

Water work
Help clean up the Methow River this weekend
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No drilling
Winthrop moves to ban new wells in town
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Methow Valley News

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County's health officials are targets of threats, suspicion

COVID-related efforts draw personal attacks

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones has been intimidated and received death threats for doing her job to keep people healthy and prevent COVID-19 from spreading throughout the county.

In her 17 years at the agency,

Jones had never received scrutiny or backlash for carrying out her regular duties — investigating outbreaks of contagious and food-borne illnesses; tracking immunization rates; and overseeing a small department that monitors the safety of restaurants, drinking water, and septic systems.

But Jones, like public health professionals across the United States, is now the recipient of unwanted attention for her efforts to control COVID — and an unlikely minor media star.

Jones has been profiled on National Public Radio, in the Washington Post and — just last week — she appeared on NBC's TODAY show with three other public health directors from around the country.

Talking with NBC News Correspondent Kate Snow, the four of them — all women — described the unprecedented threats they've received during the course of the coronavirus pandemic.

See **THREATS**, A2



Screen shot by Marcy Stamper

Lauri Jones, Okanogan County health director, has been threatened and harassed while working to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

FRIENDLY MESSAGE



Photo by Don Nelson

The Town of Winthrop installed new greeting signs on Highway 20 last week, urging visitors to wear protective masks to help combat the coronavirus. The successive signs are modeled after the Burma-Shave advertising campaign, and have the same message on each side.

Methow Valley School District will provide several education options

District cites valley's low COVID rate

BY MARCY STAMPER

The Methow Valley School District still plans to offer a choice of two days of in-person instruction and three of online learning — or 100% remote learning — this fall, even in light of new guidelines issued by Gov. Jay Inslee last week.

Although the governor suggested remote learning for counties at high risk because of their rate of new COVID infections (which includes Okanogan), disease rates in the Methow Valley have remained low and are consistent with what the school district's re-opening work group predicted, the district said in an update to families last Wednesday (Aug. 5).

"Our local public health officials have stated that based upon the numbers, the Methow Valley, unlike other parts of the county, appears

to be doing a good job of adhering to the guidelines and mandates associated with social distancing, facial coverings, proper hygiene, and cohorting/bubbling," the district said.

As long as the Methow maintains its consistently low number of COVID cases, "it seems reasonable that the MVSD [Methow Valley School District] is in a position to open its doors for some in-person instruction (Hybrid Model) in the fall," the district said. A full re-opening of schools is not possible because it is not practical to maintain 6 feet of distance between students, teachers and other staff.

Local and state officials are taking into account the overall health — physical, social and emotional — of students and their families. "We know the uncertainty surrounding school reopening is a source of extraordinary anxiety for parents and educators — anxiety not just about whether it's safe to go back to school in person, but also about the impacts to

children if they don't return to the classroom," Inslee said.

The Methow Valley schools are offering three options:

- Option A: A K-12 hybrid model with two days of small-group, in-person instruction and three days of teacher-directed remote learning. There will be two groups for in-person instruction, one on Monday and Tuesday and the other on Thursday and Friday.

Students in grades seven to 12 will have four classes each semester, giving them the full year's instruction for each subject in one semester. Students at the Independent Learning Center will have an individualized program that incorporates internships.

- Option B: A 100% remote-learning program with instruction from district teachers.

- Option C: For kindergarten through eighth grade only, families can choose home-schooling supported by the district's parent-partnership program (REACH).

See **SCHOOL**, A3

Primary sets scene for November

Haven leads Hover, Moore trails Goehner

BY DON NELSON

The Aug. 4 primary election did not decide any local races, but did produce some interesting scenarios for those contests in the November general election.

In Okanogan County, about 3,000 ballots remained to be counted as of Monday (Aug. 10), according to the county auditor's office, with the next report expected on Wednesday (Aug. 12). Here's an overview based on the latest reported results:

- Challenger Katie Haven, a Democrat, maintained a very slim lead — just 22 votes — over incumbent Andy Hover, a Republican, in the race for the District 2 seat on the Okanogan County Board of Commissioners. Haven

was drawing 50.3% of the vote (1,898), to Hover's 48.1% (1,876). Both are Methow Valley residents.

