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OUR VIEW

Contested races key to well-functioning county government

Umatilla County's three commissioners are among the most important elected positions in northeast Oregon. They are the main tools local voters have to help shape and direct how our communities will look and operate in the future.

Such important positions cannot be lifelong appointments, and those seats must be contested often so local government operates as efficiently as possible. Only with competition does the cream rise to the top. Only with debate and the free exchange of ideas will the best plan be uncovered.

Which is why we are imploring for contested races as a voting majority of the commission is up for grabs in 2018. That election season begins with the primary in May and ends with the general in November.

Both Larry Givens and George Murdock have declared they are running for re-election. For Givens, this would be his fourth, four-year term on the commission. For Murdock, who has had a seat since a 2013 special election, it would be his second full term.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

Important seats on county commissions cannot be lifetime appointments.

Perhaps they remain the best people for the job. But voters should be able to ask themselves every four years if that's still the case. And they should have alternatives to the status quo, should that be the direction they wish to go.

There are numerous Umatilla County residents in private enterprise, and others with experience in city government, who would be excellent candidates for the position. They should consider throwing their hat into the ring and trying for a promotion.

Recently, we have been heartened by city council elections in Hermiston and Pendleton that saw contested seats and public forums. Those contested races have made for better councils.

This re-energized civic engagement should translate to the county level. County commissioner is a lucrative post, with power and responsibility and a salary much higher than Umatilla County's average. Like any open, sought-after position in the county, it should draw plenty of qualified applicants.

OTHER VIEWS

Colorado's intriguing tale of two drugs

The San Francisco Chronicle

America has been trying and failing to forcibly prevent people from using their drugs of choice since before Prohibition. A new study provides the latest evidence of a drug epidemic stemmed by the opposite approach.

Colorado's marijuana legalization coincided with a reversal of a long-standing rise in opioid-related deaths, according to research published in the American Journal of Public Health. Having climbed consistently since 2000, the toll has fallen 6 percent since legal cannabis sales began in 2014, inviting the suspicion that one far less dangerous drug is substituting for the other.

The researchers caution that their findings are preliminary given the novelty of legalization. They also note that marijuana, which carries no risk of fatal overdose, may bring other perils, such as car accidents. And Colorado officials told the Denver Post that other factors, including recently expanded access to the overdose antidote

naloxone, may be playing an important role.

But after controlling for opioid policy changes and examining the data in neighboring states that didn't unleash recreational marijuana, the researchers believe they can credit legal cannabis with saving about eight Coloradans a year. Moreover, many other studies have supported similar conclusions, demonstrating marijuana's efficacy in treating pain and its tendency to replace some opioid use — precisely contrary to the "gateway drug" theory long propounded by drug warriors.

There has certainly been more than enough research to advise against the return to reefer madness being advocated by the nation's chief marijuana-phobe, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, as well as the counterproductive slow-walking of California's legalization in places as diverse as Fresno and San Francisco. Public policy should distinguish among drugs based on objective measures of risk, not subjective judgments of those using them.

Marijuana legalization coincided with reversal of rise in opioid-related deaths.

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- U.S. SENATORS: Ron Wyden, Jeff Merkley, Greg Walden
REPRESENTATIVES: Greg Barreto, District 58; Greg Smith, District 57
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OTHER VIEWS

Is the tone of Trump-Russia probe changing?

Have you noticed? In recent public comments, the lawmakers investigating the Trump-Russia affair, along with some of the commentators who dissect its every development, seem to be focusing more on the facts of Russia's attempts to interfere with the 2016 election and less on allegations that Donald Trump or his associates colluded with those efforts.



BYRON YORK
Comment

Some of that could be just an impression. But the fact is, the subjects that have dominated discussion of the Trump-Russia matter lately — Facebook and other social media ads and the most recent update from Senate Intelligence Committee leaders Richard Burr and Mark Warner — do not necessarily point toward collusion. Rather, more often than not, the latest talk points toward Russian "active measures," that is, the effort to disrupt the 2016 campaign.

Why the change? "Because that's where the evidence is going," one lawmaker who follows the matter closely told me in a text exchange. "I mean, things could always change, but that observation is just the reality of the situation right now, as I see it."

"Because they've been spinning their wheels on something for which evidence has yet to emerge," said another lawmaker. "I think it's 1) the Mueller probe means that stuff (allegations of collusion) is sort of in his wheelhouse now," said yet another lawmaker, "and 2) I think there's recognition that Trump himself is unlikely to be implicated in this."

In a recent speech to the San Mateo County, California Republican Party, House Intelligence Committee chairman Devin Nunes said that at this moment investigators have more evidence of Democrats colluding with Russians than of President Trump doing so.

