

OUR VIEW

COVID-19 painting organizers into corner

The Pendleton Round-Up is a pretty big deal.

We recognize that and we also acknowledge the week-long pageantry and rodeo delivers millions of dollars into the local economy. Without the event, the local economy takes a major hit, and the repercussion of that loss are significant.

Still, we would be remiss if we did not identify the serious risk the event posed in a time of the COVID-19 crisis. While health officials believe the latest wave of COVID-19 cases appears to have crested, they also predict there will be a long recovery time that will last into the holiday season.

The Round-Up attracted, as it always does, huge crowds. While organizers attempted to protect the rodeo crowd from COVID-19, the fact is, the virus is everywhere.

Organizers faced a tough choice. Postpone the event again — and risk the loss of millions — or go ahead and gamble that the Round-Up won't become a super-spreader event.

It was a tough call, all the way around, but in the end the decision was made to make the money and hope for the best.

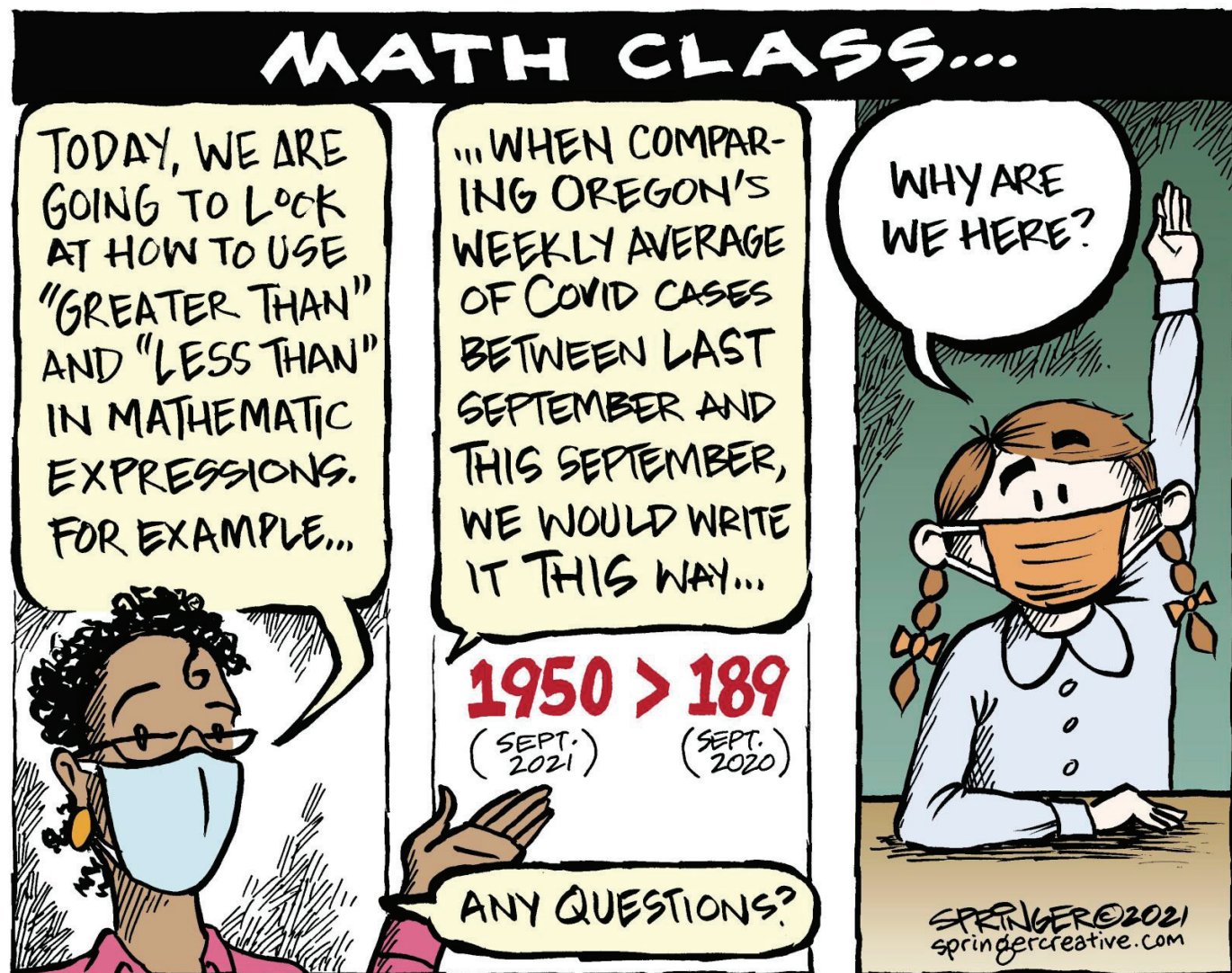
The organizers of the event are not the only ones who face such hard decisions. Any venue, anywhere, must contend with what are terrible choices. Hold an event and rake in the cash — and help the economy — or cancel it and perhaps stop a larger COVID-19 outbreak but hurt the economy.

