

# OPINION



# the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

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**KARI BORGEN**  
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**DERRICK DePLEDGE**  
Editor

**SHANNON ARLINT**  
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**JOHN D. BRUIJN**  
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## GUEST COLUMN

# Nuggets for spicing your holiday chatter

As you gather 'round the holiday table, or seek to converse via Zoom, where will your small talk take you? Fear not, dear readers, for I offer the following nuggets of news for spicing your chatter.

Each tidbit is intriguing but doesn't merit a column on its own. The late Oregon columnist Ron Blankenbaker referred to such items as "pieces of string too short to save."



**DICK HUGHES**

Without further ado, and in no particular order ...

- When the Oregon Employment Department eventually rolls out its new technology, Oregonians will know whom to thank, or blame: Frances.

The IT project will handle unemployment insurance and the future paid family and medical leave insurance program. The project is long from completion. But last week officials announced, "Exciting news! The name of our new modernized system." The name they chose honors Frances Perkins, who was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's long-serving secretary of labor.

- Mike Cully's demise is one of the strangest I can recall. The League of Oregon Cities' executive director got into a Twitter fight — about tipping fast food workers — with Beaverton Mayor Lacey Beaty. Really.

Beaty filed a complaint with the league about Cully's inappropriate and reportedly profane language. The league board accepted Cully's resignation last week. By the way, Cully's profile on LinkedIn refers to his "Transformative Leadership."

- By next summer, Oregon will have been under a COVID-19 state of emergency for more than two years. Last week, Gov. Kate Brown extended her pandemic emergency declaration through June 30.

- As of Thursday afternoon, 12 Democrats and 11 Republicans had filed to run for Oregon governor. Former New York Times columnist Nick Kristof is the latest, filing last week as a Democrat. Kristof resides on the family farm outside Yamhill. But as was first reported by Oregon Public Broadcasting, state election officials want more information before determining whether he meets the three-year residency requirement.



Unity, Oregon, was on the U.S. Census Bureau's list of holiday-sounding places.

The filings are for the May 17 primary election for the Republican and Democratic parties. They do not include independent candidates, such as former state Sen. Betsy Johnson.

Now that Oregon courts have upheld the congressional legislative redistricting maps, candidates can begin filing on Jan. 1 to run for U.S. representative, state senator and state representative. Filing continues through March 8. Unlike candidates for the U.S. House, legislative candidates must live within their district.

- What will the 60-member Oregon House look like in 2023? Women — 22 Democrats and 12 Republicans — are in the majority. The newest member is Rep. Jessica George, R-St. Paul, who was sworn in this month to replace former Rep. Bill Post, R-Keizer. He resigned after moving to Nevada.

There could have been a 35th woman in the House. The Marion County commissioners, all Republicans, selected Salem City Councilor Chris Hoy over three women applicants to finish the term of former Rep. Brian Clem, D-Sa-

lem, who resigned. By law, an appointed legislator must be from the same political party as the person who left the office.

Meanwhile, a number of House members are forgoing reelection and choosing to retire or seek higher office. The most recent announcements include Rep. Sheri Schouten, D-Beaverton, who is retiring, and Rep. Raquel Moore-Green, R-Salem, who is running for the Senate.

Schouten's story is unique. She met her future husband, then-Washington County Commissioner Dick Schouten, on the campaign trail. Both were widowed. During then-Rep. Malstrom's first term in 2017, he proposed to her on the House floor. The next year, Gov. Brown officiated at their wedding.

- The Legislature officially has two new top managers. Interim Legislative Administrator Brett Hanes had "interim" removed from his title. Legislative Administration includes human resources, facilities, finance, information technology and visitor services. Amanda Beitel was named legislative fiscal offi-

cer, leading the nonpartisan staff that works on state budgets and analyzes the fiscal impact of legislation.

- Legislators participated from all over for Friday's virtual meeting of the Emergency Board, which appointed Beitel. Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, called in from the Walla Walla Regional Airport in Washington state. Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, was on video from his car. (He said he wasn't driving.)

The Club for Growth Foundation has gathered statistics on individual legislators' attendance. The average state senator in Oregon missed 7% of floor votes during this year's regular legislative session, compared with 8% for state representatives. A few lawmakers scored perfect attendance.

- Sen. Chris Gorsek, D-Troutdale, said the Oregon Task Force on School Safety will take a deep look into school resource officers next year. Gorsek opposes their unilateral removal from schools. He is a task force member, a former police officer and a longtime instructor of criminal justice at Mount Hood Community College.

