

OUR VIEW

# Change of heart about VA plan is good news

Good news from Congress is often hard to come by but the recent announcement from U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden's office that a plan to modify the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla into an outpatient clinic is no longer an option was a bright spot among the usual fare of depressing information that leaks from the nation's capital.

Wyden said in a press release last week he "welcomed the news" that a group of bipartisan senators will block the plan originally configured by the veterans Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission. That plan would have shut down the 31-bed residential rehabilitation and treatment program and moved it to Spokane.

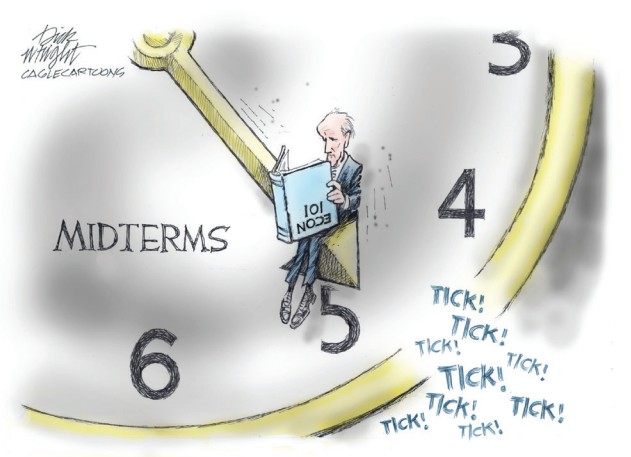
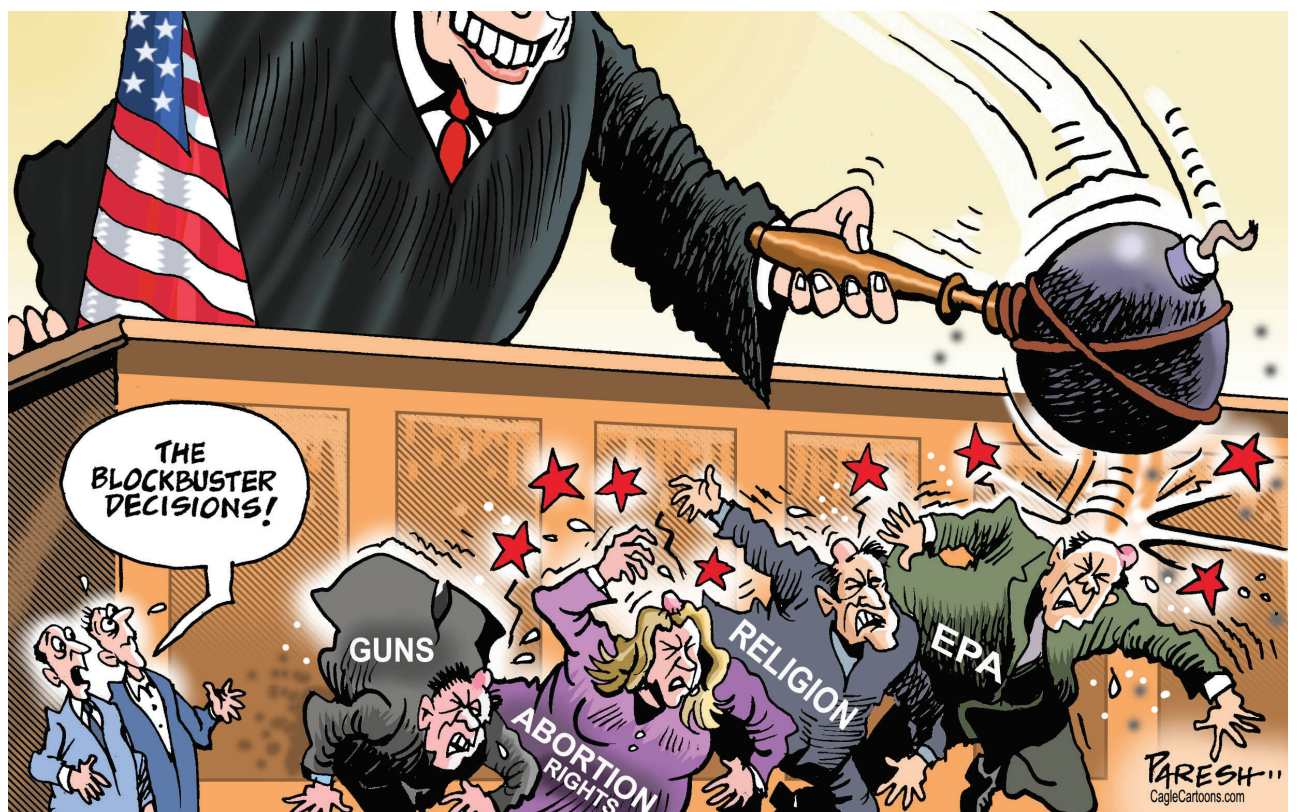
Wyden, in a recent town hall meeting, reported he'd heard from veterans about how the plan to turn the facility into an outpatient clinic would make a negative impact.

All the gratitude for the decision can't rest with Wyden, of course, as a number of other prominent senators also chimed in to stop the plan from becoming a reality. Yet, Wyden's influence was surely a factor and we thank the senator for that assistance.

The fact is the concept was a bankrupt one from the very beginning. Why the federal government would want to shortchange our veterans on any issue is not only a mystery but grossly unfair. Surely money had a lot to do with the decision. It is no secret the costs of the Veterans Administration continue to climb at an unprecedented rate. Taxpayers are ultimately billed for those costs, just like taxpayers end up footing the bill for any conflict the nation finds itself in.

Caring for our veterans is one of those unseen and often not talked about aspects of our foreign policy. When the call erupts across the nation to let slip the dogs of war, the upfront costs are always high. Yet when a conflict is over, those costs continue as the men and women who shouldered the burden need long-term, costly care.

We owe our veterans a great deal, including excellent health care. The fact the plan to turn the Walla Walla clinic into an outpatient center has been abandoned is good news.



## A signal we should all pay attention to



**NORM CIMON**  
OTHER VIEWS

Thanks to The Observer for publishing a range of views about forest management. Those articles have focused on how trees store carbon, and the perceived value of forest collaboratives. There's a bigger picture that needs to be understood, one that touches on both.

It's well known that a changing climate can take us down a path we can't quickly return from. That's the evidence from core samples drilled deep into ancient ice. Regular cycles have warmed and cooled our Earth over the last 400,000 years. Very rapid transitions to a much warmer Earth are followed by a slower return to cooler periods that can last thousands of years.

Now that we humans are pulling the climate strings, there's no knowing where this might lead. The wild gyrations we've been seeing, from blistering hot for days on end to a spring that only recently arrived, are a message we need to heed. That may signal even bigger changes.

That variability also reworks ecosystems. Climate records show that forests develop, expand and contract under specific conditions of precipitation and temperature. Once established they can persist and thrive even through climate swings.

In the Wasatch Range, which dominates the skyline in northern Utah, thick groves of gambel oak are every-

where at higher elevation. But when the ground finally warms, it's too dry for trees to reproduce from seeds — though they easily germinate in a lab setting. The oaks we see are, instead, part of one large organism, a root mass that corkscrews its way up mountainsides. It sends up a thick growth of leafy stems above ground, visible to us as small trees. The clones, as they're called, can be tens of thousands of years old. In all likelihood, they migrate with the climate, seeding out successfully when conditions allow, hoarding resources underground when they don't.

A similar story plays out here in the interior Northwest. Stringers of trees work their way down from the slopes, forming a thick carpet in north-south running canyons like the Lostine. Direct sun only visits that realm for a few hours every day. The deep dark spruce-fir forest that results harbors a very different plant community from the one just a few miles north, where the Lostine River spills out onto the open prairie.

Such deeply shaded old-growth forests can sustain an ecosystem through hotter and drier periods, even over centuries, till cooler temperatures and plentiful rainfall return again. They do so as David Mildrexler has written about, also in The Observer: by creating their own ecosystem reality. They tap water underground, and move it closer to the surface, which hosts plant communities dependent on that moisture. Water is also pumped to the very top of those big trees that transpire it into the canopy above the forest stand, maintaining the microclimate

they've created. That's something anyone who's found cool refuge in such a forest on a hot summer day understands instinctively.

Because mature trees can be quite old — those that grow in the Northwest are some of the longest-lived of their kind — they can hold on until favorable climate conditions return again, taking advantage of the changes to expand their range. Seen this way, the ecosystem is a sort of super-organism, growing and changing over time.

Older trees also store very large amounts of carbon. In wetter forests those trees can be covered with lichens and mosses that add even more to the storehouse. Log the big trees from those stands and there is no guaranteed return path to that wetter ecosystem. The water isn't going to be as available to younger growth, the new vegetation will be hotter and drier, and the forest openings will no longer support the same plant community. It could be a very long time before conditions allow for reemergence of that ecosystem. The microclimate has vanished.

That brings focus back to Lostine Canyon, a very wet place. That cool refuge offers us a humble lesson we should take to heart. We live on the margin of wet and dry. Over thousands of years, our forests have adapted to that reality. We need to do the same by keeping them intact.

That's a signal we all need to heed.

■ Norm Cimon, of La Grande, is a member of Oregon Rural Action, a nonprofit, but his column represents his opinion only.

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