

CAMAS-WASHOUGAL POST-RECORD

Volume 113 No. 34

Camas-Washougal, Washington, Thursday, August 26, 2021

2 Sections, 12 Pages • \$1.00

‘Safety is the most important thing’

Local teachers union presidents react to WA’s new COVID-19 mandate requiring staff vaccinations by Oct. 18

By **KELLY MOYER**
Post-Record editor

Presidents of the local Camas and Washougal teachers union recently weighed in on a new state mandate requiring all K-12 school teachers, staff, coaches, bus drivers and volunteers be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 by Oct. 18 or lose their jobs.

Shelley Houle, president of the Camas Educational Association, a union representing more than 460 educators, school counselors and teacher-librarians in the Camas School District, said she believes

about 70 percent of Camas K-12 teachers have already been vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, but is urging the remainder of her union’s members to talk to their medical physician if they have concerns about the vaccine.

“Staff and students safety is the most important thing to me and the board,” Houle said. “We encourage (educators), if they’re able, to get the vaccination and, if they have concerns, to talk to their doctor.”

While the union is not taking “sides” on the state mandate, Houle said she personally thinks the vac-

cines, which are available for free to every Washingtonian 12 years old and older, are “the most effective way to stop the spread of COVID.”

Houle has only heard from a few members since Gov. Jay Inslee announced the vaccine requirement on Aug. 18.

“Some are reluctant (to get vaccinated), but I’ve also heard from those who hope everybody is vaccinated,” Houle said.

There seem to be more educators in the Washougal School District with concerns about the new vaccine requirement.

James Bennett, the

president of the Washougal Association of Educators, a union representing about 200 teachers in the Washougal district, said the announcement was “a bit stressful” despite the fact that the majority of Washougal educators — Bennett estimates about 60 to 70 percent — are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

“The majority of our members are vaccinated, but there are people who can’t get vaccinated or who have some objection to getting the vaccine,” Bennett said. “It’s pretty stressful to find out a week before school starts that you could lose your job.”

Bennett said the union is working with the district to “see what the exemption process looks like” and to figure out the timeline for teachers and other school district staff who must be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18.

On Monday, Aug. 23, Doug Hood, interim superintendent of the Camas School District, said the requirement would mean unvaccinated individuals would need to have their first dose of the Pfizer vaccine, which requires two doses, 21 days apart, by Sept. 13; of the Moderna vaccine, which requires two doses, 28 days apart, by Sept. 6, and of the sin-

gle-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine by Oct. 4 to be considered fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by Oct. 18.

“We’ve had calls from people on all sides,” Bennett said. “The most common is from people who were uncomfortable getting the vaccine, but will now do it. They feel stuck.”

The one thing nearly all Washougal educators can agree on is the fact that they support returning to a five-day school week after more than a year of remote and hybrid learning, Bennett said.

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‘Beautiful things unfolding’

Community groups, supporters help TreeSong thrive despite pandemic

By **DOUG FLANAGAN**
Post-Record staff writer

Michelle Fox is overcome with joy, gratitude and a bit of disbelief when she thinks about how the TreeSong Nature Awareness and Retreat Center’s two recent major projects were completed thanks to the hard work and financial assistance from a variety of community members, organizations and businesses who love nature and believe in her mission.



TreeSong’s director Michelle Fox

The rural Washougal, nonprofit nature awareness center recently debuted its new outdoor shelter, built free of charge by Vancouver-based Design Doctors Construction; and is working to finish its native plant circle garden, funded with a \$2,500 grant from the Camas-Washougal Rotary Club and Camas-Washougal Community Chest and constructed by local volunteers.

In March 2020, Fox was unsure if TreeSong would survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventeen months later, the organization is not only surviving but thriving thanks in part



Children dress up and gather around a tree at the TreeSong Nature Awareness and Retreat Center’s 2018 “Run Wild!” event in Camas.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHELLE FOX



A Vancouver construction firm built a new wooden shelter at TreeSong Nature Awareness and Retreat Center in August 2021.

to the generosity of its supporters.

