

Column: Thinking about the Blackmons and good fortune.

>> Sports, B1

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2020

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Today's weather

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Cloudy

36
26

Scrapbook:
Last December 29:
High: 62
Low: 51

Inside:
More weather, Page A2



IDOH updates COVID-19 count

Grant County EMA Director Bob Jackson said 26 new COVID-19 cases were reported Monday, bringing the total number of county COVID cases to 5,416 since the start of the pandemic. A total of 92 Grant County COVID-19 deaths have been reported since the start of the pandemic.
A total of 300 COVID-19

Unsafe housing complaints remain steady

Health board discusses remedies, enforcement issues due to county's red status

By **TIM TEDESCHI**
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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused nearly every aspect of life to change, but the Grant County Health Department's Environmental Division has found one thing has remained the same.

According to Environmental Health Specialist Peggy Bradley's December report to the health board, housing complaints for unsafe or uninhabitable structures have not slowed down during the pandemic. Bradley's report

stated from Oct. 14 to Dec. 3, the division received 12 housing complaints for issues such as no water, trash or sewage and/or overall unfit housing.

While the complaints have remained the same, Bradley said the pandemic has changed the division's approach to addressing them. Employees are not going into houses and doing inspections right now due to the county being in red, she said.

"We are calling the landlord or whoever is responsible for the property, and letting them know we received a complaint and what needs to be done to rectify the problem," Bradley wrote in the December report. "We get back with the person

who filed the complaint, and see if the problem has been resolved. If the problem has not been resolved, we write a letter outlining what has to happen and the time frame it needs to happen in."

At the health board's December meeting, board President Dr. Barbara Irlke asked what criteria is used to determine whether a housing situation is bad enough that the health department will declare it uninhabitable and close the residence.

Board attorney David Glickfield said he has advised health department staff that statutory language allows the health department to declare a public health emergency when needed, which he interprets to mean when a residence is unsafe

for human habitation.

"And so the obvious question is what is unsafe? Things like rodents in the house - this is stuff we've seen or heard of in the past years - animal waste in the house, no running water, maybe no electricity," Glickfield said. "If there's other issues, no waste disposal systems, potentially water, mold coming in, those are the things we look for. Any one of those issues by itself may be enough, certainly a combination makes it to where we need to unfortunately have those people either leave or get them out of there because it's jeopardizing their own health."

County health officer Dr. William David Moore said unfortunately an added dif-

ficulty is that the health department can only do so much and lacks authority to enforce such orders at a certain point. He said on various occasions the notice on a residence declaring it uninhabitable has been taken down, and residents who are removed from the residence sometimes return after the health department leaves or on weekends when they know the health department will not be returning. Moore said if the sheriff's department is involved, most residents will leave at that time, but they often return later.

"How in the midst of all that we have going on with COVID, cold weather coming up, with resources being

See BOARD, page A10

Grant County Republicans sworn in at pared-down ceremony

Former

1980s. In 2015, he made the leap from that department to his current position in ASEC. "Over the years, through my Extension work, I listened to so many employers saying, 'Your students know science, but we have problems with how they

has taken him beyond U.S. borders. In the early 2000s, the college challenged his department to provide an international trip for students. Russell began taking groups to places like China, Brazil, Hungary, Romania, Haiti and Peru.

BOARD

From page A1

taxed, how aggressive do we want to be?" Moore asked. "... You know we could go in and say you have to get out right now, bring the sheriff with us, but if they wait 'til we turn the corner, we don't really have very much to go. But there are houses that are in that condition in our county right now."

When there are issues with housing that deals both with building code violations and health risks, Moore said Area Plan and the health department have worked together in the past to address the various issues. However, due to COVID-19, he said that has not occurred recently.

Health board member Dr. Philip Renfroe said if some of these properties are rental properties, the focus should be on getting the landlords to fix the issues. Renfroe asked if it is possible to fine landlords for not keeping properties up to amenable standards.

Glickfield said the health department would not have standing to impose a fine on landlords or bring them to court, but tenants have the right and often take landlords to small claims court to receive damages when the

property is not up to standards. Ihrke said the health department could potentially encourage renters and inform them of their right to go to court since the department cannot do so itself.

Health department Office Manager Tara Street said declaring a property uninhabitable in theory prevents the landlord from renting it to anyone else, but sometimes landlords will move new tenants in without the health department's knowledge.

Adult Protective Services is called upon to help aid residents that are removed from uninhabitable residences, but Moore said they have limited resources to help people find alternative housing.

Board members said although they lack the teeth to enforce things, often times permanent change occurs when there is a concerted effort from multiple agencies. With that in mind, board members suggested possibly getting other county departments and nonprofits involved to help remedy situations.

In other business, the health board approved its 2021 meeting schedule. The board will hold its regular meetings Jan. 25, March 15, May 17, July 19, Sept. 20 and Nov. 15 at 5 p.m. in Grant County Council chambers.

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