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# Methow Valley News

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## Hiring woes hit Methow Valley marketplace hard

**Housing remains a barrier for workers**

BY MARCY STAMPER

Local restaurants and retail shops are reducing hours and even closing completely on some days. Employers are offering signing and retention bonuses of up to \$1,000. Hotel rooms are blocked off because there's no one to clean them.

Businesses throughout the valley — in particular, those that cater to tourists — are struggling to find enough employees to staff the busy summer season.

"The mood felt dire" at a Winthrop Chamber of Commerce meeting last week, Winthrop Marketing Director Anne Young said. "Businesses were really struggling, across the board."

The reasons are varied, but most business owners point to a lack of housing as the culprit. Others say the extra unemployment benefits to help people

weather the COVID pandemic are too tempting.

"We're just treading water," said Jacob Young, co-owner and general manager of the Old Schoolhouse Brewery. In five years with the business, Young has never had so much trouble finding staff. A \$200 bonus doesn't seem to have mattered. "I haven't felt as desperate, ever," he said.

Some places have reduced their hours, but other restaurants in Winthrop can't even open until they find enough workers. Some have posted signs explaining they're closed because of "staffing challenges."

Tiffany Yates, who bought the Kind Grinds coffee shop in Winthrop last year, is biding her time for another couple of weeks, until an employee from last summer is out of school. Being closed for extra days is preferable to taking the time to train new staff, Yates said.

"If we can't find more warm bodies, Trails' End [Bookstore]

will have to close one day a week," which they've never done, said co-owner Abilene Hagee. The store may not be able to stay open in the evenings this summer, she said.

"It's a difficult decision, but we need our staff to be happy and healthy," Hagee said. Just two employees kept the bookstore going throughout the stresses of the pandemic. "We need to give them some breathing room," she said.

A special visa program that provides cultural and work experiences for foreign workers has been drastically scaled back this year, after being shut down last year because of COVID. Employers must provide housing, but some — like Sheri's Sweet Shoppe — rely on the workers.

This year, Sheri's hired six young people, but only two — from Thailand — have received their visas. There's such a backlog that Sheri's owner Kyle Johnston doesn't expect



Photo by Marcy Stamper

"We're hiring" signs are a familiar sight at Methow Valley businesses, many of which are struggling to find enough workers for the summer months.

the others will be approved this summer.

Not every place is facing the same hurdles. Joshua Buehler, owner of the AbbyCreek Inn in Winthrop and the Idle-A-While in Twisp, said almost all their staff from last year has returned. Many come back year after year,

collecting unemployment during the slow season, he said.

### Housing challenge

Many business owners are quick to blame the lack of housing in the valley for the employee crisis. There are no affordable options, and seasonal

rentals are even harder to come by, said Hagee, who's also president of the Winthrop Chamber of Commerce. Some workers are looking for housing as far away as Omak.

One woman said that two

See **HIRING**, A3

## COMING DOWN



Photo by Natalie Johnson

Demolition of the old Twisp Town Hall on Glover Street began Tuesday (May 18), to prep the site for construction of a new civic building and regional communications center.

## Twisp man sentenced to a year in jail after guilty plea to sex crimes

**Judge also imposes SSOSA sentence**

BY NATALIE JOHNSON

Jedidiah McMillan, who pleaded guilty earlier this year to four felony counts of sexual crimes against a child, was sentenced last week under the state's Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative,

requiring him to spend a year in jail but be monitored by the state Department of Corrections Community Custody program for nearly two decades following his release.

McMillan, 19, of Twisp, pleaded guilty to first-degree child molestation, first-degree rape of a child and two counts of indecent liberties with forcible compulsion.

The sentencing hearing took place May 11 in Okanogan County Superior Court.

Lewis County Prosecutor Jonathan Meyer, acting as a special prosecutor appointed to the case, recommended a sentence under the Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative (SSOSA), which was agreed to by the defense.

Like the Drug Offender Sentencing Alternative, a person sentenced under SSOSA gets a prison term, but all or a portion of the term is suspended provided that

See **MCMILLAN**, A2

## Vaccination clinics scheduled for teens

**FDA expands authorization for Pfizer doses**

BY NATALIE JOHNSON

On Friday (May 14), following the Food and Drug Administration's decision to authorize the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in children 12 and over, Washington officially opened vaccine eligibility for that age group, and teens in Okanogan County are already signing up to get their first shot.