The Russian effort to interfere in the election was always supposed to be the heart of the investigation. And if the Russian plot were in fact the only subject of the probe, there would probably be a lot of bipartisan agreement and cooperation. But the investigation early on included allegations of collusion and has been politically radioactive since.

In recent days, one of the president's chief accusers, Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, has found himself pushing back against suggestions there's not much evidence of collusion.

"If it was so obvious, it if were so egregious, you should have known by now,"

CNN's Chris Cuomo, paraphrasing the investigation's critics, asked Schiff earlier this month.

"Well, no one's saying this was obvious," Schiff answered. "Obviously, there was a deep interest in the Russians in keeping their work hidden. But you can't say there's no evidence of collusion."

"We've seen even in the public realm, I think, very graphic evidence that the Trump campaign was willing to collude with the Russians," Schiff continued. That was most likely a reference to the infamous June 2016 Trump Tower meeting which Kremlin-connected Russians enticed Donald Trump Jr. into attending by promising dirt on Hillary Clinton. In fact, the Russians wanted to push their goal of killing the Magnitsky Act, and the meeting, by all accounts, ended quickly. But Schiff argues that it suggests the willingness to collude, if not collusion itself.

"So you can't say even in the public realm, let alone what we're looking at (in secret), that there's no evidence," Schiff concluded. "Now, is there proof beyond a reasonable doubt? Are we ready to announce a conclusion? We're not there yet."

For his part, Senate Intel chief Burr recently noted that one part of the committee's probe was "to look into any collusion by either campaign during the 2016 elections."

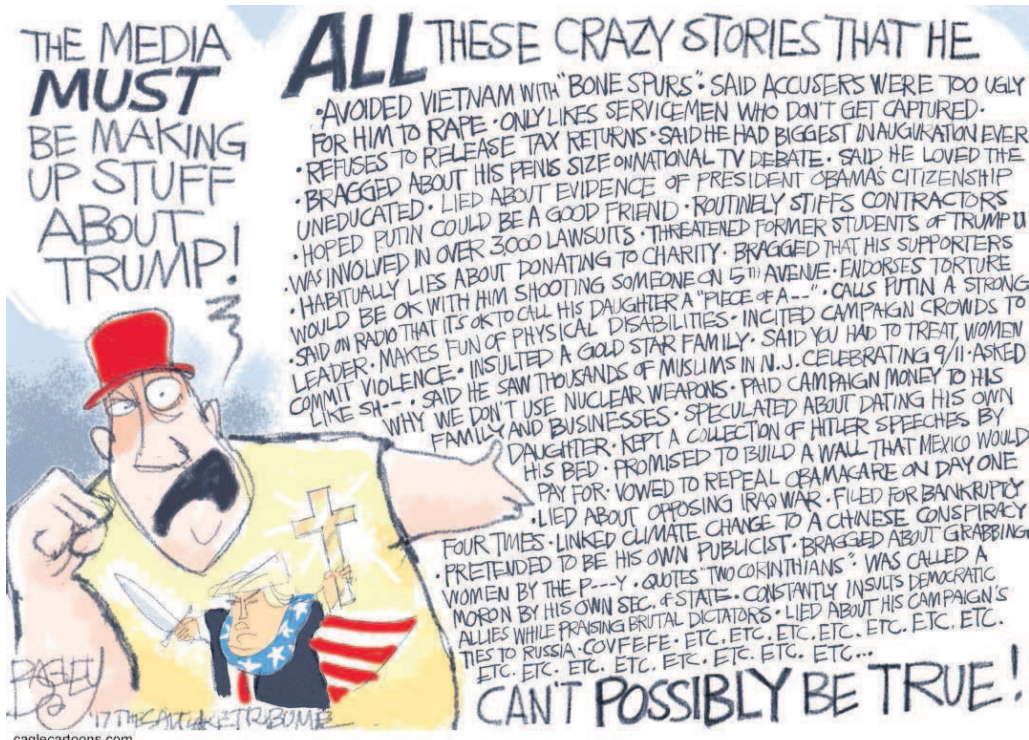
The "by either campaign" was a point not heard much in public discussion of the investigation. (After all, some investigators looking into the Trump dossier characterize it as Democrats paying Kremlin-linked Russians for compromising information on Donald Trump.) In any event, under questioning by reporters, Burr said the probe into collusion is still open and the committee "continues to look into all evidence to see if there was any hint of collusion." But he gave no indication one way or the other about what had been found.

None of this is definitive. And that's without noting that the Mueller investigation appears to be going full steam, although in precisely what direction is not publicly known.

But the tone of the public discussion seems to be changing — away from collusion and toward Russia. Yet another lawmaker agreed that appears to be the case, and in a text message suggested there's a simple reason: "Maybe reflects where they think it's heading."

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.

The subjects that have dominated discussion lately do not necessarily point toward collusion.



LETTERS POLICY

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