- Incumbent Chris Branch was outpolling challenger Shauna Beeman in the race for the District 1 seat on the Okanogan County Board of Commissioners. Branch, who does not declare a party affiliation, drew 56% (1,393) to Republican Beeman's 43.3% (1,094).

In the primary, only residents of District 2 (which includes the Methow Valley) voted for either Hover or Haven, while only residents of District 1 voted for either Branch or Beeman. All of the candidates advance to the November general election, where they will compete for countywide votes to win their respective positions.

- First-term incumbent 12th Legislative District Rep. Keith Goehner (R-Dryden) had a substantial districtwide

lead over Adrienne Moore, a Winthrop resident who is running as a Democrat, for the Position 1 seat. Goehner was drawing 65% of the votes (27,361) in District 12, which includes Okanogan, Grant, Chelan and Douglas counties, while Moore was drawing 35% (14,759). However, the race was much closer in Okanogan County, where Goehner tallied 52% (2,440) to Moore's 48% (2,251) in early returns. Both candidates will advance to the November general election.

- Only incumbent Mike Steele, a Republican, filed for the 12th Legislative District Position 2 seat. Incumbent District 12 Sen. Brad Hawkins was also unchallenged.

- In the crowded 4th U.S. Congressional District race, incumbent Dan Newhouse, a Republican, was polling 57.7% (83,785) against five

See **PRIMARY**, A2

Ducks, dinners and deluxe rides

Don't give up on summer just yet

BY DON NELSON

It may seem, in this listless summer of COVID-19, like everything has been canceled.

Not quite, or at least not entirely. Winthrop Kiwanis, Classroom in Bloom and the Winthrop Chamber of Commerce all are sponsoring events that you can ink into your appointment calendars.

Still afloat

More than 2,000 little plastic ducks will again take a deep dive off the Chewuch River bridge in Winthrop for the annual Winthrop Kiwanis Duck Race on Labor Day (Monday, Sept. 7). Buckets full of dapper ducks, each sporting a sailor cap and scarf, will be emptied off the bridge at noon.

The annual spectacle — a



File photo by Don Nelson

The Kiwanis Duck Race will take place as scheduled on Labor day

silent, motley flotilla of yellow ducks bobbing past the confluence to the Methow River bridge finish line — is an annual fundraiser for the service organization. The Duck Race is especially important this year because two other Kiwanis fundraising events — Bite of the Methow and food sales during Winthrop '49er Days — were canceled.

Each duck is painted with a number associated with an entry ticket. If your duck wins — that is, somehow manages to catch the

right currents and ripples — your \$3 ticket pays off with a \$400 prize. The second-place duck earns \$200, the third-place duck is worth \$100, and fourth and fifth places are good for \$50 each.

At the finish line, a crew of duck wranglers wade into the Methow River to capture the plucky floaters before they can head for Twisp, Pateros or parts beyond.

Tickets can be purchased at The Tenderfoot in Winthrop,

See **EVENTS**, A3

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Aug 13	Aug 14	Aug 15	Aug 16	Aug 17	Aug 18
83°	87°	91°	93°	98°	90°
49°	54°	56°	61°	63°	51°
Sunny	Partly Sunny	Partly Sunny	Sunny	Sun and some shine	Sunny with clouds

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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THREATS

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The coronavirus — and the backlash against public health workers — is widespread. At least 30 public health professionals across the country have resigned, retired or were fired “amid unprecedented political and personal pressure,” Snow said.

Three of them, including Jones, recounted personal threats. “That fear — I’ve never felt that before. A person posted something to the effect of ‘F--- her, F--- them; let’s start shooting,’” Jones said. She has had to install surveillance equipment at her home because of the malicious attacks.

At meetings with the county commissioners, Jones has regularly said that there’s nothing political about the measures public health is using to control the virus and track potential exposures. Still, with the fear of disease, economic catastrophe, and the increasingly polarized atmosphere across the country, some people see common public health techniques as politically motivated.

The TODAY show guests all agreed that women in public health have consistently been treated differently from their male counterparts, with attacks that are often highly personal.

The situation — and loss of dedicated public servants with decades of experience — increases risks to the entire community, Snow said. “Keep in mind the stakes of losing so many seasoned professionals. These are the people we rely on to protect all of us from all kinds of disease outbreaks, from tuberculosis to measles to salmonella, E. coli,” she said. “They’re the peo-

ple we’re going to be counting on soon to coordinate immunizations for COVID-19,” Snow said, urging community members to speak out to defend public health workers and the science behind their work.