"At the joint County registration system, 450 patients are wait-

ing for appointments and many of the more-recent signups are the age group that is just recently eligible," said John McReynolds, CEO of the North Valley Hospital District.

Pfizer reported 100% effectiveness of the vaccine in children as young as 12, saying the vaccine produced a stronger antibody response in children than in teens and young adults, according to the state Department of Health.

Liberty Bell High School has scheduled a vaccine event for students 12 and older from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on May 26. Students who received their first dose at a similar event on May 5 will receive their second dose at this event. Vaccines

are free to students.

"In an effort to save interested students and their families the time and energy of having to travel a long distance to be vaccinated, the Methow Valley School District is partnering with Okanogan County Public Health and Local Medical Providers to host a vaccination clinic at Liberty Bell High School, specifically for students," according to a news release.

Students and their family members can register at <https://methow.org/news-events/covid-updates> or by calling the Methow Valley School District at 996-9205. Parents or guardians do not have to

See **VACCINE**, A2

## Twisp will re-open public restrooms in Merc Playhouse building

**Theater raises concerns about facilities' safety**

BY DON NELSON

Under mounting pressure to provide public restrooms for visitors, the Town of Twisp will re-open the bathrooms in The Merc Playhouse building that were closed in 2018 because of safety concerns.

The Twisp Town Council voted to re-open the bathrooms at its meeting last week, providing a much-needed downtown facility — while at the same time exacerbating a strained relationship between the town and the theater organization that has not been resolved to either's satisfaction.

Council members concluded that re-opening The Merc's bathrooms is the best near-term action, in that the town's other public facilities are less accessi-

ble and alternative solutions are not on the horizon.

The town has maintained the restrooms under a 99-year lease agreement with The Merc Playhouse Society, the non-profit that operates the theater. Although the restrooms are inside The Merc's building and are used by theater patrons during events, they can also be accessed through a lockable public entrance on East Second Avenue. That access has been closed since November 2018 because

of concerns about whether the facilities could be kept safe.

Missi Smith, executive director of The Merc, said in an interview last week that the theater organization feels "bullied" by what it considers the town's unilateral action to re-open the restrooms, and that re-opening the facilities could put the theater's users at risk.

Smith said The Merc has for several years asked the town to better-maintain the restrooms and ensure their safety, with-

out satisfactory responses. The Merc's complaints about the restrooms, including incidents of lewd behavior, drug use, filthy conditions and broken fixtures, date back several years. Correspondence from The Merc to the town cites problems The Merc says were not addressed or adequately remedied.

### In default?

In late 2020, out of frustration with what the theater organization considered the town's

neglect, The Merc declared the town in default of the 99-year lease under which the town has opened the bathrooms to the public.

In an October 2020 memo to Twisp Mayor Soo Ing-Moody, Smith stated that "this letter provides NOTICE that the Town of Twisp is in Default of the Lease Agreement by and between Twisp and The Merc Playhouse Society ... Twisp

See **BATHROOMS**, A2

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
May 20	May 21	May 22	May 23	May 24	May 25
60°	73°	77°	74°	76°	74°
39°	43°	45°	48°	44°	39°
Mostly Cloudy	Warm	Showers Possible	Clouds and Sun	Chance of Shower	Showers Possible

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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# Wagner Pool set to open — if adequately staffed

## Lifeguards needed for summer season

BY DON NELSON

The Wagner Memorial Pool in Twisp is scheduled to open for the first time in nearly two years on June 12 — if the town can hire enough lifeguards to staff the facility through the summer.

While adequate funding for the pool's operations has been pledged by Friends of the Pool, the nonprofit advocacy group for the facility, and the town staff is getting the pool ready, a shortage of staff could push the opening date farther out.

At last week's Twisp Town Council meeting, Public Works Director Andrew Denham said that at the time, the town had recruited about half the staff it needs to open on time.

Denham said it's vital to have a full roster because lifeguards must take their training at the same time.

"We're doing everything we can," Denham said, including

social media and "advertising everywhere we normally would, and more."

As for prepping the pool, Denham said "mechanically, we are on schedule."

In an interview this week, Denham said that the staffing requirement is "all or nothing ... it's either adequate or not," because of the concurrent training required.