We are in that situation because of politics. A solution — a federally-approved vaccine — is available but it has become a hot-button political issue. Masks have too. Neither issue should have reached the high-velocity level they are now. Yet, here we are.

COVID-19 isn't some vague threat. The latest variant has sickened thousands and killed many. We still believe getting vaccinated is a personal choice, but we also realize that because of the political rhetoric and blatant misinformation, big events such as the Round-Up are put into a corner with only two, horrible choices: postpone or go ahead. Each carries serious risks — one to the economy, the other to the health and welfare of the public.

We realize the organizers of the Round-Up faced a hard decision. We also know either way they went, there was going to be criticism.

Our hope now is the Round-Up will not prove to be a super-spreader event and lengthen an already long COVID-19 surge.



Scene's from Joe's Eastside



ALEX
HOBBS
PASTURES OF PLENTY

The convenience store my father owned for most of my life still sits quietly on Main Street in Hermiston. My grandfather, after years of working as a superintendent in Salinas, California, left education when collective bargaining entered it.

I don't know what model of car they owned, but in my mind, the Thompson brothers are squabbling in the back of a baby blue Ford Country Squire, its sleek, faux bois panels, and V8 engine thundering up the California coastline toward Oregon.

After college, with a history degree in hand, my father returned to Hermiston to man the market. Dishing out daily cups of coffee and chicken strip baskets and selling 25-cent Laffy Taffy by the handful to the neighborhood kids. This is how it always was.

A new cigarette tax, a new bottle deposit. Puddles of iridescent water pooling in the parking lot after its morning hose down. Hiding in the walk-in cooler with my little brother, giggling, as our tiny hands reached out to grab the unsuspecting patron whose only wish was to procure a Diet Coke.

There was a seating alcove staged around a wall-sized corkboard. It overflowed with newspaper clippings of local high school teams and their feats

of glory on the field. A golfer mid backswing; a tee-ball team; a running back mid rush; a guard, arms outstretched in what can only be assumed was a three-pointer that found its way to the hoop. Even a few pictures of the proprietor's daughter swimming butterfly. A shrine to athleticism.

Tending to the shrine, huddled around three small tables emblazoned with Coca-Cola insignia, were the Coffee Boys. If my father was the priest conducting daily mass from behind his hot rack altar, these were his acolytes. These days, they've since dispersed. Only mirages of a bygone era: One of pre-Starbucks, where the coffee was brewed two hours ago, consumed black and from a styrofoam vessel.

Over the years the Coffee Boys would occasionally band together to start collections for local charities like The Agape House, or help with spaghetti feeds — small-town fundraisers before the advent of GoFundMe. They were not intentional do-gooders. There was no charter document stating their objectives, no bylaws ruling their little organization. Yet, somehow something good often came from this group of men as they sipped their styrofoam encased coffees.