The Aug. 5 episode of the TODAY show can be watched at <https://www.today.com/video/public-health-officials-are-leaving-their-jobs-amid-death-threats-political-fights-89569349607>.

Coroner questioned

Jones isn’t the only county official whose motives have been questioned and disparaged. Okanogan County Coroner Dave Rodriguez, who has confirmed most of the nine COVID-19 deaths in the county, said last month that he’s heard repeatedly from people who suspected he was fraudulently attributing the cause of death to COVID to get money for his department.

“People think the health department and I are in cahoots,” he said. The only money the coroner receives in connection with investigations is to reimburse lab costs, he said. The coroner is an elected official, and doesn’t answer to the county commissioners, the governor, or federal health agencies, Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said he’s spent a lot of time explaining the strict, scientific process and procedures he follows in determining a cause of death. He gathers information at the scene, obtains a medical history, and draws blood for a toxicology analysis. When someone dies after symptoms consistent with COVID, Rodriguez does a post-mortem nasal swab and sends it to two different labs for testing.

In evaluating the cause of death when someone is COVID-positive, Rodriguez

has three options. If the person dies from another cause, such as a car accident, he doesn’t list COVID. If the individual had a diagnosed condition for years, even if COVID contributed to the death, Rodriguez doesn’t attribute the death to COVID. In cases where someone was healthy, with no obvious comorbidities, the cause of death is clearly COVID, he said.

Taking the time to explain his investigations has paid off. Rodriguez heard from one person who helps administrate the Reopen Okanogan County Facebook page, where some people had voiced suspicions about his motives. After they talked, Rodriguez said the administrator wrote a detailed account on the page about their conversation, where she explained the coroner’s responsibilities and duties in investigating a death, and dispelled doubts about his professionalism.

“I have no agenda to perpetuate this situation. I have no incentive to manipulate death certificates,” Rodriguez said. “I would be a lot happier — like everyone else — if this would all go away.”

Mistrust of his motives and scrupulousness has materialized during the COVID pandemic, with people uniting around the notion that their freedoms are being taken away, Rodriguez said.

“People are in denial that it can happen,” Rodriguez said. “People are trying to rationalize. ‘It can’t happen to me because’ — fill in the blank — ‘I’m not that particular nationality; I don’t live in that town; I’m not obese,’” he said. Rodriguez is concerned that this mindset leads people to make risky decisions based on inaccurate assumptions.

“I think it makes people feel more comfortable to think the county is immune from COVID deaths,” Rodriguez said.

County commissioners craft COVID-19 proclamation

‘Desperate appeal’ for cautionary actions

BY MARCY STAMPER

The Okanogan County commissioners responded promptly to impassioned pleas for a statement from all of them to urge residents to act responsibly to control the spread of COVID-19 as the county’s cases increased six-fold in the past month.

The day after Okanogan County Community Health

Director Lauri Jones begged the board to make a strong, unified statement, the commissioners approved a proclamation written by Commissioner Chris Branch.

The commissioners incorporated a suggestion from a community member to add a statement saying that the efforts of businesses and the public show we are “Okanogan Strong!” Each commissioner added a signed personal statement to the proclamation.

The individual statements highlighted specific concerns. Board Chair DeTro, who has consistently stated his objection

to government mandates, particularly with regard to masks, urged people to take precautions and use curbside pick-up if they are not able to wear a mask for health reasons.

Vice-Chair Branch wrote that he relies on state and local health officials, and their expertise in limiting the spread of disease, as the basis for his decisions. Hover reminded constituents that the effort to control the virus is not a political issue, but one that’s critical to everyone’s health and safety, and to the health of the regional economy.

County commissioners’ proclamation

Aug. 5, 2020

WHEREAS, Okanogan County continues to experience a significant surge in coronavirus cases over the past few weeks, and

WHEREAS, the Board of Okanogan County Commissioners (BOCC) fear that the economy and the health and well being of the people of Okanogan County are severely compromised by our lack of urgency in controlling the virus; and

WHEREAS, the BOCC recognizes that it is the commitment of the people of Okanogan County at a “grass root” level that will be most effective in succeeding at eliminating the COVID-19 virus; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Okanogan County Commissioners (BOCC) agree that their collective leadership is important in compelling the community to act.

NOW, THEREFORE, THE OKANOGAN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS HEREBY PROCLAIM AS FOLLOWS:

1) We are extremely grateful to the businesses, public, health care organizations, County departments, and agencies for the efforts and sacrifices made to date, we are Okanogan Strong! and

2) We issue a desperate appeal to the Okanogan County community at large to implement the cautionary measures suggested by Okanogan County health officials, and

3) In signing this proclamation, each of us commit to setting an example to the public in implementing the measures recommended by our Okanogan County health officials, and

4) This proclamation shall be in effect until a photograph of the all three commissioners together with their smiling faces, without masks, is released to the press.

DATED at Okanogan, Washington this 5th day of August 2020.

Board of County Commissioners
Okanogan, Washington

Chairman Jim DeTro

“I don’t like being mandated by government; however, I do take precautionary measures, and if you are mask compromised, use curbside services.”

Signed: Jim DeTro

Vice-Chairman Chris Branch

This is my first pandemic but I know that it is as real as the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 and my most reliable decision-making information comes from state and local health officials whose careers are all about limiting the spread and impacts of disease.”

Signed: Chris Branch

Member, Andy Hover

“The effort to control the virus is clearly not a political issue. It is critical to the health and safety of our families, our friends, our neighbors, and the economic health of our entire region.”

Signed: Andy Hover, approved remotely

COVID cases mount in Okanogan County, but growth rate declines

BY MARCY STAMPER

Although the rate of new COVID infections has been slowing in eastern Washington, including in Okanogan County, “encouraging declines in Yakima, Benton and Franklin counties are offset by rises in Okanogan, Chelan and Douglas counties,” the Washington Department of Health (DOH) said in its weekly report for Aug. 7.

Still, new cases in Okanogan County are rising more slowly, with confirmed infections dropping to 206 per 100,000 for the week of July 29 to Aug. 4, from a high of 592 just two weeks earlier, according to DOH.

The county had a cumulative total of 877 confirmed cases as of Sunday (Aug. 9), more than 100 of those added in the previous week. Cases follow a stark pattern, with 52 of the new cases recorded in Brewster, which has 59% of the county’s total. Omak recorded 21 new cases in the past week, bringing the total there to 134.

The cases in Brewster are

a result of community spread, Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones said at the county’s Board of Health meeting on Tuesday (Aug. 11). Because housing options are so limited, many people live 10 to a residence and work at businesses around the county. They have no place to isolate at home if they are sick or exposed to COVID, she said.

COVID expenses

Dealing with the COVID pandemic has been very costly, with Public Health staff working ’round the clock for months and the need for additional computers and cell phones for data management and contact tracing, Jones said.

The Board of Health approved using CARES Act money to pay overtime for Jones, a Public Health nurse, and the county’s health officer, all of whom accrued months of overtime.

All three county commissioners are members of the Board of Health. County Commis-

sioner Jim DeTro was the only Board of Health member to vote against using the money for overtime. DeTro pointed to the extra hours regularly worked by other county employees, including the treasurer at tax time and the emergency manager, and to his own extra hours during wildfires in 2014 and ’15, “which could have paid for my whole third term,” he said.

While DeTro said he recognized their hard work, these county employees didn’t miss a paycheck. He compared them to businesspeople in the county who were forced to shut down under “heavy-handed rules” during the pandemic, who now face bankruptcy and have “had their lives ruined.”

The commissioners have allotted one-fourth of their CARES Act money, or \$575,000, to Public Health, which can be used for wages and other direct COVID expenses, County Commissioner Andy Hover said.

PRIMARY

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other candidates. In second place was Douglas E. McKinley of Richland (a Democrat), who drew 26.5% (38,543), well ahead of any other candidate. In Okanogan County, McKinley drew 32% (3,182)

of the vote compared to Newhouse’s 56.7% (5,650). The top two finishers advance to the general election.

The governor’s race is headed for a west side-east side showdown in November. Incumbent Jay Inslee, a Democrat, handily won first place in the 36-candidate field with about 50.3% of the vote

(1,075,056). In second place was Republican Loren Culp, the police chief in Republic, with about 17.3% (370,642) of the vote. In Okanogan County, Culp drew 47% (4,821) to Inslee’s 33% (3,409). Culp was the leader in 11 of Washington’s 39 counties, including all those in north central Washington.

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