The town needs nine lifeguards available to open the pool. Candidates must be over 15 years old and be strong swimmers. The pay is \$13.69 to \$14.69 per hour, with flexible schedules. A \$100 incentive will be paid when an applicant is hired, and an additional \$200 bonus will be paid if the applicant works for the entire swimming season.

The application deadline is Wednesday (May 19). Applications are available at the temporary town hall, 110 E. Second St., or online at [www.townoftwisp.com](http://www.townoftwisp.com). For information, email Lori Rodio at [lorir@townoftwisp.com](mailto:lorir@townoftwisp.com) or call 997-1311.

Because of COVID restrictions, the popular pool remained closed all last summer, not only eliminating a recreational option for valley residents but also wiping the Killer Whales swim team's season.

Friends of the Pool earlier pledged to raise \$50,000 toward opening the pool this summer. The organization told the Town Council on April 17 that it had \$20,000 on hand that it could provide to the town, and that it would raise another \$30,000 by May 31.

Town officials have said it will cost about \$65,000 to operate the pool through the summer, including \$15,000 from the Wagner Fund, which was established by the pool's original benefactors to be used for its operations. The town's 2021 budget does not include any other operational funds for the pool.

### Killer Whale sign-ups

Meanwhile, the Methow Valley Killer Whales swim team, which lost its 2020 season because of COVID restrictions,



Photo by Don Nelson

The Twisp Public Works Department was making preparations last week to open the Wagner Memorial Pool by June 12.

is open for sign-ups at <http://mkillerswhales.org>.

Andy Floyd, former president of the Killer Whales team orga-

nization and current president of the Okanogan County Swim League, said in an email that it looks like pools in Omak, Brew-

ster and Okanogan will be open this summer, but it's unclear yet how many of those communities will have swim teams.

# Mask-wearing requirements relaxed for fully vaccinated

## State to be re-opened June 30

BY MARCY STAMPER

Just hours after the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention relaxed its guidelines, allowing people who've been fully vaccinated against COVID to go without masks, Gov. Jay Inslee followed suit, declaring the same option for people in Washington, whether indoors or out.

Inslee also announced plans for a full reopening of the state on June 30 — with all businesses at 100% capacity. That could happen even earlier if 70% or more of Washingtonians over the age of 16 initiate vaccination, he said.

Inslee's announcement on Thursday (May 13) came after a two-week pause that kept three counties in Phase 2 of reopening. But what the state's health officer called "a possible plateau" two weeks ago became a true decline in COVID infections, Inslee said.

Individual businesses can still require customers to wear masks, and some around the valley haven't changed their policy. Masks are still required

in health care settings like hospitals and clinics, in schools, and on public transportation.

As of Tuesday (May 18), all counties were back in Phase 3, including Ferry County, which the regional health district had moved to Phase 2 after a major COVID outbreak in Republic.

Inslee also announced that all schools will be expected to offer full-time, in-person learning for all students starting in the fall. Schools will provide remote learning accommodations for students who need it, he said.

The state relaxed restrictions for additional activities. Indoor and outdoor sports will no longer have limits on the number of vaccinated spectators. Vaccinated individuals can sing and can perform on woodwind and brass instruments without facial coverings.

Choirs and congregations in places of worship can sing, with at least 6 feet between singers. Vaccinated people can sing without masks, but unvaccinated people still need a mask, according to the state guidance released last week.

The state is focusing on vaccinations, which are now authorized for people age 12 and older. "To fully reopen and protect our communities,

we want to see at least 70% of eligible Washington residents get their first dose. Right now, we're at about 59%, so we still have a ways to go," Secretary of Health Umair Shah said.

"The next chapter of recovery from this pandemic is within our reach, and we can get there faster with vaccination," said Lacy Fehrenbach, the state's deputy secretary for COVID-19 response. "Getting our children and communities vaccinated now will set us up for a safer and more normal summer and beyond in Washington state."

Washington is still under a state of emergency, which allows the governor to curtail business and social activities if ICU capacity reaches 90%.

### County cases

Okanogan County recorded 61 new COVID cases in the week ending May 17, including one in Winthrop. The county reported one more death from the disease, of a man in his 70s, bringing the county's losses to 37 since the start of the pandemic.

The incidence rate per 100,000 population has climbed over the week from 192 to 223, the highest in several months.

Almost 38% of county residents have been vaccinated.

## HIRING

From Page A1

friends — both working — are living in a tent after their rental house was sold. "I'm really hoping the best for this valley, after watching all these people move away," she said. "Hopefully, people will come down on rent."

