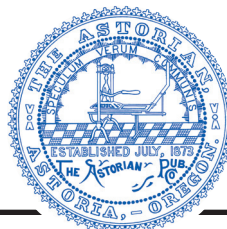


OPINION



the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

'It's all hands on deck'

Mark Kujala knows there might be some skepticism when he grades Clatsop County's response to the coronavirus pandemic so far as an A.

The Astorian and others have pressed the county Public Health Department for more information about virus cases so people might have a better understanding of the prevalence and potential health risks.

Nearly a year into the pandemic, though, the county has been fortunate not to have more hospitalizations and deaths from the disease.

"When we went into this, there was no playbook for us to put into place about what we were going to do, what roles should be assigned to who, what to expect," said Kujala, the new chairman of the county Board of Commissioners. "So I think about it much differently in January 2021 as I did in March 2020."



DERRICK DePLEGGE

Elected to the commission in 2018, Kujala represents District 1, which covers Warrenton, Hammond and the western portion of Astoria.

A former Warrenton mayor, Kujala owned Skipanon Brand Seafoods and served as membership director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce before becoming director of the Columbia Memorial Hospital Foundation.

In an interview, he explained his grade of the county's pandemic response, the challenges of sharing more information about the virus, his thoughts on the county's Resiliency Project and his view on the more conservative ideological makeup of the commission.

Q: On a scale of A to F, how do you grade the county's response so far to the coronavirus pandemic?

A: I am grading it as an A.

Q: Why?

A: Back in March, the county stood up the incident management team, and that included our emergency management folks, but it was headed by Mike McNickle, who is our county health director.

It also brought in (emergency manager) Tiffany Brown; we had the public information officer, Tom Bennett; Don Bohn, our manager; Monica Steele, to talk about finances and what financial relief was available throughout this; and we met every day — on weekends as well — in anticipation of getting that first case.

I was just really impressed in the fact that in such a short period of time, with the information changing almost by the hour, that this group was able to kind of react, get some plans in place, knowing that we needed PPE (personal protective equipment), we needed to have a plan in place for when we got that first case.

We had Dr. (Ellen) Heinritz as the deputy chief, who was giving us kind of that clinical perspective and, of course, had been leading the response when we had those first cases.

As they kind of went out into doing their jobs when we had the quarantine take place — securing quarantine facilities, assuring wraparound services for folks that were in quarantine, making sure you brought in Consejo Hispano, to make sure



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Mark Kujala is the new chairman of the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners.

that they could come in and do interpretation. Clatsop Community Action came in and provided food when people didn't have that.

So there was a coordinated response from the county health department. And it just grew. Obviously, we didn't know what to expect. As it kind of grew, there were gaps in what the county health department could do. We don't have the resources as other counties do.

But there were other groups that came in and kind of filled those gaps. They stood up the community testing site — drive-thru testing out at the household hazardous waste facility. That couldn't meet the demand. We kind of learned that there were a lot more people that wanted to get tested than they could do.

And so then Columbia Memorial Hospital, Providence Seaside Hospital, they propped up testing programs ...

So the county response has really been a county-wide response, a community response.

I feel like when we've had issues with distributing PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) funds, CEDR (Clatsop Economic Development Resources), Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, other chambers of commerce, have filled in the gaps there to help local businesses, to help individuals in the county.

So I've got to give it an A, because I think that there's been a really cooperative ... I was mentioning about the cities. The cities have been able to cooperate, when it's been closing the beaches. The sheriff's office has been a part of these meetings.

It's been something that has kind of grown over those initial meetings of this incident management team. I can't say anything but an A because there are some really dedicated people in that county health department and with the county administration that have been working just nonstop over these last 10 months.

Q: The Astorian and others have pressed the county to provide more details about coronavirus cases so people might get a better understanding of the risk and spread of the virus locally. We understand the county has to balance patient privacy and public transparency. What do you say to people who want more information?

A: It's a big challenge.

I think that when we have the health information privacy laws, we need to — we had that initial discussion in March, and Dr. Heinritz was a part of that discussion saying, 'We can provide the very

basics about who these people are.' Because we're a kind of small county, people can pinpoint who these people are. And just because you have COVID doesn't mean your right to privacy fades away.

We have to respect that. So it was decided early on — and there was guidance from Oregon Health Authority on this — to provide the persons, you know, male, female, age range, whether they live in North County, South County, or whether they have been hospitalized or are convalescing at home.

And that's really it. And I know that there's been some pushback on that, like, 'Listen, I want to know if this is in my community. I want to know some more information.'

But it was very clear from Dr. Heinritz from the beginning that we need to be very careful about this, because there are these protections in place — privacy protections — for individuals that are sick in our community. And we need to respect that.

And so that's been the case.

