

OUR VIEW

New taxes on the horizon

Out of the spotlight, a task force is crafting a plan to make Oregon the first state with a single-payer health care system.

Remember, Oregon Democrats control the state Legislature and the governor's office. So, at least for now, yes this is coming. And the plan is for new taxes to pay for it.

New payroll tax. New personal income tax. And maybe a new sales tax.

Single payer is what some people call in shorthand: Medicare for all. A single government agency takes responsibility for financing health care for all. Everybody would be on the same insurance plan and have access to the same services.

It could help fix some problems by making health care more equitable and accessible to more people. There might be better cost control and lower administrative costs. More health care dollars could also be targeted toward preventive medicine.

Trade-offs? There would be trade-offs. In other countries with such systems, there can be long wait times. Some procedures that people may feel are necessary may not be covered. And, of course, wealthier people will still find ways to get access to care that others cannot.

Would Oregonians be happier and healthier under single payer? Would quality of care improve? Would it be easier to fight a pandemic? We hope the answers are yes, yes and yes.

Among the challenges with creating such a system are paying for it, uncoupling health insurance from employment and getting people to support it. The Legislature just granted the task force another year to come up with its plan. The task force meets again this week.

We're going to focus on the tax proposals under consideration.

The task force's interim report to the Legislature said it could mean additional taxes. In fact the report says: "The Task Force recommended funding the Plan with a combination of a new payroll tax, an increase in the personal income tax, and the creation of a sales tax. ...

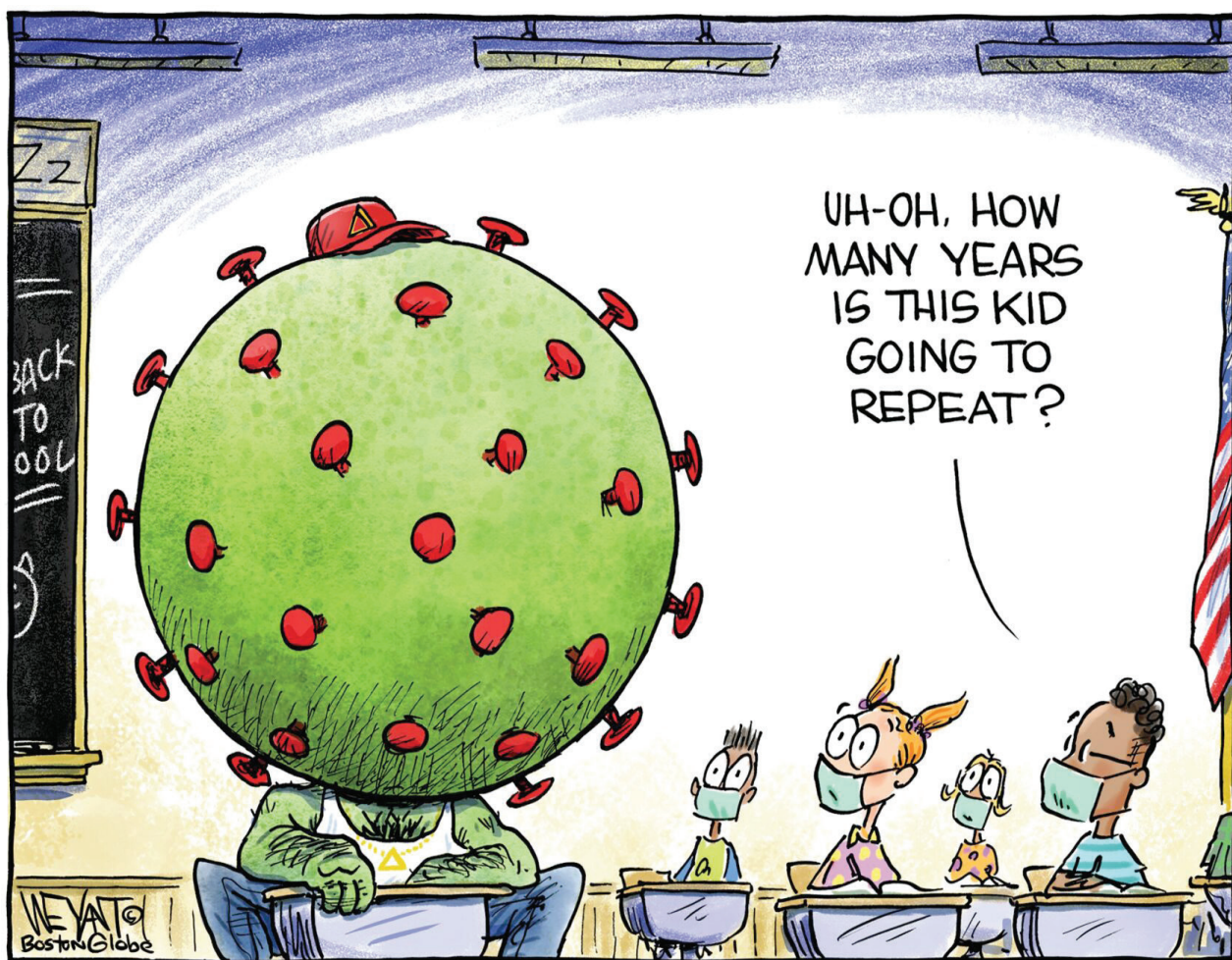
"Payroll tax will apply a flat rate on wages up to the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) limit (currently about \$138,000, subject to annual increase), and higher rates on income over the FICA limit." The exact rate is not specified. That tax would be assessed on employers, though it may have an impact on employees, of course.

