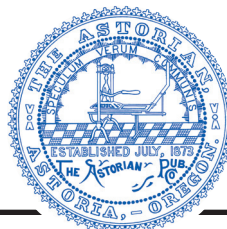


OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Oregon needs clarity, trust and health

My wish for Oregon in 2021 boils down to four words: clarity, trust and good health.

Oregonians have been whipsawed not only by the pandemic but also by the state's leadership.

Gov. Kate Brown's disastrous Friday evening press conference in March with Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and Multnomah County Commission Chair Deborah Kafoury was a harbinger of what was to come. 2020 was such a nutty year that Brown never even delivered the annual State of the State address.



DICK HUGHES

To be fair, these are the toughest of times to be an elected leader, whether at the national, state or local levels. But these also are the times for which we elect leadership — the abilities to respond confidently, effectively and consistently to the unexpected and unpredictable.

Oregonians have been confused and frustrated by the shifting metrics and policies for evaluating the state's progress against the coronavirus.

Last month, Brown abruptly reversed course and dropped state requirements for reopening schools. Those rules were considered among the nation's most stringent. Brown, who caught many people off guard, was following the lead of Washington state.

Some research indicates that schools, especially in the youngest grades, are not high risk for spreading coronavirus — if students, staff and families strictly follow the health protocols.

That raises a question that continues to befuddle Oregonians: How can health officials have data indicating that schools might reopen safely but not have data on coronavirus transmission in restaurants, bars, gyms, churches and other indoor places?

I put that question to the Oregon Health Authority on the same day Brown made her school announcement, asking: "Is there specific information for specifically how much various activities contribute to the possible spread of COVID-19? For example, what percentage of cases are attributable to indoor dining, what percentage to gyms, what percentage to churches, what percentage to family gatherings, etc.? Or, putting it another way, are there statistics for how much various activities increase the likelihood of transmitting or contracting the coronavirus?"

This was the health authority's response: "We see overlap between people who report attendance at social gatherings across places — in private places and bars/restaurants. Because of this overlap, we cannot definitively pinpoint where transmission occurs, but there are associations with these social get-togethers. In addition, the percentage of sporadic cases has increased, indicating broader community spread."

"Gyms and fitness centers pose risks because when exercising people breathe



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A Columbia Memorial Hospital nurse prepares a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine in December.

heavily, which produces more droplets and aerosols that are potentially infectious, and they may sweat on face coverings, which can reduce effectiveness of filtration. Restaurants and bars pose risks because people take off their masks to eat and drink, and restaurants tend to be places where people talk more, which produces more droplets and aerosols that are potentially infectious, and many restaurants and bars are smaller spaces."

For the most part, Oregon has taken a one-size-fits-all approach based on county metrics. This creates another question: Excellent air filtration, roomy spaces and enforcement of strict health protocols are key. Though this would be more difficult for the state to implement and manage, why not allow closed businesses to reopen if they demonstrate they have those keys in place?

As a longtime reader wrote in response to last week's column: "Do you suppose any one of our state politicians, legislative or executive, will ever have the guts to open restaurants again? I mean for indoor dining. ... We need this for our economy AND our sanity! Masks and distancing will make it feasible, if monitored inside the restaurants. We don't need Brown or (Senate President Peter) Courtney to make it work, just the chance to do it again. We're civilized enough to make it happen. We the people just need the latitude."

It is worth noting that many school buildings have poor air filtration and circulation, and many staff members are in high-risk populations.

State Rep. Courtney Neron, D-Wilsonville, echoed that concern in writing about Brown's announcement on school reopenings: "While I understand and value the efforts to get children into the classroom as soon as safely possible, I have deep and persistent concerns about the lack of testing and contact tracing, inadequate ventilation in school buildings and the disproportionate health impacts of this virus on our uninsured and underinsured families who we must consider as we discuss

returning to in person learning.

"I will continue to advocate for teachers and underserved community members to have access to vaccinations, increases in testing and tracing, a focus on the most vulnerable among us, and a reasonable timeline that includes educator, parent and student voice. I am surprised that this news was presented to our education community just days into the first break that many educators have had in months."

Which brings us to the issue of trust. Through the then-Chalkboard Project's CLASS program and other efforts, some Oregon school districts developed mutually respectful working relationships among administrators, teachers and other staff. But in other schools and districts, the level of mistrust is so high that staff are taking no-confidence votes in the administration and talking of striking over the district's failure to realistically follow COVID-19 protocols.

Similar mistrust exists within the Legislature and among some Oregonians toward state government. Brown and others make the valid point that the pandemic has exacerbated the existing economic, educational and social inequities in Oregon. The pandemic also deepened the fault lines of mistrust.

Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, wrote in his constituent newsletter on Thursday: "2020 has pushed our collective selves, our communities and the businesses that support them to the brink and unfortunately, we're not in the clear yet."