“To sit here right now and (witness the) abundance, with gardens and shelters and all

of these people wanting to support these things, it’s been so positive,” said Fox, TreeSong’s founder and executive director. “Part of TreeSong’s mission is community-building and (providing) connections beyond just what’s happening right here into the greater community. That’s what I’ve seen with both projects — the joy, the connection, and the knowledge that they are going

to give for years and years and years. Honestly, in a time when there’s a lot of heaviness and divisiveness out there, it’s nice to know that there are beautiful things unfolding in our community.”

Fox suddenly found herself in need of a new shelter to house TreeSong’s youth programs when her previous structure

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Camas School Board OKs budget

Enrollment losses, pandemic costs force district to dip into reserves

By **KELLY MOYER**
Post-Record editor

The Camas School Board this week approved a \$132 million 2021-22 budget that includes using \$6.5 million out of fund balances to make up for revenue shortfalls caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, decreased student enrollment and COVID-19 relief funds that were disproportionately low compared to similarly sized school districts in Washington.

“The 2020-21 fiscal year was perhaps the most uncertain in the history of K-12 educa-

tion,” Jasen McEathron, the district’s director of business services, told the Camas School Board on Monday, Aug. 23. “The COVID-driven changes in policy and educational practices made 2020-21 extremely difficult to forecast.”

The school district also has had “unprecedented enrollment volatility” since the start of the pandemic in 2020, McEathron added.

“We experienced a 6- to 7-percent enrollment loss this past year,” McEathron said.

The 2021-22 school district budget is based on an assumption that the district will recover

roughly half of that lost enrollment.

“We felt as though that was a conservative approach to take,” McEathron said, adding that the district’s enrollment losses “were consistent” with other districts in the region and throughout Washington state.

“Through the work of the budget committee, we decided on a projected 2021-22 enrollment of 7,018 students ... “This represents a net gain of 3 percent over our current enrollment,” McEathron said, but is still below the district’s pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

“Given the high level of new development in our community and the opportunity to welcome back students to

full-time, in-person instruction, we believe the 3 percent increase in enrollment is a reasonable budget parameter. However, from a service standpoint, we will be striving to safely welcome back all students in the community and hope to exceed our budgeted enrollment.”

A four-year projection shows Camas school officials also believe enrollment rates will start to rebound, but may level off over the next four years.

“In this model we’ve put enrollment gains where we were pre-COVID,” but then the trend starts to level off due to “declining birth rates,” McEathron said. “We know that COVID

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Camas resident puts city on notice

Threat of lawsuit over Lacamas Lake biofilter shuts down committee

By **KELLY MOYER**
Post-Record editor

Threats of a lawsuit have put a damper on the Lacamas Creek Watershed Committee, an ad hoc group created in 2020 to investigate and advise the city of Camas on water quality topics related to the Lacamas Creek Watershed and the city’s Lacamas, Round and Fallen Leaf lakes.

City leaders say they have temporarily halted the committee’s activities after receiving notice last week that a citizen intends to sue the city, as well as the Lacamas Shores Homeowners Association (HOA) over what he contends is a failure to maintain a biofilter on the shores of Lacamas Lake.

In a statement released Tuesday, Aug. 24, Camas Communications Director Bryan Rachal said Steven D. Bang, a resident of Camas’ Lacamas Shores subdivision, had served the city, as well as the Lacamas Shores HOA and members of the ad hoc watershed advisory committee, a 60-day notice that he intends to file a suit under the federal Clean Water Act.

“The city understands the magnitude of such a lawsuit and intends to pursue all available avenues to defend the claim,” Rachel stated in the news release.

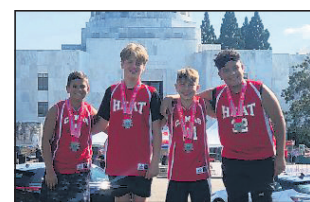
The city has retained legal counsel from Seattle-based Stoel Rives attorneys, including Beth Ginsberg, who has litigated environmental cases for more than 35 years; Jason Morgan, an attorney with extensive litigation experience involving the Clean Water Act; and Veronica Keithley, who has defended several clients in federal citizens suits involving the Clean Water Act.

In his 60-day notice of intent to file a lawsuit under the Clean Water Act, Bang contends the Lacamas Shores HOA and the city have violated federal law “by discharging pollutants from the Lacamas Shores biofilter treatment facility ... into Lacamas Lake and its adjoining wetlands without a discharge permit ... since at least Sept. 23, 2020.”

The notice contends the HOA’s biofilter “was initially properly maintained and effectively removed nutrients and solids from stormwater runoff” but subsequently “fell into disrepair.” “Specifically, the ‘filter’ component of the biofilter — namely, the grasses and aquatic plants that sequester pollutants — has not been maintained because the HOA has not conducted the required management and harvest-

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Camas Vintage & Art Faire returns Saturday
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Camas Heat dominates in hoops contest
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Schools:

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"I think, by and large, everybody is excited about returning to five days a week," Bennett said. "The more back to normal we can get, the better."

Previous to mandating COVID-19 vaccines for all public and private K-12 school staff and volunteers — as well as educators and staff at the state's colleges, universities and early learning childcare centers — Inslee had announced that K-12 schools would return to a five-day-a-week schedule but would continue to require staff, visitors and students to wear face coverings to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the 2021-22 school year.

Houle and Bennett agreed the continuation of the mask mandate is not a big issue for most of their union members — or for most students.

"I think everybody is used to it at this point," Bennett said of the mandate to wear masks during school. "I don't really like the masks, mostly because they fog up my glasses, but it is what it is ... and, on average, the students have been very good about wearing their masks."

Houle agreed: "The kids are really good at doing that," she said of wearing masks during class and even during recess time. "They can have mask fatigue, but the teachers have been good about taking them outside for a snack and a mask break, while staying six feet apart."

Houle said Camas educators also are excited to return to a five-day-a-week school year, and are confident the mask mandate will help keep staff and students safe.

"The delta variant is hitting kids, and we want our kids to be safe," Houle said. "We know (wearing masks) works. We had exposures last year and nobody else in the room got it."

Though a small group of community members have come to Camas School Board meetings throughout the summer to express their anger over the mask mandates, Houle said she has heard of very few instances of students refusing to wear masks at school.

'Delta variant is a game-changer'

Inslee announced the vaccine requirement for school staff on Aug. 18, during a press conference with Washington's superintendent of public education, Chris Reykdal, and the state's secretary of health, Dr. Umair Shah.

With COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations "exploding across our state," Inslee said he had to act to save lives and protect the health care system from being overwhelmed by COVID patients.

"We can go back to the painful days of closing our businesses, closing our schools, or we can use the known, effective and safe tools at our disposal," Inslee said. "We are fortunate, blessed, to have two tools — masks and vaccines — that are safe ... and we should use them."

Washington is one of the most protective states when it comes to keeping students and staff safe inside classrooms, Inslee added, and "cannot afford to continue to gamble with the health of educators, students, parents and the communities (educators) serve."

The governor said the new vaccine requirement will impact nearly 155,000 educators, school leaders and staff in Washington's K-12 schools, as well as about 118,000 early education workers and 90,000 staff, faculty and graduate students in Washington's college and universities.

"These vaccines are incredibly, amazingly effective," Inslee said, adding that 95 percent of COVID patients in Washington hospitals today are not vaccinated against the disease.

Adding that the delta

variant is a "new challenge to the state of Washington" in the fight against COVID-19, the governor said he, along with the state's public health officials, felt it necessary to mandate vaccines at this point in the pandemic.

"We are convinced we are at the point that, without these vaccine requirements, we will continue to be susceptible to new variants," Inslee said. "We will do our level best to share accurate medical information with Washingtonians. The more people who don't fall prey to misinformation on the internet, the more lives will be saved."

After the state broke its COVID-19 hospitalization record last week, Inslee said state leaders knew they had to act fast.

"This virus mutated, and there is a new game in town. Our hospitals are swamped. Our health care workers are exhausted. Our communities are stressed. And we have not seen a trend that shows it's going to slow down without new action," Inslee said. "We know the vaccines work. We know masks work. And, together, these tools will help us forge a new path in our state."