The report doesn't give a hint of how much payroll taxes may go up. It does suggest the increase would apply to households to a threshold income of 300% of the federal poverty level. That's about \$79,000 a year for a family of four. There may be a new, higher tax bracket set for higher income earners.

And the report says, if there is a determination that more revenue is needed, there would be a sales tax on all goods and services except "essential" things such as groceries and utilities. The state would also establish a refundable sales tax credit to ease the burden on low-income families.

Most of us have more immediate worries than how this single-payer plan would work. But your government is hatching it right now.

Task force members say they are worried that they hear from some organizations that track their work. They say they aren't hearing from the general public. So the plan to fundamentally redesign how health care works in Oregon is being designed without input from the general public. What is the task force going to do to change that?



LETTERS

Sheriff: I am dismayed with your mudslinging

I was dismayed to read Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen's letter to Gov. Brown.

Sheriff, I would (and I speak as someone who supported your candidacy for sheriff) say that you have overstepped your role, and revealed a misunderstanding of your job by making a political and religious statement as sheriff and on county letterhead.

Your election most definitely did not give you the right to speak for "we the people of Union County." Your statements do not reflect my opinions, nor those of many county residents.

You certainly have a right to hold the opinions you express in your screed against Gov. Brown. But you should hold and express those opinions as a private citizen, not as an official elected to a supposedly non-political office.

Finally, I resent your invocation of "God-given rights." Such speech is deeply problematic. Whose God? Do other gods beside the one you believe in have the power to grant rights? Do people who don't believe in God have the same rights as those who do? We live in a country that expressly separates church and state, and to link civil rights to religious belief is a dangerous path to start down.

Cody, there is absolutely no reason for you to engage in this kind of mudslinging in your role as sheriff. Your job, at the most basic level, is not to make policy but to enforce the laws that express public policy. Do your job (which is challenging enough) and leave the politics to the politicians.

If you ever want to have a conversation about this issue, I would be happy to engage with you.

David Moyal
La Grande

Governor is sensible and courageous

My youngest child grew up in the age of school lockdowns. Unarmed civilians were dropping like flies in the wake of massacres spawned by Second Amendment extremists. Our new governor, Kate Brown, stood up to them and spoke out for sensible restrictions on insanely lethal weapons in the hands of anybody who wanted them.

From that point on, nothing she

says or does will go uncriticized by people without enough gumption to pause and reflect on what life in America has become. Who is the true courageous hero in this bizarre new world?

Mary Cooke
Cove

Sheriff Bowen following in questionable footsteps of his predecessor

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen, having won the November 2020 general election after his only opponent withdrew due to ethics allegations, now feels he has a mandate to speak for all the people of Union County. After seven months as sheriff, he is a now an expert on matters from public school administration to epidemiology, and a legal scholar on the Constitution ("Bowen takes aim at Brown, mask mandates," The Observer, Aug. 17).

Bowen cites "calls to his office from the community" as his reason for writing Gov. Brown. Who exactly were these calls from? Did Bowen solicit any other opinions? Did he do a county-wide survey? For that matter, what authority does a county sheriff have to involve himself in matters such as public health and school district policy?

Aside from the content, the tone of his letter was beyond unprofessional. It betrays an immaturity that is astonishing, even given his relative youth and inexperience. And the fact Bowen used county resources, and his position as a law enforcement officer, to advance his own personal political viewpoint certainly raises ethical questions. The obvious intent of such a letter is to intimidate those with opposing views; he appears to be following in the questionable footsteps of his predecessor.

In the future, Bowen should spend his time focusing on law enforcement and keep his own political views separate from his professional life. Union County deserves a sheriff who is nonpartisan.

Matt Cooper
La Grande

If you don't like masks, get vaccinated

Gov. Brown is not responsible for reinstating mask requirements. We are. Last year, masks and vaccinations brought infection rates down

dramatically. Masks mandates were removed. And then?

Unvaccinated populations allowed a more transmittable variant to evolve and spread rapidly, again over-running hospitals. Now everyone must mask again.

Don't like masks? Get vaccinated.

Many in Union County masked last winter, got vaccinations and yet must mask again. Why? Because anti-vaccers, COVID deniers, mask phobics, individual rights extremists and alternative medicine advocates are COVID vectors. It's time for individuals to put common good over personal ideologies/choice.

Unvaccinated residents, not Gov. Brown, are responsible for forcing business closures, activity cancellations, mask mandates, even sickness and death.

Mary McCracken
Island City

Sheriff's letter to governor may warrant ethics investigation

This letter is written about Sheriff Bowen's letter to Gov. Brown. The letter he wrote to the governor about mask-wearing mandates states his opinion as far as I can tell. He is entitled to it. He does not speak for all the citizens of Union County. He does not speak for me. Nor should he assume he can do so.

In reading his job description, which can be found in the Oregon Public Law Statutes, it looks like he went beyond the purview of his job. His responsibilities are to uphold the law. He chose to state his opinion, infer or extend that opinion over all the people in the county, and use public resources and monies to do so.

There are many legitimate concerns on both sides of the mask-wearing mandate. COVID and mask-wearing issues concern all of us, our families' safety, and each of our responsibilities to protect ourselves and others. Plus, keeping our health resources available to us all and keeping businesses open depends on mask wearing and distancing.

That all said, the sheriff's actions could be an ethics issue to say the least, and a violation of using public monies for personal use. Further investigation is needed.

Joy Cleaver
La Grande

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