

OUR VIEW

Freeway frustration in Eastern Oregon

The sequence of events is as predictable as it is frustrating. Snow begins to fall along Interstate 84 in the Blue Mountains between La Grande and Pendleton.

The freeway gets slick. Vehicles — most often commercial trucks, and often trucks that don't have traction chains installed — lose control or momentum.

The lanes in one direction, and sometimes both, are blocked.

And once again the main travel route through Northeastern Oregon is closed.

When the freeway is blocked for more than a few hours — and this is often the case when trucks are involved, as they're more cumbersome to move than passenger cars are — the closure can extend for more than 150 miles. As safe parking areas for commercial trucks are claimed in, say, La Grande, the Oregon Department of Transportation frequently has to close the freeway at Baker City and, as the domino effect continues, in Ontario.

The effect works in the opposite direction, too. A couple crashes in the eastbound lanes in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Huntington can trigger a cascade of closures starting in Baker City and later spreading to La Grande and Pendleton.

Weather-related closures on I-84 aren't a new phenomenon, to be sure.

Blizzards, particularly through passes such as Ladd Canyon and the Blue Mountains near Meacham, can create whiteouts so severe that closing the freeway is necessary.

But although ODOT doesn't have detailed historical data about the frequency of I-84 closures in our region, even a cursory review of media reports shows that the freeway has closed more often in the past several years than in past decades — and in conditions that aren't particularly treacherous.

As mentioned above, it hardly rates as a surprise when the freeway closes, even during a relatively modest storm such as the one that descended on the Blue Mountains Monday evening, Dec. 13.

A cold front brought a few hours of heavy snow, but this was no extended blizzard that cut visibility to the length of a truck trailer and made it dangerous for all vehicles.

ODOT's press release announcing the closure noted that the culprit was "multiple spun out trucks" in a 3-mile section of the westbound lanes between La Grande and Meacham.

The closure, fortunately, was relatively brief, lasting about four hours.

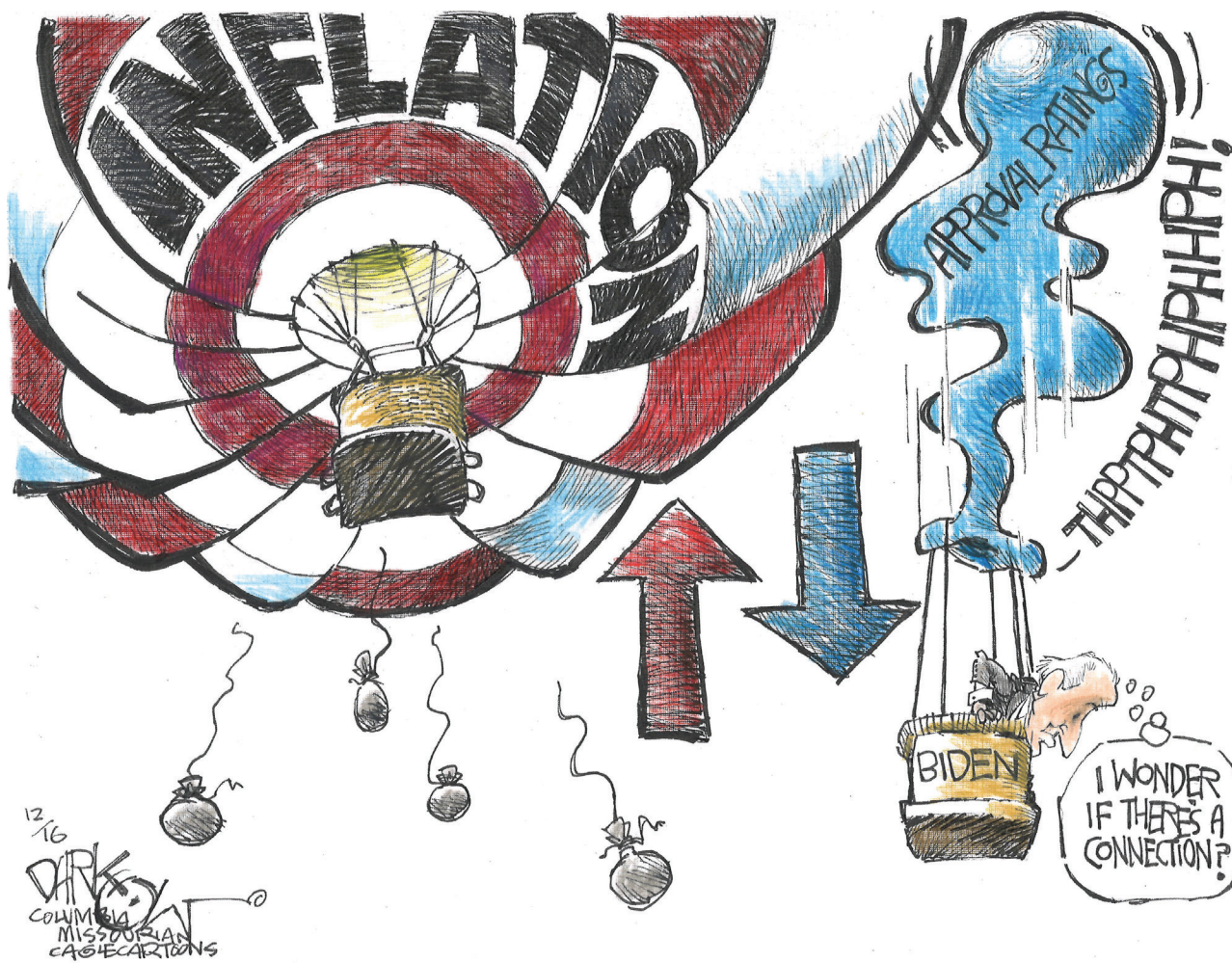
Yet it was also the latest example of how fragile this vital transportation pike seems to have become. It's not an exaggeration to wonder whether it's possible to get through even a modest storm — of which we can expect several in a typical winter — without a closure.

The culprit in Monday's closure — unchained trucks — is a common one in freeway closures, said Tom Strandberg, a spokesperson for ODOT in La Grande. In hopes of encouraging drivers to put on chains, in late September the state doubled the fine for failing to comply with the chain requirement, from \$440 to \$880. That's a reasonable change. Unchained trucks not only are responsible for many freeway closures, which is at best annoying, but worse, they also pose a threat to other drivers.

The problem isn't limited to commercial trucks, certainly. All drivers on the freeway during winter need to be prepared for snow and ice, either by installing traction tires or by bringing chains. And all motorists should drive with caution, according to the conditions.

Over the past couple decades, ODOT has done many things to try to make I-84 safer, including building a third lane on steep grades such as Ladd Canyon and Spring Creek, installing electronic signs to warn drivers of bad weather, and improving chain-up zones.

Those are worthwhile improvements. But none can replace plain old common sense.



We have to learn to live with the virus



TOM HERRMANN OTHER VIEWS

In the nearly two years since we agreed to take "two weeks to flatten the curve," much has been learned about COVID-19. I would like to make some observations, partly personal, partly recent science. My thoughts do not come from a lack of empathy — few of us do not know someone locally who has sickened or has died.

By now it's clear that we have to learn to live with the virus: It is not going to be "defeated" by injections, which are turning into a subscription service. Non-vaccine treatments that have been so far ignored must be taken seriously, and I am optimistic.

We need a better strategy than the one captained by Drs. Fauci and Walensky. The U.S. has the 18th highest death rate — 2,395 per million — among 155 nations tabulated by Statista.com. Bangladesh has lost only 172 per million. The Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has nearly eliminated COVID altogether, in spite of low vaccination rates. Shouldn't we study how they did it? Have we heard Dr. Fauci recommend early outpatient treatments? Does he ever promote monoclonal antibodies? Checking one's vitamin D levels? No, just (highly profitable) vaccines.

Thankfully, the incompetence of the NIAID (headed by Dr. Fauci) and the CDC (chaired by Dr. Walensky) has been partly balanced by non-governmental professionals who have developed effective treatment

protocols. As just one example, the FLCCC Alliance (flccc.net) is composed of world-class critical care physicians who have developed protocols for both outpatient and hospital care, refined by treating thousands of COVID patients. However, these doctors are routinely slurred in the legacy press and censored on social media sites. Some hospitals have actually banned some of the therapies they recommend.

There is no mystery here. Effective treatments by existing (and cheap) drugs would have made it difficult for vaccine makers to obtain the Experimental Use Authorizations they needed. With tens of billions of dollars at stake, Big Pharma has been aggressive, using connections in the press, social media and the captive NIH/CDC/FDA.

The pharmaceutical industry seems to be dictating much of our COVID strategy. If not, why is naturally acquired immunity ignored in vaccine policies? At least 81 studies show that it is broader and longer-lasting than mRNA vaccines. Why the push to vaccinate children, who are clearly not at risk? From COVID's beginning, Sweden kept all children 16 and younger in school, with no masking. Of the more than 1.9 million Swedes in that age group, there have been 16 hospitalizations and no deaths. Yet our medical vizards want to jab children in spite of reports of myocarditis and in the absence of long-term safety studies. Remember the "safety" studies on cigarettes, funded by tobacco companies? I don't see much difference now, except that Pfizer and the rest are shielded by law from any liability.

Perhaps the harder problem is to heal the divisions among us which have arisen from fear, stoked by opportunistic politicians and the media. For example, it has been known for some time that COVID vaccinations do not prevent infection. It is now established that an infected, vaccinated person transmits COVID as well as an unvaccinated individual. (The CDC's Walensky admitted this in August 2021. The latest experimental confirmation was published in Lancet Infectious Diseases in October.) Vaccinations lessen symptom severity, but do not produce the "sterilizing immunity" needed for attaining herd immunity. Blaming (and fearing) the unvaccinated is therefore not warranted, but those who refuse the jab are often vilified. A relative of mine is a nurse in the Legacy chain of hospitals in Portland. She related that 800 employees there were fired for refusing the jab. One cannot dismiss all these people as tinfoil-hat rubes.

Many of us view the blatant increase in authoritarianism due to this pandemic as a bigger threat than the disease itself. For example, the Oregon Health Authority is seeking to make mask mandates permanent. Australia is implementing internment camps! We are in danger of leaving our descendants a world sorely diminished in liberty, prosperity and communal joy. Healing divisions in our communities — and improving treatment of COVID-19 to the point we are no longer fearful — will require dialogue and open minds on all sides.

Tom Herrmann is a retired physics professor. He lives in La Grande with his wife, Swanee.

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