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OUR VIEW

Pendleton council owes us honesty

Pendleton's city council is talking in circles, trying desperately not to say the only two things councilors can possibly say about the city's terrible roads.

Either:

1) Sorry, it's too expensive. We can't fix your street.

Or:

2) We're going to tax you an egregious amount to begin a long, slow slog to getting Pendleton's roads back up to code.

Obviously, neither of these are answers residents want to hear. But what other correct response is there?

Council members have tried all sorts of mixed metaphors and unwieldy analogies to describe this crisis. But enough is enough. Taxpayers are owed some honesty here, and council should stop with the hemming and hawing and come out with it.

Voters need to know the plan. Maybe not the computer algorithm that shows where our money is best used. But we need to know how increased funding is going to do more than just coat the problem with a thin layer of asphalt. We need to know how funds raised by a proposed fuel tax and utility fee will be used. We need to know what the city's philosophy is for fixing streets — do we continue to do upkeep on our best, most-traveled thoroughfares, or do we do some costly renovations and improve our worst neighborhood cul de sacs? We need to know how development and growth will reduce the tax burden on the city's stagnant population.

Because unless they see that plan spelled out, it will be hard to convince voters that a gas tax is something they can get behind. We all know the city's roads need fixing. And the longer we delay, the more decrepit our roads will become and the more it will cost us to restore them. Currently, we don't have the money to make even minimal headway on the problem, and that is true about a budget inflated with the two new sources of revenue (fuel tax and utility fee).

So what's the plan Stan?

It's clear that right now voters are suspicious of the council's ability to spend their money wisely. We want better infrastructure, but we sure as heck don't want our dollars to go toward building a road to an empty industrial park, or to a bridge traveled by just a few cars per day. And Barnhardt Road and the Eighth Street Bridge have been the costly infrastructure priorities for council recently — along with the unpopular upgrades to the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport and Main Street.

> It is going to take decades of financial prudence, increased taxes and fees, cost cutting and economic growth to get out from under Pendleton's road problem.

Obviously, city council is in a no-win situation. It took decades of mismanagement, poor budgeting and bad leadership to get us to this position. It will take decades of financial prudence, increased taxes and fees, cost cutting and economic growth to get us out of it.

And city council won't say it, so I guess we have to. The poor souls who live on Perkins who organized and stood before council to tell their tale are not going to get a new street. Neither are the hundreds of others who live on streets that are just as damaged. The city cannot institute a gas tax and then take all those nickels and have just one tiny, shiny street to show for it.

We need a plan, long term and realistic. We don't need city government to beat around the bush: we need to know how hard it's going to be and how expensive it's going to be. Because it will be both, no matter how long council tries to dance around that fact.

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Obama's flexible climate fix

JOE NOCERA
Comment

For many years, I used to spend at least part of the summer in the gorgeous Laurentides region of Quebec, an hour northwest of Montreal. By the mid-1980s, with each return trip, I could see a growing environmental threat to the area's beauty: More and more trees were dying. When I asked people what was happening, the answer was simple: "pluie acide," or acid rain, a form of pollution caused by sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides that were spewing from coal-fired power plants in America.

A decade or so later, the trees had stopped dying. An environmental disaster had been averted. What had happened?

The answer was that the administration of the first President George Bush, working hand in glove with the Environmental Defense Fund, devised a market-based plan, now known as cap-and-trade, to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions. Congress passed it in 1990. The brilliance of the scheme is that while it set emissions targets, it did not tell power companies how to meet those targets, allowing them a great deal of flexibility. It also provided a financial incentive: Companies that cut their pollution beyond their caps could trade their leftover emission allowances to companies that were having trouble staying under the limit.

Industry officials and many state officials complained bitterly about the new system, saying it would be costly and tie companies up in regulatory knots. But that's not what happened. "Industry had incentive to innovate," recalls Fred Krupp, the president of the Environmental Defense Fund. As an interim measure, power companies began using low-sulfur coal while they worked to come up with better and more affordable scrubbers. Today, average levels of sulfur dioxide pollution are 76 percent lower than they were in 1990. The cost has been far less than the critics feared.

On Monday afternoon, President Barack Obama unveiled his Clean Power Plan, formalizing some tough new rules from the Environmental Protection Agency that are aimed at reducing the carbon emitted by power companies. There is no bigger source of carbon pollution; the goal is that by 2030, carbon emissions will be reduced by 32 percent from their 2005 level. In the fight against climate change, nothing is more important.