"Thousands are unemployed, and their support system has been riddled with failures. Businesses have been closed, without data to support such mandates, while big-box stores are open to the masses. The public has been relatively shut out of the public process of governing this state, which cannot continue into the '21 legislative session. Legislators and the third branch of government have had little to no input on the mandates and closures."

In his newsletter the previous week, Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, wrote: "At

some point these restrictions, like others hampering all our lives, will end. What looks longer lasting is the anger, mistrust, fear and — much as I'd rather not write this — the hatred with which a sector of Americans have come to hold government, and those of us who serve in it. If I have a resolution for 2021, it's to work diligently with compassionate, patriotic people with different political viewpoints, who share an understanding of how dangerous the current moment is for representative democracy, and a commitment to find a path forward that will keep it secure."

Meanwhile, our knowledge of COVID-19 continues to change and evolve. An item as simple as face masks has gone from being discouraged early in 2020 to now being recognized as one of the most effective ways of preventing transmission of the coronavirus.

On the other hand, the nation has a vast oversupply of face shields because universities and companies took up the challenge of manufacturing personal protective equipment. But we know that face shields are an inadequate substitute for face masks. And even wearing a mask does not negate the need for physical distancing, frequent hand-washing and the like.

The lack of clarity permeates national and state guidelines. The 6-foot physical distancing rule is arbitrary. So is the guideline against being closer than 6 feet to an infected person for more than 15 minutes during a day. Depending on the circumstances, it may be that coronavirus droplets travel farther well over 6 feet of distance, or far less. A person may become infected in fewer than 15 minutes, or not at all.

Further uncertainty surrounds the long-awaited vaccines. For the life of me (no pun intended), I can't understand why certain hospitals agreed to wait hours to begin vaccinations in an orchestrated media event with Gov. Brown, rather than starting immediately as Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Ontario did.

By the way, though the new vaccines are deemed highly effective in protecting people from developing COVID-19 symptoms, it's unknown whether they stop asymptomatic individuals from transmitting the coronavirus.

On Thursday, the Oregon Health Authority finally announced who would serve on its 27-member Vaccine Advisory Committee, which will "determine the sequence in which new COVID-19 vaccines are distributed around the state."

I will get vaccinated when it's my turn. One family member, who works in federal law enforcement, already has received his first shot. Fatigue was the main side effect.

And so, as this new year begins, I wish good health to all Oregonians — physically, mentally, economically, educationally and socially. Please do your part to stop the coronavirus from spreading to anyone, including you and me.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

THE LACK OF CLARITY PERMEATES NATIONAL AND STATE GUIDELINES. THE 6-FEET PHYSICAL DISTANCING RULE IS ARBITRARY. SO IS THE GUIDELINE AGAINST BEING CLOSER THAN 6 FEET TO AN INFECTED PERSON FOR MORE THAN 15 MINUTES DURING A DAY. DEPENDING ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT MAY BE THAT CORONAVIRUS DROPLETS TRAVEL FARTHER WELL OVER 6 FEET OF DISTANCE, OR FAR LESS. A PERSON MAY BECOME INFECTED IN FEWER THAN 15 MINUTES, OR NOT AT ALL.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thank you

This is a thank you to all of those who, when driving, use their turn signals, stop at stop signs, don't fly by going 5, 10, 15-plus mph over the limit and leave handicapped parking to the truly handicapped.

And to those who are respectful, considerate, kind, caring and helpful to others, and show thanks to those who are going above and beyond in these difficult times. Who are decent, willing to think of others before themselves. Who are aware of the thousands of Americans who are dying, not on fields of foreign wars, but right here on their native soil.

We're all tired and frustrated by the constraints put upon us, not by our leaders, but our own refusal to simply do as we're being asked to do. We are better than this, I know we are.

I believe in the greatness that is this country — a country built upon the sacrifices of those who've gone before us. Who gave freely of themselves. Personally, I'm going to honor them by doing my part, as best I can. As a patriot, it's the least I can do. My resolve has never been stronger.

Will you join me?

To all of you who continue to show empathy and consideration for your friends, neighbors and your communities daily, thank you.

NANCY GLARUM
Warrenton

Surprising occurrence

I'm writing about a surprising occurrence that was reported recently in The New York Times. It turns out that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democrat, of New York, and Sen. Ted Cruz, a Republican, of Texas, agreed on something.

That something was the fact that the COVID-19 spending bill, which comprises 5,593 (yes, 5,593) pages, was written entirely by a few select congresspersons and staff, was not reviewed by the majority of the Congress, and was presented for a vote with not more than a few hours for any discussion whatsoever.

The original Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which contained the first pandemic stimulus measures, was 335 pages long. It

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appears that the most recent spending bill contains everything but the kitchen sink.

If our representatives in Congress get only two hours to review a nearly 6,000-page document before voting on it up or

down, it is, thus, no small wonder that ordinary citizens feel disconnected and disenfranchised from government.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria