

OUR VIEW

Meeting challenges with science

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners made the right decision last week when it approved nearly \$25,000 to pay for COVID-19-related billboards.

The elected board also approved a request from the Umatilla County Health Department to employ seven contract tracers permanently.

Those two decisions — while seemingly mundane — signal convincingly the COVID-19 crisis isn't over. Recent health department statistics also show the COVID-19 emergency locally may become acute.

The health department recently reported 135 new COVID-19 cases, the highest weekly total since February. Less than 40% of county residents have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The county's vaccination rate ranks sixth lowest in Oregon, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What those statistics mean is funding for such items as billboards to advertise COVID-19 prevention remain crucial, and the overall message that vaccinations are critical to stopping the disease isn't getting through.

It could be people have simply stopped listening, or they are reluctant to get a shot because they don't trust the vaccine has been tested enough, or they subscribe to conspiracy theories that filter around the state and the nation.

No matter the reason, the bottom line remains the same: People who are not vaccinated are at risk from the delta variant of COVID-19 — now the predominant variety in Oregon — and some will catch the bug, get very sick and some will die.

It's that simple.

Obviously everyone has a choice. In America now, it is vitally important the element of choice remains at the forefront of everything we do. No one can, nor should, be able to force a resident to get vaccinated if they do not want to.

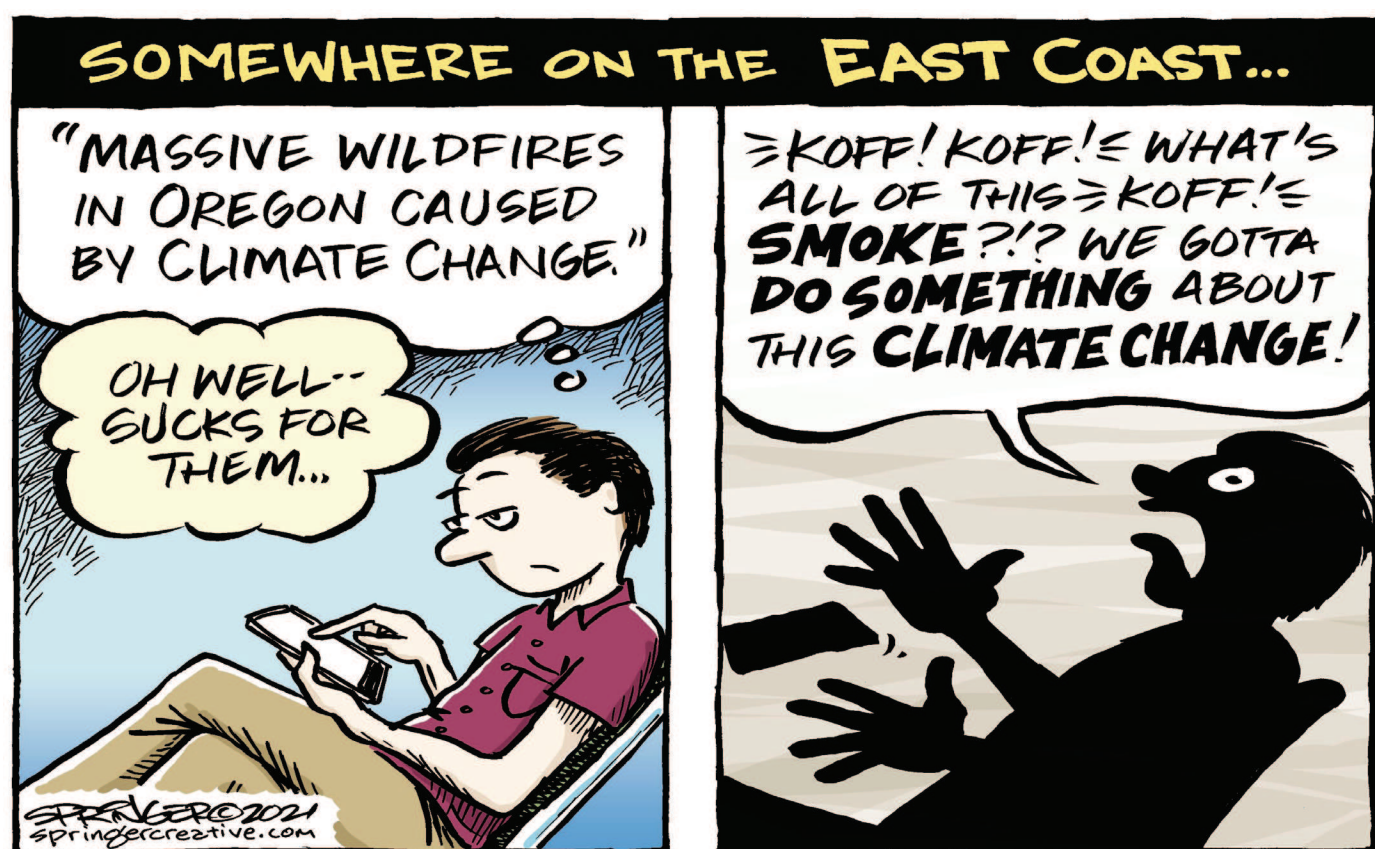
The problem is the amount of information floating around about the vaccine is usually tainted, one-sided and designed to create mayhem and confusion. That doesn't help solve a crisis.