Once again, opponents are up in arms, forecasting calamity for the utility industry if the rules are allowed to stand, with at least a dozen states planning to sue the EPA. The attorney general of West Virginia, Patrick Morrisey, has said the regulations would lead to "reduced jobs, higher electricity rates" and increased stress on the power grid. Mississippi's Republican governor, Phil Bryant, described the EPA plan as "burdensome."

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And then there's Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, whose state, Kentucky, is in the heart of coal country. He has openly called on states to defy the EPA. On Monday, he described the new rules as "a triumph of blind ideology over sound policy and honest compassion."

But just as with the acid rain controversy, the opponents of the new emission-reduction rules have it exactly backward. The EPA rules have a far greater chance of creating jobs, being less burdensome and epitomizing sound public policy than the opposite.

The single most important fact about the new regulations is that they don't tell utilities how to get their emissions down. Instead, they allow the states flexibility to figure out how to lower their own emissions. Some may choose a cap-and-trade system — as California and nine states in the Northeast have already done to great effect. (In California, for instance, carbon intensity — the amount of carbon pollution per million dollars of gross domestic product — is down 23 percent from 2001, while its GDP has grown.) They can stress energy efficiency or renewable energy. They can offer incentives to push innovations that would make carbon capture more affordable, which would allow for the continued use of coal, still America's most plentiful energy source. Or they can do all of the above. Since many of these things are already happening, the new government policy is really just giving industry an extra shove in the right direction.

Jim Rogers, the former chief executive of Duke Energy, told me that he thinks natural gas could serve as the same kind of bridge to emission-lowering technology that low-sulfur coal was in the acid rain days. The point is, there is really no reason the Clean Power Plan won't work — except for political intransigence, which is far worse today than it was during the first Bush administration.

In his 2010 book, "The Climate War," Eric Pooley, the former managing editor of Fortune who has since become the Environmental Defense Fund's communication chief, notes that the whole time officials at the fund were working on cap-and-trade to solve the acid rain problem, climate change was never far from their thoughts. They wanted to prove, with sulfur dioxide emissions, that a flexible, market-based system worked — and would work for carbon emissions as well.

It did. And it will.

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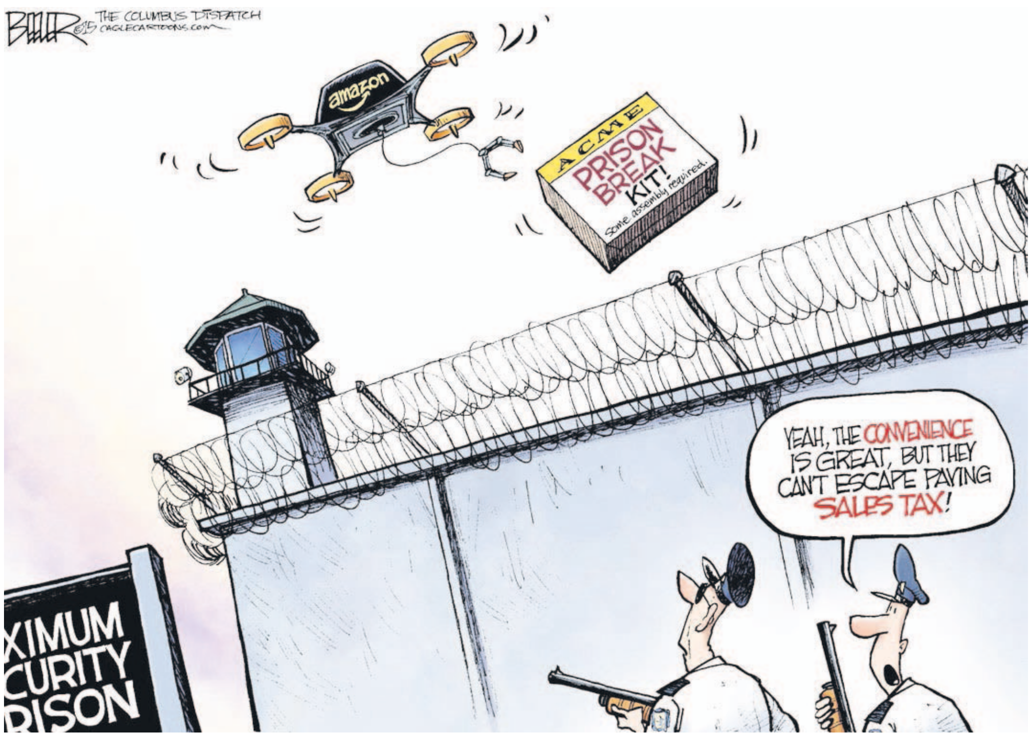
Joe Nocera is an Op-Ed columnist, joining The New York Times in April 2011.



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