

OUR VIEW

The fire danger is climbing

We have made a point to bring up the danger from range and forest fires before on this page and in this space, but as the temperatures climb the risk bears repeating.

That is because the specter of last summer's forest fires — that consumed homes and inflicted millions in damages to the western part of the state — looms as our weather pattern continues hot and dry and thunderstorms become a common element.

Fire season has arrived earlier than usual, and a moment of complacency or carelessness while camping could ignite a fire that gobbles hundreds or thousands of acres.

While Mother Nature obviously plays a key role in the start of fires, the public also is an important part of prevention. Nationally, human-caused wildfires make up 87% of all wildfires each year. Almost all those fires could have been prevented.

So, the public, when out in the forests camping, does hold a great deal of responsibility regarding fire prevention.

No one wants to end a camping trip with a raging forest fire in the background, so it is important to remember the tips to keep safe. For one, make sure your vehicle or trailer is in good mechanical working condition. Sparks from a chain as it hits the pavement could cause a spark that shoots into a region of dry grass. Mufflers also should be in good working order.

Equipment is one leading cause of fires. Another is just plain carelessness. Common sense is crucial while out enjoying our state's vast public lands. While fire restrictions are already in place throughout the region, it is important the public understand that operating a generator next to a dry patch of grass probably is not a good idea.

Area fire managers are worried, and they should be. That is because the climate is going to get hotter across our state before it begins to cool off. Many forest areas are already far too dry and are, essentially, tinderboxes.

It is easy to shrug off the danger. To adopt a sort of "it's hot every year" philosophy would be an error. Our public lands are some of the greatest in the nation, they provide ample recreation opportunities for the residents of Eastern Oregon, and they deserve to be protected. That means all of us need to remember to use common sense and caution when we are out in the woods over the next few weeks.

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Celebrate good times, commemorate hard times



DANIEL WATTENBURGER
HOMEGROWN

Thank goodness we remember how to celebrate.

For the past 15 months, in-person gatherings have been one of the main culprits leading to the spread of COVID-19. This put a serious damper on the usual events and milestones that mark our lives.

As each person and household decided how they would navigate the many evolving health guidelines, parties lost their pizzazz. We ventured out to the extent we felt safe — keeping social circles small and precautions in mind — and didn't have the opportunity to mingle with the community at large.

I'm not calling June 30 the end of the COVID-19 era. At best it's the start of the third (and hopefully final) phase: post-vaccine. Everyone who wants a vaccine can get one, and as a state approximately 70% of eligible people have. Our numbers here in Umatilla County aren't nearly that good, and we'll

continue to feel the ill effects of the virus as people are resistant to immunizing themselves.

But today I'm thinking about celebration, not sickness. And the good news is that our regularly scheduled festivities are back on track.

Sunday, July 4, was a big example of that. Fireworks across the region and a grand opening of the new Funland Playground in Hermiston brought people back together.

The Funland grand opening embodied everything a community celebration should be. For starters, its goal is to enrich the lives of the next generation. It was created through the generous support of the community. And it was inaugurated with a crowd of smiling faces and lots of laughter.

I couldn't help but think of Jade McDowell's final column in the Hermiston Herald, published last week, about the three kinds of people who make up a town — the builders, the focusers and the complainers. Funland is a testament to the builders in Hermiston who are undeterred by obstacles. (If you haven't read the column, I highly recommend it.)

Celebrations often are the result of builders' hard work and commemorate

an accomplishment that can be enjoyed by everyone. The drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence, for instance, or the planning and set up of a local music festival. At their best they motivate us all to join in the building effort.

But sometimes they are simply the reaction to the end of a difficult time. They can help us move forward, leaving the past behind and simply enjoying the good things in life.

It's been a long year, and for many a lost year. Seeing loved ones for the first time, eating at your favorite restaurant, or watching your kids climb the to the top of the tallest playground slide they've ever seen are all good things to celebrate.

We still have difficult days ahead. But celebration is cathartic, and I hope everyone takes time to recognize what we've come through before we move on to our next challenges.

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YOUR VIEWS

A gift that doesn't give to most of us

A \$500,000 gift: That's the additional funding city hall has approved to provide the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce to promote tourism for the next two years. Though they are not requiring the chamber to develop any statistical parameters to evaluate the success or failure of their "Pendleton Comes Alive" program, they've been assured that this investment will bring thousands of tourists to downtown Pendleton for the free music, spending millions on food, drink and motels. I expect most will be local or from as far away as Helix, Pilot Rock, Athena and Weston.

Evidently, organizers are unaware the local area will be saturated with music events, especially in Walla Walla, a city our officials have idolized for years with their award-winning downtown area. If you've been there lately, you can see it's evident that they take a lot of pride in the professional construction and attention to detail in designing those numerous parklets. I wished I could say the same about ours. That philosophy of "if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right" seems to be missing.

The steady stream of rhetoric emanating from city hall for years that the city just doesn't have adequate resources to maintain our infrastruc-

ture and more revenue is needed has resulted in the adoption of a "utility" fee and several attempts at instituting a gas tax. So how is it even possible that city hall can suddenly agree to fund this new program? Free money is what they call it. It's actually a part of the millions of dollars the city has received from the federal government referred to as the "American Rescue Plan" funded by your federal income taxes.

Many cities are experiencing the same infrastructure problems with which Pendleton continues to struggle. The powers that be have given cities great latitude on how they spend those "Rescue" funds. Many have elected to use those for much-needed repairs on and upgrading infrastructure. Our city officials won't commit.

The Convention Center manager, for instance, has been forced to seek outside sources for funding the renovation of their bar/lounge/concession area while city hall sits back flush with cash. That facility alone has been a major focal point for drawing in revenue for local businesses year-around, not one or two weeks.

You just have to ask yourself why our city officials prefer raising taxes and fees rather than use resources currently available to maintain our infrastructure.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

Grocery store liquor sales are a nonstarter

Your comparison of selling hard alcohol in grocery stores to self-service gas stations is spot on, but in a whole different way.

Neither is placed on the ballot to make my life more convenient, but instead has everything to do with money! The change to alcohol sales will always be advocated by those that will dig just a little further into all of our pockets. Big Booze gains, as they can spend their money to push their products, and Big Food and their counterpart Big Wholesale simply want to increase their bottom line with more sales of anything. And, as usual, Big Government will find a way to manipulate the change to dig just a little more tax out of our pockets.

Details schme-tails, it always looks good on paper and is pushed that way by the advocates of such change. Looking north to Washington state's experience shows that the real truth of such a change comes at the cash register, where a bottle of booze is generally twice the price than it is in Oregon. It is not hard to know, it is simple: It is just another attempt to take the money out of our pockets and put it in theirs.

The change to the law to allow hard alcohol sales in grocery stores should never, and I mean never, make the ballot, ever.

Carl Culham
Athena

EDITORIALS

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LETTERS

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