The debate over vaccines has come at a crucial time, a period when the focus should be on how we stop the COVID-19 virus. Should we emphasize the vaccine more? Should we institute more restrictions? How do we convince those who do not trust the vaccine?

These questions should be at the forefront of our task now, not promoting the dissemination of bogus information or encouraging a false narrative.

The virus isn't going away. Now a variant of the virus is rolling through the nation — a variant that is far more easily spread and presents a risk to all.

We must meet this challenge head on with science, not rhetoric.



Keeping the power running



REGINA BRAKER

ANOTHER MILE

Years ago, I ran into a former student of mine hailing from Texas with an uncle in Northeastern Oregon who had encouraged her to come out to our rural state university in La Grande. I supported her resolve to continue her adventure so far away from home, confessing to her parents at graduation that I, too, was to blame for why she had not returned to them.

She wanted the small college experience as compared to the state university where her high school boyfriend wanted her to join him. A sense of new possibility here compelled her to stay, as she discovered that she loved the outdoors and the new friends she had made.

After graduation she ended up fighting fire in the summers, buying a local home to make her life here. When you work in an occupation where survival can be on the line and the support of your crew goes beyond the typical eight-hour day, the connection grows much deeper than the relationship between colleagues in an office job. I think that's true of other outdoor work too.

In our circle of friends and acquaintances, there are so many more who are doing this kind of work, perhaps taken on as a chosen vocation right out of high school, or started as a summer job while in college. Inspired by outdoor experi-

ences, in backpacking adventures and hunting trips as they grew up, our children and their friends see new possibilities in work done to protect those natural treasures.

Increasingly, it is dangerous work, as they protect wildland landscapes, small rural communities, the exurban interface between population centers, and the vast seemingly empty spaces we value as retreats from the stresses of modern life. But as wildfires cross that interface, there is much more we must think about, new protective measures to act on, and there are those who can help us in the effort to further protect ourselves, even at home.

There are the arborists, who relish showing off their workplace skills at tree climbing competitions, which may once again resume in the near future. We enjoyed following the two-day action when our oldest son participated some years ago. These events offer an important opportunity to learn from more experienced arborists, demonstrate required skills for certification tests, and expand range of experience on tree varieties to practice technique.

In this time of drought and extreme weather events, arborists' work to maintain the health of our urban tree cover has become essential, so much more than just cosmetic landscape work. Our ability to fight the heat with passive measures, such as strategic tree shade coverage throughout our neighborhoods, allows us to moderate our power usage, and keep the power grid from being overstressed.

