

OPINION

the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘We’re going to learn from this’

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the often stark contrasts between Oregon counties. “Having come from a larger county and the resources of a larger county, I can’t tell you the difference,” Clatsop County Manager Don Bohn said. “When you think about responding to a pandemic, a lot of it has been done with a handful of people for a year. And we have mobilized by sending people from every department in the organization to help with the response.” Bohn, a former assistant county administrator for Washington County, was hired as the county manager in 2019.

While recognizing some imperfections, he praised the partnerships with cities, schools, social services agencies, hospitals and businesses to help contain the spread of the virus.

“This has been a good example, where in a rural community, it takes the whole community,” he said.

In an interview, Bohn graded the county’s pandemic response, explained what the county could have done differently, discussed the tension between patient privacy and transparency and talked about the lessons for emergency planning.

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

A: Counties provide a lot of essential services, and it ranges from public safety to roads and all things in between. Providing effective and efficient services is what the goal is on all those different levels.

So when I think about how well we have performed, I recognize that the most important thing is that local government shows up when people need us the most.

So if I look at it through that lens, and I look at it, Did we show up? Were we effective? Were we competent? Were we collaborative? And were we compassionate? And I look at those five factors, I would say we’ve scored high, and I’d give us an A.

When I say an A, it doesn’t mean I think it’s perfect. This is a pandemic. What I’ve learned through the pandemic is anything that I thought was routine or typical is not routine and typical during a pandemic.

So I want to also say that the county is one responder. The county couldn’t have done this without volunteers, our partners, businesses, our employees. And, really, when you look at it, I give everybody a high mark, because this is a pandemic, and we showed up, we were effective and we got things done.

Q: From a management perspective, what, if anything, would the county have done differently?

A: I think there’s a lot of things, upon retrospect, that the county will look at and say that we could have maneuvered one degree this way, two degrees that way.



Don Bohn is the Clatsop County manager.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

‘THE PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE HAS BEEN UNFUNDED AT EVERY LEVEL FOR DECADES. AND SO WE NEED TO FUND PUBLIC HEALTH, AND THAT DOESN’T MEAN JUST FOR THE PANDEMICS.’

Don Bohn | Clatsop County manager

I first heard of COVID when I was about three months into my tenure with the county. We declared an emergency around five months with the county. And so my orientation to the county came through the fire, really, of the pandemic.

When I look back, though, there is one thing that I would do differently from day one. And that is I would have instituted a more formal incident management structure from day one. And in doing so I would have reached out to expertise and resources from the community to have them be part of our team from the get-go.

I think that would have fortified and really organized our response from the beginning. As you would recall, the pandemic, when it first was here, it was kind of a slow rolling event. I think if I would have organized it more formally sooner, it would have helped us throughout this long trajectory of the pandemic.

Q: We understand patient privacy protections, but we also believe the county is legally able to provide more demographic information about virus cases. Do you anticipate the county will release a breakdown of virus cases by race and zip code?

A: That’s something that we are talking within public health about. Right now, there’s just some practical resource limitations as we’re dealing with the vaccination process.

What I have learned coming here from a much larger county, is that the resource limitations does impact our capacities.

I think that as we go through this, the

county is interested in providing information that is helpful to understand the pandemic. There is this tension between privacy and transparency, and rightfully so, there’s a lot of laws about it. And I think that all rural counties, and I would even say urban counties, have a difficulty navigating beyond what those rules are. We take a lot of our direction from OHA (Oregon Health Authority), CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and others.

But I do think that transparency is a hallmark of good government, and so I will say that we are talking about that and we will provide as much information as we can as we move forward.

Q: In September, the public health director said the county would try to follow the state’s threshold for reporting workplace outbreaks. Since then, the Oregon Health Authority has disclosed outbreaks at Skanska at Astoria Middle School, Clatsop Retirement Village, Big River Excavating, Columbia Memorial Hospital and Pacific Seafood. While we appreciate the state’s practice, why hasn’t the county shared this information first, if only to prevent time gaps in the reporting?

A: Again, that’s something that we’re talking about. We have really relied upon the state and have been following the state’s reporting guidelines.

When the outbreaks do happen, we have been — from my understanding — waiting for the state to report them. And I’ve been talking with public health now

about the options for us to report sooner if we know of something.

Those conversations are ongoing. As you know, we have new leadership within public health. And so that is an ongoing conversation.

What I’ve learned is that a lot of things in the pandemic are just iterative. We are making adjustments all the time. We’re learning as we go. And this is one of those areas, as well.

I think, practically speaking, as challenging as this last year has been on every imaginable level — from personal to professional — we are going to do a comprehensive look back. When I say ‘we,’ I mean the collective ‘we’ — state, federal government, local governments. We’re going to do a look back and we’re going to learn from this. We’re going to figure out what are the systems that need to be in place so that the data and the reporting requirements that the community needs comes naturally out of all the systems that have been structured.

Part of the challenge has been is that some of that data doesn’t naturally flow from the systems that are structured. And so then it doesn’t happen in the way that all of us would really prefer. But when you’re in the response mode, it’s not the best time to reconnoiter processes and procedures.

I think that is one of the many examples of some of the improvements that will be made as we move forward.

Q: What lessons has the county learned from the pandemic that can be used to prepare for future public health emergencies or disasters?

A: The first thing is that we need to support infrastructure in nonemergency times.

We need to have some fundamental staffing levels. We need to have plans. We need to be training to those plans constantly. And we need to build a larger support structure around response that has to go beyond county staff alone.

We need to become much more formal and much more definitive in our commitment to that process. The reality is emergency management can become one of those other duties, one of those planning processes that you do when you can, when you’re not dealing with the here and now.

It’s too important.