Q: Residents in Lewis and Clark have dug in against relocating the county's public works facility out of the tsunami inundation zone and into their rural neighborhood as part of the Resiliency Project. What do you see as the next steps in that project?

'I'M ELECTED TO A NONPARTISAN POSITION. AND SO MY ROLE IS REALLY TO WORK WITH ALL IDEOLOGIES THROUGHOUT OUR COUNTY. WE'RE GOING TO NEED TO WORK TOGETHER.'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The golden rule

A new year, new administration, new call to unity, healing and civility. Have not most of us wanted this through four grueling years of unrest?

Where was this call when violence erupted the moment former President Donald Trump took office? Can we only have unity and heal if we think alike? Oh, that we could respectfully agree to disagree.

It's a bitter pill to swallow this "new call" coming from those who have demonized the former administration with any and all supporters for the past four years.

Sadly, a local respected community leader, Lisa Lamping, recently had her home vandalized and hateful lies spewed over social media simply for peacefully exercising her support of former President Trump.

Countless intelligent, kind and good people of integrity are fearful of voicing their views because of the intolerance and vitriol so pervasive today.

How can this be? We all owe it to ourselves, to each other, to the founding ideals of this great nation to treat others with respect, honor and kindness; regardless of our differing views.

We are a nation founded on freedoms that can only exist with responses birthed from

"treating others as we would have them treat us." We are called to pray for our leaders, and all those in authority, so we can lead peaceful lives.

This call must cross any, and all, political, social and spiritual divides. Anything less breeds hate. Walk your talk, "be the change you want to see."

HARLEY and TONI MIETHE
Svensen

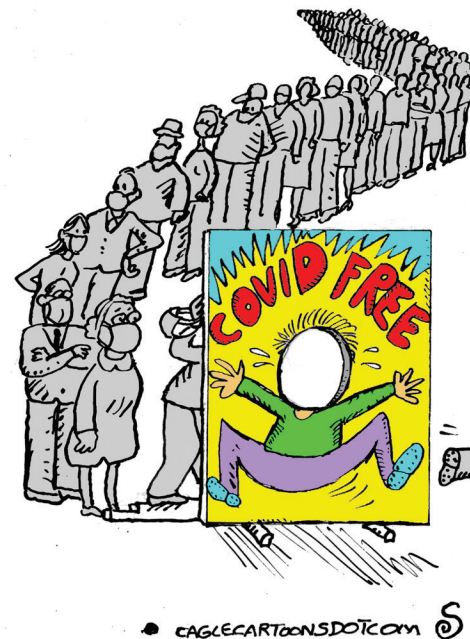
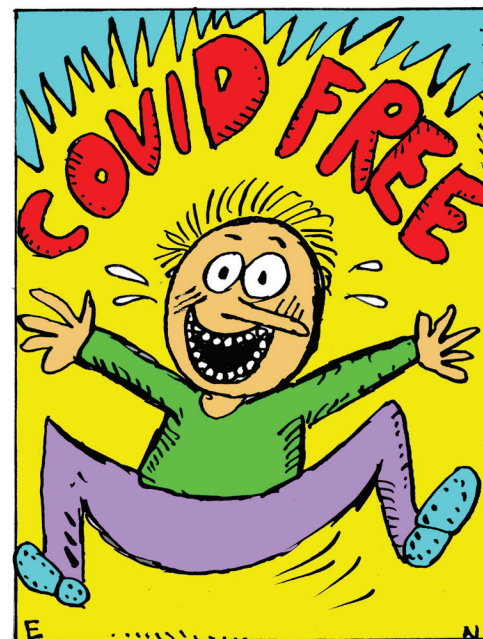
Angry

I was so angry about Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones' letter to Gov. Kate Brown, in which he asked her to allow quarter capacity in restaurants, that I compared it to the thinking of QAnon, on Facebook.

Of course, the degree to which Bruce was letting his bias inform his opinion wasn't anything near the run amok delusionality of QAnon, and the party it's largely associated with, but it was wrong on many levels.

At the time of his letter, over 100,000 Americans had lost their lives in the past five weeks, the nation was crossing the 400,000 lives lost and we were racing towards 500,000 ... 600,000 ... It's no time for anyone to ask what fewer restrictions can be placed upon us.

Claiming the science didn't show that



restaurants operating at quarter capacity were unsafe was what made me furious. So much harm is done in this world by people distorting science.

It is certain that people being unmasked and spending prolonged time with each other allows the virus to spread among them, and those who interact with them, whether that is at full capacity or quarter capacity.

I understand the severe economic stress

restaurant owners are facing, and it is that stress that is interpreting the science, not the science itself.

I would have understood an honest plea to the governor, one that acknowledged the trade-off between economic survival and putting more lives at risk — that, at least, I could have respected, even if I place a higher value on life.

MICHAELA. "SASHA" MILLER
Salem