After a stint working with his arbor-

ist brother, our youngest son took the next logical step in his search for work he loves and a crew that supports one another, attending lineman college in Idaho. Throughout his years as an apprentice level lineman, he worked in many settings, both in power grid maintenance and updating construction, as well as grid recovery in the aftermath of natural disasters. Upon achieving journeyman status, he returned to projects in our region, which also included power restoration for communities during last summer's incredible fire season.

These occupations can become skilled alternatives for those not interested in continuing academic studies beyond high school. For my former student there was a meaningful connection between the seasonal work of wildland fire fighting and the enjoyment of those spaces in the off seasons. For my sons, the ability to work out of doors, and at times in beautiful locations, has intangible benefits. As their work becomes more dangerous, our efforts to follow guidelines toward reducing that risk become increasingly important too.

To my sons and their peers, men and women who are working the wildfires, the trees, the power grid, we are grateful for your choice of occupation, to go out there year after year, committed to this hard work. You are in our thoughts daily as we follow the news, knowing how important your work is.

Regina Braker, a retired educator with journeys through many places and experiences, enjoys getting to know people along the way.

YOUR VIEWS

State needs to support essential workers

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, many businesses started paying their essential workers more to help retain them and compensate them for putting their health and that of their family at risk. Some restaurants and most stores, even Walmart, added an essential worker bonus or pandemic pay, knowing that these employees were putting themselves at risk.

In the public sector, firefighters, police officers and health service workers all had to keep coming to work and face potential infections from COVID-19. The state capitol locked down and meetings were done virtually so lawmakers could avoid exposure.

The state said it would provide pandemic pay if the budget had any money. The state promised its employees that if the federal government bailed it out, it would have the money to pay them.

On March 11 the federal government passed the American Rescue Plan Act, which gave Oregon \$4.127 billion. Approximately \$500 million was set aside to pay essential workers from these funds, yet legislators hurriedly adjourned the session without passing this relief, saying they'll review this during the next session.

The state is in the middle of bargaining with employees represented by SEIU 503 and AFSCME Council 75, and still doesn't want to make any concessions to those that went far and beyond what

is normally asked of them. Wouldn't be nice if the state actually treated their employees better than a Walmart?

Jeff Coffman
Pendleton

COVID-19 coverage shouldn't be slanted

A recent editorial mentioned the lack of a local newspaper as an information desert. The explanation was acceptable, if not a little one-sided. A local newspaper needs to serve all of its readers if it is to be considered pertinent and to the point. Once journalism reflects one viewpoint over another, it becomes a slanted piece of information that excludes some readers from actively seeking news and facts about the community.

The arrival of a virus that has killed over 600,000 Americans was presented with doubtful articles that always included the questions about whether we should believe the scientists who were trying to convince people that politicians are not viral experts. Every statement about COVID-19 was accompanied by the expression of doubt that was present with our former administration. For the East Oregonian, this took on the color of always questioning decisions made by the leader of our state. Was this productive? Was there an outreach to let people know that masks, then vaccinations were the only way to keep our community safe? Not at the beginning.

There were many articles and editorials casting doubt and scorn in the direction of Gov. Kate Brown. I doubt there is anyone in this county who has the ability, expertise or will to take on the task that landed in her lap. I appreciate that her efforts were along the science guidelines and were in keeping with trying to keep people alive. I certainly don't have the skills or the will to try and manage such a crisis.

A little support from the pages of local news sources could have created a better response, but I realize the political will of the county bends one way and few have spoken for the rights of the public to a healthy and safe community. There are many people with compromised immune systems that are still isolating because of the poor response to getting vaccinated in this county. Now, in the midst of the delta variant causing more angst, we celebrate large public gatherings and publish editorials that say Gov. Brown should not be the voice for vaccinations. What?

If she doesn't speak, she will be believed? The idea that she should sit down and be a nice little woman is so damn demeaning. Once you get her to take a back seat and be quiet, then you will complain about how she didn't lead at all. You can't have it both ways. I personally celebrate that she is smart enough to not encourage us to drink bleach or other fake QAnon lies that seem to buoy the good old boys and big thinkers of this area.

Colleen Blackwood
Pendleton