction can be done with reasonable safety," Inslee wrote in response to WEA.

Only one out of six Washington students (about 200,000 in all) is attending school in person, Venable said. In the Methow, the vast majority of students—80% of elementary students and 95% of high school students, about 610 in all—opted for the hybrid model, with two days of in-person instruction and three of remote education.

Some staff members, depending on their level of risk, are filling positions that don't require in-person contact, Venable said.

The Methow Valley took the first step but, as fall progressed, all school districts in Okanogan County resumed in-person education for all grades, Venable said. School superintendents in Pateros, Brewster and Okanogan schools have also urged Inslee to expedite vaccines.

'Get Ready' plan

Venable and other local educators were flabbergasted by the "Get Ready" vaccination plan released at the end of January by state Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal in conjunction with Kaiser Permanente, a health insurer and medical provider. The plan starts with school districts along the I-5 corridor—such as Seattle and Tacoma—and in Spokane, where most schools haven't reopened.

Those areas were selected based on where Kaiser Permanente has staff, supplies and facilities, and they're working with the company to arrange pop-up sites in rural areas and to find other providers, OSPI's Payne said. School districts have also been encouraged to make their own arrangements with local providers—but only for employees who are already eligible, Payne said.

In its announcement of the plan, OSPI said it would "focus on supporting a safe return to school for communities across the state," without addressing districts that have already returned to the classroom.

Areas covered by the plan encompass more than 80% of school employees. "OSPI and DOH are additionally planning further efforts to define potential sites more proximate to Central Washington school employees," OSPI said.

"Keeping our educators and school staff safe is very important to me," Inslee said about the Get Ready plan. "This announcement does not allow educators to move ahead in the current prioritization; it means when it is their turn, we are ready to move ahead."

While Methow Valley school staff are dedicated and know what they're doing is critical, the state's approach makes them feel "disheartened, abandoned and invisible, like they've been ignored," Venable said. In-person instruction is vital not only for academics, but also for students' social and emotional development and support, he said.

Statewide, there are about 20,000 educators providing in-person instruction, 1,500 of them in Okanogan County. The entire statewide work force in education is about 143,000, Venable said.

If the state doesn't change the priorities for all educators, Venable would like more discretion given to local public health agencies to devise strategies for their own communities. "Their hands are tied," with strict guidelines that threaten punitive action for vaccinating ineligible individuals, Venable said.

"All vaccine providers are balancing three competing directives: vaccinate within the phase, vaccinate as quickly as you can, and don't waste any doses," North Valley Hospital CEO John McReynolds said. At the end of each day, the hospital's clinic considers how to use the extra doses that would be wasted if not used that evening.

North Valley has tried to focus on the group that's next in line but, early on, eligibility guidelines weren't always clear. If they do have leftover doses, North Valley has been calling local teachers who can get to the facility within a few minutes, McReynolds said. "But that is a difficult situation that each provider needs to address," he said.

Neither Venable nor Hawkins was optimistic they'd hear from the governor. "I'm doubtful we'll get a response. There is no evidence he's listening to WEA or others," Venable said. Neither had received a response as of press time.

Venable made a dire prediction in his letter to Inslee. "I fret this period of time may otherwise serve as a case study to be examined for years to come, highlighting the tragic failure of our current leadership ... an unfortunate legacy that could have been avoided."

FEATHERED ANGLER



Photo courtesy of Alan Sodell

A bald eagle recently tried out its ice fishing technique, hoping for a fish lunch.

ski kind.

THE BACKCOUNTRY RESPONSIBILITY CODE

In skiing we are our best selves. And by skiing we mean sliding over snow on whatever you've got – be it a lunch tray, a splitboard, an inflatable dragon, skinny skis or a 1000cc snow pony. Together we can keep the backcountry open, accessible, inclusive, and protected.

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ski inclusive

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ski aware

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ski respectful

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