- The new president of the Oregon Farm Bureau comes from the state's most populous county, Multnomah. Angi Bailey operates a Gresham nursery that specializes in Japanese maples. Elected this month to a two-year term, she has filled the presidential role since last spring when Barb Iverson stepped aside for health reasons.

- U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio recently announced big money for Oregon from the federal infrastructure bill — \$662 million for improving roads, highways and bridges, and \$42 million for airports. U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici announced \$92 million from that same legislation to fix and expand drinking water and wastewater systems in Oregon.

- Thanks to successful petition drives, voters in Douglas and Klamath counties will consider May ballot measures that would take small steps toward the possibility of eastern and southern Oregon becoming part of Idaho.

- In its list of holiday-sounding places, the U.S. Census Bureau includes Unity, Oregon. The town in Baker County has 40 residents. No mention is made of unincorporated Christmas Valley in Lake County. The Census Bureau also says the U.S. has more bookstores than either home-improvement centers or department stores. Really.

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

## GUEST COLUMN

# Give patients a choice on pain management

The terrible pain caused by the opioid crisis has reached every community in our state — and our country.

So many of us have heard from Oregonians whose loved ones died from an opioid overdose after struggling with addiction — all because they filled an opioid prescription. And our nation's overdose death rate soared to record highs during the coronavirus public health emergency.

Preliminary data released by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in August show that fatal drug overdose in 2020 rose nearly 30%, to a record-setting 93,331 deaths. Opioids, including prescription pain medication, caused a staggering three-quarters of those deaths — a record 69,710 lives lost. Sadly, Oregon has been hit hard with a nearly 44% increase in overdose deaths over the past two years.

Putting a stop to this opioid crisis requires a multifaceted response with economic and social dimensions. It also requires us to look at the underlying policy and commercial factors that drove the epidemic to reach such staggering heights of tragedy and despair.

Health care providers have taken steps to try to reduce the contribution of prescription drugs to the opioid epidemic.

According to the American Medical Association, physicians and other health care professionals' use of state Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs increased 64.4% and opioid prescriptions decreased by 37.1% from 2014 to 2019. Yet, opioid overdoses continue to be a problem, largely driven by illicit forms of opioids.



Patrick Semansky/AP Photo

The NOPAIN Act would create an equal playing field that gives doctors and their patients more autonomy when choosing between differing opioid or nonopioid treatments.

**THIS LEGISLATION WOULD ADDRESS THE BARRIERS WITHIN MEDICARE REIMBURSEMENT POLICIES THAT DISCOURAGE PROVIDERS FROM OFFERING NONOPIOID PAIN MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES TO PATIENTS UNDERGOING SURGERY.**

Health care providers need access to a variety of options to manage their patients' pain, but often administrative and financial barriers get in the way of comprehensive, multidisciplinary pain care and rehabilitation programs.

In order to increase access to safe and effective nonopioids across America's health care landscape, we are pushing for passage of the bipartisan Non-Opioids Pre-

vent Addiction in the Nation (NOPAIN) Act. This legislation would address the barriers within Medicare reimbursement policies that discourage providers from offering nonopioid pain management alternatives to patients undergoing surgery.

Under the current system, Medicare does not allow adequate reimbursement for alternatives to opioids. Instead, the program shoehorns almost all nonopioid pain

management treatments — drugs, devices and biologics — used in outpatient surgery into payment packages that don't allow for separate reimbursement for individual treatments. As a result, providers can either take the financial hit of prescribing the alternative pain management treatments or be fully reimbursed when they prescribe opioids — even if alternatives would be more appropriate for the patient.

That's why it is critical to pass the NOPAIN Act.

By directing Medicare to allocate separate reimbursement for U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved pain management alternatives, we can ensure patients undergoing a surgical procedure have a choice when deciding which treatment is best for them.

Importantly, this legislation would not prohibit or stifle patient access to physician-prescribed opioids for chronic or acute pain in any way. Instead, the NOPAIN Act would create an equal playing field that gives doctors and their patients more autonomy when choosing between differing opioid or nonopioid treatments.

With so much pain and hardship wrought by the opioid epidemic, Congress must spearhead innovative policy remedies that help address the structural causes of the crisis. The NOPAIN Act is one such remedy. By fixing Medicare's reimbursement policy to ensure patients across the country have a choice between differing pain management treatments, we can help combat one of the major drivers of this addiction epidemic.

*U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat, is a sponsor of the NOPAIN Act. Dr. David Russo is a psychiatrist and pain management specialist at Columbia Pain Management, PC, in Hood River and a member of the Oregon Medical Association. This guest column is part of a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.*