Reykdal and Shah agreed.

"We know we can open our schools, and keep them open, and keep students and staff safe," Reykdal said. "We had a successful opening of schools this spring and kept our COVID case loads down. But delta is different. It is more transmissible as we now know ... and our face coverings — which were already a requirement in all of our schools — and this new requirement to get folks in contact with students vaccinated is, in fact, our best way to keep schools open."

Shah said the state is "in a serious situation right now" when it comes to COVID-19 and the highly transmissible delta variant. "We have had a serious rise in cases and hospitalizations, the vast majority due to the delta variant,

across the state."

The increase in illnesses is stressing Washington's health system, Shah said.

"We are seeing staff shortages. We are seeing (hospitals) discharge patients early and divert patients from care they need because they're too full to accept new (patients)."

Delta is a game-changer," Shah said, adding that the two million eligible Washingtonians who have not yet been vaccinated against the coronavirus are "helping drive up our surge" of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations across the state.

"So, here we are, wishing we did not have to act as we are today," Shah said, referring to the new vaccine requirements, as well as a new state order that requires all residents to wear face coverings in public indoor spaces. "Vaccination (rates) are increasing, but it will take weeks to see an impact. People are getting sick today from the delta variant, which means we have no choice but to act. Masks and vaccines together, we know, work better. We urge you to get vaccinated and to talk to your health care provider (about COVID-19 vaccines)."

Anti-mask sentiment persists

Despite statements from the Centers for Disease Control that masks are "an effective way to lessen the transmission of the coronavirus," a small but vocal group of Camas-Washougal community members have shown up to recent school board meetings to voice opposition to mask mandates.

At the Camas School Board's meeting on Monday, Aug. 23, a 20-year Camas resident and a Washougal health care provider spoke out against the district's state-mandated mask policy for students.

"I believe putting masks on schoolchildren is unconscionable," said Camas resident Liz Rondeau, who came to a July 26 Camas school board meeting with a "Take Masks Off" sign. "We have this fantasy that wearing a mask is making any difference at all."

Washougal physician assistant Scott Miller also came to the Monday night Camas School Board meeting to speak against the mask mandate. Turning his back on the school board and lowering his mask, Miller said "we know

(masks) are useless."

Some parents and students have thanked the school board for their COVID-19 precautions.

At the board's first meeting in August, 14-year-old Camas student Elspeth Ediliah Feb wrote to board members to tell them she believed they were "all doing great" and to support the board's COVID-19 prevention measures.

"I am a 14-year-old girl who has lived in Camas for 12 years now," Feb wrote in a letter to the school board. "I used to be proud of my country, of my hometown; used to call this place my hometown. Now I'm just ... completely and utterly embarrassed. ... Please, don't let up on masks. They are a vital part of our survival."

Interim Superintendent Doug Hood said Monday the state's superintendent of public instruction, Chris Reykdal, had made it "very clear that any board that decided to go in a different direction than the governor would lose funding."

"It is not an option to go in a different direction when it comes to our mitigation strategies," he said. "Face masks are a state, not a local, requirement."

Budget:

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has further declined those (birth) rates."

The school district plans to return to a pre-pandemic learning schedule this fall, with five full days of in-person instruction each week and a fully remote, five-day-a-week Camas Connect Academy option for families who do not want to return to in-person classes.

The 2021-22 school district budget includes \$114.4 million in general fund expenditures, which includes funding for 483.7 full-time equivalent (FTE) certificated staff (teachers, principals, central office administrators) and 274.5 FTE classified staff.

McEathron said revenues are expected to be 4.3 percent higher in 2021-22 than in 2020-21, and include \$1.6 million in federal and state COVID-19 relief funds as well as the planned use of the \$6.5 million from the district's fund

balance. Expenditures also are expected to be 11.4 percent higher in 2021-22 over 2020-21 levels, with 87 percent of the district's

general fund expenses going toward personnel costs.

The district will end the 2021-22 school year with a 9.7 percent fund balance.



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