I think what we’ve seen is that, this pandemic, it has lasted a year so far and it’s not over. If you listen to the experts, it’s not going to be potentially the only one that we’re faced with.

I think that we have to seriously commit to the public health infrastructure. The public health infrastructure has been unfunded at every level for decades. And so we need to fund public health, and that doesn’t mean just for the pandemics, but we need to have a more stable funding level in the nonpandemic times, so that when the pandemics do happen, we’re already prepared as much as we can possibly be.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Special character

I am so grateful to the Astoria Co+op for offering me the option of picking up my groceries without going into the store. I really cannot tell you what a great boon this option has been for me. I am 71, with asthma.

When the pandemic became an undeniable reality, I followed the guidance and hunkered down in my home. But I worried about grocery shopping, even as the folks at the co-op did their best to make the store — the new magnificent store — safe for all.

Last March, the co-op introduced grocery pickup. And since that time, my groceries have always been ready on time, and always delivered to the trunk of my car with a smile.

I am now fully vaccinated. And in the coming days I will be able to resume in-store shopping, and truly, I can’t wait — what’s more fun than shopping at the Astoria Co+op?

I made it through the last year without contracting COVID-19, and the employees at the co-op are a big part of my success. By finding a way to continue to provide me with the healthy and safe food I rely on, they made my life easier in hard times.

The co-op’s willingness to contribute this service, free of charge, to people in the community who needed extra help to get safely through these times, reflects the special character of the co-op: Strong and kind and generous.

CATHY CRUIKSHANK
Astoria

Words have power

It is sickening, and saddens me, the senseless slaughter of the eight people this past week, predominantly Asian women.

The murderer was a young Caucasian man, said to be very religious and a sex addict. How does this all jive? Murder, sex and religion? But where does this start?

When the one term, twice impeached former president inaccurately called COVID-19 the “China virus” or “kung flu,” I was appalled with his reprehensible rhetoric. It is not only ignorant, but callous and insensitive. Words have power.

Whether it is Asian Americans, Native Americans, Black or brown, men, women, gay or straight — we are all Americans; America has been known as the melting pot, and that diversity is our strength.

I was encouraged to see President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris immediately speak out against this senseless violence against Asians and women. What is the common thread with the uptick in violence the past four years?

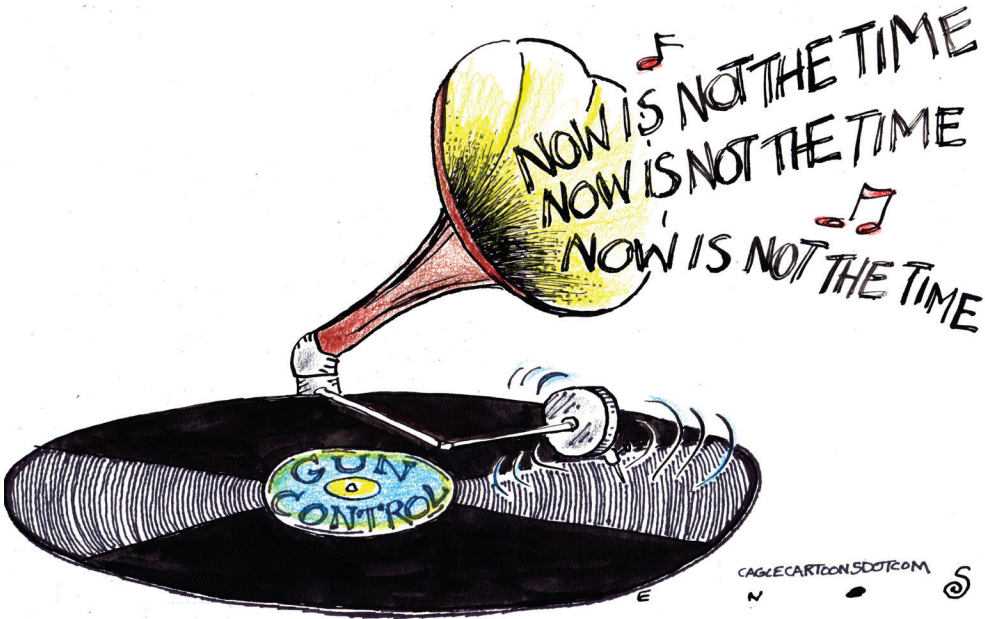
Violence in our nation’s Capitol when the electoral votes were being counted? What words encouraged that?

Misogyny? Bigotry? Xenophobia? Homophobia? If these words are unfamiliar, or you think you may have this affliction, please use the dictionary.

“Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds.” — Thomas Jefferson

Words have power.

LaREE JOHNSON
Astoria



Really clear

James Hoffman presents a letter to the editor that is full of lies.

Former President Donald Trump may have made it acceptable to flat-out lie about everything, but let’s be really clear about one thing. The truth matters.

Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. In this age of information it is easier than ever to fact check and learn and know the truth.

Here are facts, easily verified, that counteract Hoffman’s opinions:

Presidents do not control the price of gasoline, they never have.

Democrats are not raising taxes at every turn, nor are they trying to take away anyone’s right to keep and bear arms.

Homelessness and crime, as well as the

need to fund solutions to these problems, cross political lines and exist throughout the nation.

Immigrants are not pouring into this country, or Oregon for that matter, at a rate higher than ever before.

The deadliest drugs, the drugs killing the most Americans, are legal and made in America.

And finally, the 2020 election had a record-breaking voter turnout. People literally did get off their butts and vote like never before.

If we are ever to return to having a functional government, we are going to have to return to facts and bipartisanship. Leaders at all levels of government, no matter who they are or who they represent, are going to have to work together and make this country work for everyone.

CHRISTINA BUCK
Seaside