"For some businesses, housing can be an issue in retaining employees," AbbyCreek's Buehler said. But if you treat your staff with respect and pay them well, word travels fast and it's easier to retain them, he said.

Other business owners say the extra \$300 per week that people can collect in unemployment benefits to offset job losses from the COVID pandemic is so attractive that it's kept people from returning to work. Unemployed workers don't need to look for work to qualify. The extra benefits run through Sept. 4.

But others doubt that the extra compensation is a factor. Hagee said she doesn't know anyone who isn't already working. And some people are reluctant to return to work because of health concerns or lack of adequate child care.

The unemployment rate in Okanogan County was 7.9% in March, down from 8.5% in February, according to the latest figures from the Washington Employment Security Department. But the data are too old to capture the change from the slow shoulder season to summer demands.

Compared with other counties in north central Washington, Okanogan County has fewer people in the work force — people who aren't in school or retired, TwispWorks Executive Director Don Linnertz said. Linnertz talked with the Winthrop and Twisp chambers of commerce last week about strategies for attracting employees.

Almost every day, Linnertz hears about staffing problems

because of housing shortages. Some people can't find anyplace to live. Some were fed up with substandard housing and left the valley. And some can't work more hours for fear of losing subsidized housing, he said.

While rental housing has always been scarce in the Methow, a moratorium on evictions declared last year during the COVID pandemic is in place through the end of June.

### Odd hours

Staffing shortages are also hitting businesses in Twisp and Mazama. Cinnamon Twisp Bakery is closing one day a week until they find more workers, Office Manager Kathy Carney said. "It's been bad since last year, and getting worse," she said. An excellent employee recently left after losing a rental.

It's particularly hard for bakeries to fill overnight baking shifts. The Rocking Horse Bakery is limping along with extra closures until school is out, when high school students can take on more hours, co-owner Carolyn Westerfield said.

"We have fewer employees now than ever. We had to close because there's not enough staff. You can't run the front with one employee five days a week," Westerfield said.

Westerfield and her family do most of the baking, but they need more help. Right now, there's only enough bread for sandwiches. "We'd love to put out a whole rack of bread," Westerfield said. "But there are only so many hours people can work before they're exhausted."

### Temporary fixes

Some business owners have taken the housing situation into their own hands. Several offer temporary housing in a spare room while employees look for a permanent arrangement.

"I'm thinking about buying something to house my staff — that wasn't part of the

plan for growing the business," OSB's Young said.

But even those that provide housing are having trouble. The Freestone Inn has a bunkhouse for a couple of employees, which is usually a big draw, General Manager Marvin Sutton said. "It usually fills right up," but this year no one has even inquired about the rooms, he said.

It's always been difficult to find people willing to drive to Mazama to work, Sutton said. "Now, there's just a whole other level of almost a crisis," he said.

After advertising for a month, Sutton has had just two applicants. He hired one this week to work part time, even though he needed a full-time employee. "I'll take what I can get," he said.

"It's shaping up to be a very, very busy summer," Sutton said. The inn needs servers, housekeepers and people who can work weddings.

In the meantime, the Freestone has cut back on the rooms it rents, since there aren't enough housekeepers to clean between guests.

### Market forces

With Methow Valley housing prices in record territory, some business owners say landlords took advantage of the hot market and sold.

Dave Thomsen, senior managing broker and branch manager at Coldwell Banker Winthrop Realty, has heard those rumors. "But that's not my personal experience," he said. "Listings are really low."

"When property values rise, it limits the pool of who can buy them, and the rental pool — it's all interconnected," Thomsen said. "At the end of the day, there's a shortage of properties." Although inventory has increased in the past couple of weeks, prices are higher than ever, he said.

"All businesses are in this together. We don't see it as competition — we're all providing a service to locals and tourists," OSB's Young said.

## EMS Week May 16 - 22

### Thank you EMS Providers for going Above and Beyond the Call

This is EMS.....Caring for our Communities!

Aero Methow Rescue Service; Airlift NW; Bridgeport EMS; Brewster Ambulance; Colville Confederate Tribe EMS; Conconully Aid; Life Flight; Lifeline Ambulance; OCFD#3; OCFD#10; OCFPD#16 and Larry O Smith MPD.



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8am-5pm

Call 800 660-2129 for information on FHC Dental hours and closings

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