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OUR VIEW

Why the delay in paid leave?

We have written before about how unfortunate it was that late in the 2021 legislative session a bill popped up to delay Oregon's paid family medical leave program.

It was created by the Legislature in 2019. Families would be able to get paid time off — not only for births and deaths — but to care for others when they need it. Some employers already offer that. The bill was a way of guaranteeing it to more people by January 2023. Gov. Kate Brown thanked state Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, for his leadership in helping to get the bill passed.

But why was implementation delayed?

The state's Employment Department said it couldn't get it ready by the beginning of 2023. It was pushed back to September. That means, as The Oregonian pointed out, "tens of thousands of Oregonians stand to go without approximately $453 million in paid leave benefits they could have accessed in the first eight months of 2023."

"This is an aggressive timeline in the best of times and as you know, the past year hasn't been the best of times," Gerhard Taeubel, the program's acting director, told lawmakers in February.

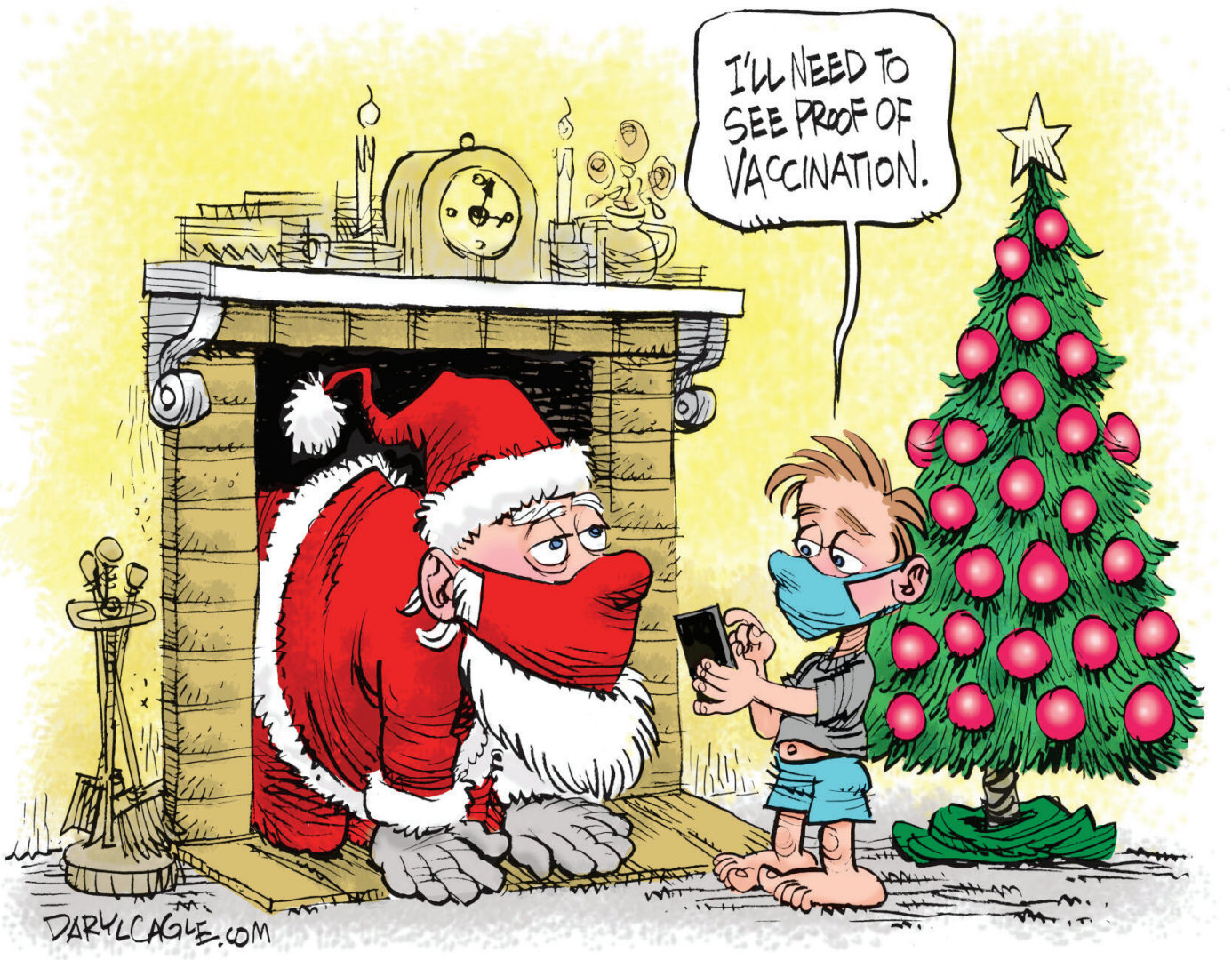
Brown declined an interview with The Oregonian to explain her staff's oversight of launching the program. Despite indicators the launch was off track, her office didn't ensure the launch stayed on track and neither did legislators. One legislator did try.