A few years ago now, I was in The Store the morning after an early snowstorm hit the Columbia Basin. Temperatures had dipped into the mid-twenties, and despite the icy road conditions, the Coffee Boys were in their self-assigned seats, my father leaned over the counter as usual. The conversation had just shifted from the weather to football when I walked a man

who appeared to have fallen on hard times. "Morning," my father welcomed him and turned back to discuss how the local hometown heroes were heading toward the state playoffs.

Over at the sink, the man stood warming his ungloved hands in running water, steam wafting from his fingers. Afterward, he approached my father and asked for two plastic bags, which he then tied over his wet and weathered tennis shoes.

It's quite cruel that my mind cannot recall which of the Coffee Boys asked the man to take his seat just as he was heading out the door, and instructed him to wait for his return. Like Gandalf departing Helms Deep, we looked on as he slowly pulled from the parking lot, snow squelching from underneath the tires. Dad poured the newcomer a cup of coffee and offered him a plate of biscuits and gravy which he accepted with many thanks. He ate silently and languorously. The small hand on the clock that stood sentry ticked by. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes. Then, the Coffee Boy reappeared — this time with a backpack. With a flourish of prestidigitiation, he extracted a brand new pair of work boots and a bag of unopened socks. A rabbit from a hat.

"They're yours," Coffee Boy said, "I think they'll fit okay." The man took the shoes, excused himself to the restroom, and emerged with the brown leather boots.

Alex Hobbs is a former educator turned full-time homeschooling mom. She has a degree in political science from Oregon State University.

YOUR VIEWS

Despite downfalls, many Oregonians thankful for the River Democracy Act

Sen. Ron Wyden deserves thanks for creating the River Democracy Act. As drought and fire make so clear, protecting watersheds is fundamental to countering the effects of climate change and preserving and enhancing the capacity of our landscapes to absorb, hold and release water and resist fire.

Several streams I (and others) nominated are included in the act. I had hoped even more watersheds would be protected, but from tiny acorns mighty oaks grow, hey? As drought and fire persist, the indispensability of even small waterways becomes ever more evident and protections ever more prevalent, hopefully more private landowners will see the advantages to themselves and neighbors.

The act however leaves much scope for irresponsibility by accommodating commercial sales under the aegis of fire prevention. Too often the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management reveal their bias toward commercial harvest over ecological recovery by cutting large trees and fire-resistant stands that have more environmental than

commercial value. Long-term ecological values are subordinated to short-term local economic gain. This needs to change.

The same applies to grazing livestock in riparian zones. Many small and medium-sized streams are severely degraded by 125 years of cattle grazing. That's why more and more streams are enclosed by barbed wire, to keep cows out. It would help if the Act recognized this fact and made some practical gesture to address the issue.

Despite the criticisms above, I, like so many Oregonians, are thankful to Wyden for The River Democracy Act.

Wally Sykes
Joseph

EOU and new fieldhouse a bright spot for community

What an exciting time for Eastern Oregon University, for students and our local communities. I enjoyed reading the recent article about the progress of the new fieldhouse being built on campus.

On behalf of the board of trustees, we have been a part of the project as it developed over the past several years. We are excited to see this new building, the first in

many years, expand capacity and access for all our students, including our Health and Human Performance department and the EOU Outdoor Adventure Program as well as Mountaineer athletics.

We were very appreciative that the funding for the fieldhouse comes from state lottery bonds, adding to the state's investment in EOU and the region. In a time when many universities are struggling in various ways, it is so uplifting to be a part of an institution that is able to renovate current academic buildings like Loso Hall and build much-needed new facilities, while not raising tuition for on-campus undergraduate students.

The possibilities and potential for this new structure are endless for our university while also reaching well beyond the geographic region of Eastern Oregon. The fieldhouse will serve as a recruiting tool, an opportunity for hosting myriad sporting events, and allow for space that will provide outreach programs to touch many different lives.

EOU is a bright spot during these challenging times.

Cheryl Martin
North Powder
EOU alumnus, EOU Board of Trustees, vice chair

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