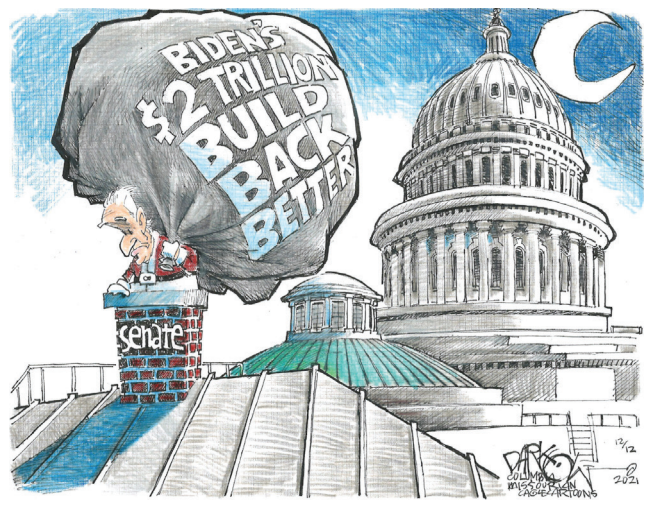
Former state Rep. Cheri Helt, R-Bend, did attempt in 2020 to shift the program's oversight to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, in the hope it had the capacity to keep it on track. She also proposed setting up a legislative committee to monitor the program. Those good ideas went nowhere.

An exodus of employees from the paid leave program, allegations of discrimination in its ranks and an ensuing investigation could further complicate the rollout at a time when the pandemic has laid bare the massive need for parental and medical paid leave. Last April, an unidentified member of an advisory group to the paid leave program warned that delays in launching the program could adversely affect communities of color and lower income workers most in need of the benefits, according to meeting notes.

If the state's plans succeed, it will have taken Oregon 50 months from when lawmakers passed the paid family and medical leave legislation to begin paying benefits to Oregonians.

Maybe with the pandemic and the disruptions it caused there was little hope the program would launch on time. But legislators and Gov. Brown don't appear to have done enough to try. The Oregonian's article on this topic is worth reading if you have access: tinyurl.com/noORleave.





Inversions during the winter season

MARY
WISTER
EYE TO THE SKY

Call me a weather nerd or a weather geek and I won't take it personally. Like all meteorologists, I am fascinated with atmospheric science. After all, the atmosphere acts like a fluid.

Air is in constant motion and moves both vertically and horizontally. Clouds can take a variety of formations based on the amount of moisture and vertical lift. Winds blow from areas of high pressure to low pressure as nature attempts to balance atmospheric pressure.

Weather never gets boring. You may disagree during the winter when fog and low clouds in the Lower Columbia Basin last for days or even weeks, and a prolonged period of light winds results in air stagnation and poor air quality. Yes, those days are dismal, and I also find myself begging for the sun to make its appearance and the winds to mix out the stagnant air mass.

However, when I think about the inversions that develop during these stagnant patterns, the thermodynamics behind inversions are almost as fascinating as thunderstorms or the formation of snowflakes.

So, what exactly is an inversion?

Think of the term "inverted" meaning reverse arrangement or upside down. Typically, the temperature in the atmosphere decreases with increasing altitude. When an inversion develops, the temperature increases with height rather than decreasing. Weather geeks like myself love to observe the temperature differences at various elevations. Many times during the winter, the temperature in Pendleton can be 10-15 degrees colder than Tollgate under a strong inversion. Have you ever driven along Interstate 84 or Highway 204 over the Blue Mountains to get above an inversion and simply observe the warmer temperatures in the mountains and watch the beautiful fog along the foothills? If not, I highly recommend it.

Just be careful for the low visibility and slick roads as you drive through the stratus clouds, and make sure you're prepared for winter driving conditions. Observing the weather during inversions is no different than a scientist in a lab swishing fluids in a beaker and logging the results. What you are observing is cold dense air sinking, and the warmer air overriding the cold air. This causes a lid, or inversion, to form that traps the cold air in the lowest elevations.

If an inversion lasts for days or weeks, it can cause air stagnation and potentially poor air quality. This is weather nobody likes. Those with respiratory issues become susceptible to air pollution and particulate matter entering the lungs. What does it take for nature to break down an inversion and end the air stagnation? This will require a weather system strong enough to provide significant mixing — for example, a cold front accompanied by strong winds. In these situations, meteorologists are challenged to forecast temperatures, winds and precipitation. Will the front be strong enough to mix out the cold air, or will the winds just override the inversion with little impact on mixing out the cold air in the lower elevations? This can greatly affect the type of precipitation expected be it snow, rain, sleet and/or freezing rain.

Despite nearly 30 years of experience in the National Weather Service, I find this scenario is often the hardest to predict. It's amazing to watch and exceptionally difficult to forecast.

Did you know that students at Sunridge Middle School in Pendleton study inversions and air quality? Thanks to teachers Jodie Harnden and Nancy Vert, students work with the Pendleton Air Quality Commission to understand the role of inversions on air quality. The air quality commission is dedicated to educate students on the dangers of poor air quality, and it's always a pleasure speaking with the enthusiastic students in their class.

It's also wonderful to see the next generation of scientists wanting to learn how weather impacts society and how they can make a difference by understanding it better.

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