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OUR VIEW

Freeway frustration in Eastern Oregon

The sequence of events is as predictable as it is frustrating. Snow begins to fall along Interstate 84 in the Blue Mountains between La Grande and Pendleton.

The freeway gets slick.

Vehicles — most often commercial trucks, and often trucks that don't have traction chains installed — lose control or momentum.

The lanes in one direction, and sometimes both, are blocked.

And once again the main travel route through Northeastern Oregon is closed.

When the freeway is blocked for more than a few hours — and this is often the case when trucks are involved, as they're more cumbersome to move than passenger cars are — the closure can extend for more than 150 miles. As safe parking areas for commercial trucks are claimed in, say, La Grande, the Oregon Department of Transportation frequently has to close the freeway at Baker City and, as the domino effect continues, in Ontario.

The effect works in the opposite direction, too. A couple crashes in the eastbound lanes in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Huntington can trigger a cascade of closures starting in Baker City and later spreading to La Grande and Pendleton.

Weather-related closures on I-84 aren't a new phenomenon, to be sure.

Blizzards, particularly through passes such as Ladd Canyon and the Blue Mountains near Meacham, can create whiteouts so severe that closing the freeway is necessary.

Although ODOT doesn't have detailed historical data about the frequency of I-84 closures in our region, even a cursory review of media reports shows the freeway has closed more often in the past several years than in past decades — and in conditions that aren't particularly treacherous.

As mentioned above, it hardly rates as a surprise when the freeway closes, even during a relatively modest storm such as the one that descended on the Blue Mountains Monday evening, Dec. 13.

A cold front brought a few hours of heavy snow, but this was no extended blizzard that cut visibility to the length of a truck trailer and made it dangerous for all vehicles.

ODOT's press release announcing the closure noted the culprit was "multiple spun out trucks" in a three-mile section of the westbound lanes between La Grande and Meacham.

The closure, fortunately, was relatively brief, lasting about four hours.

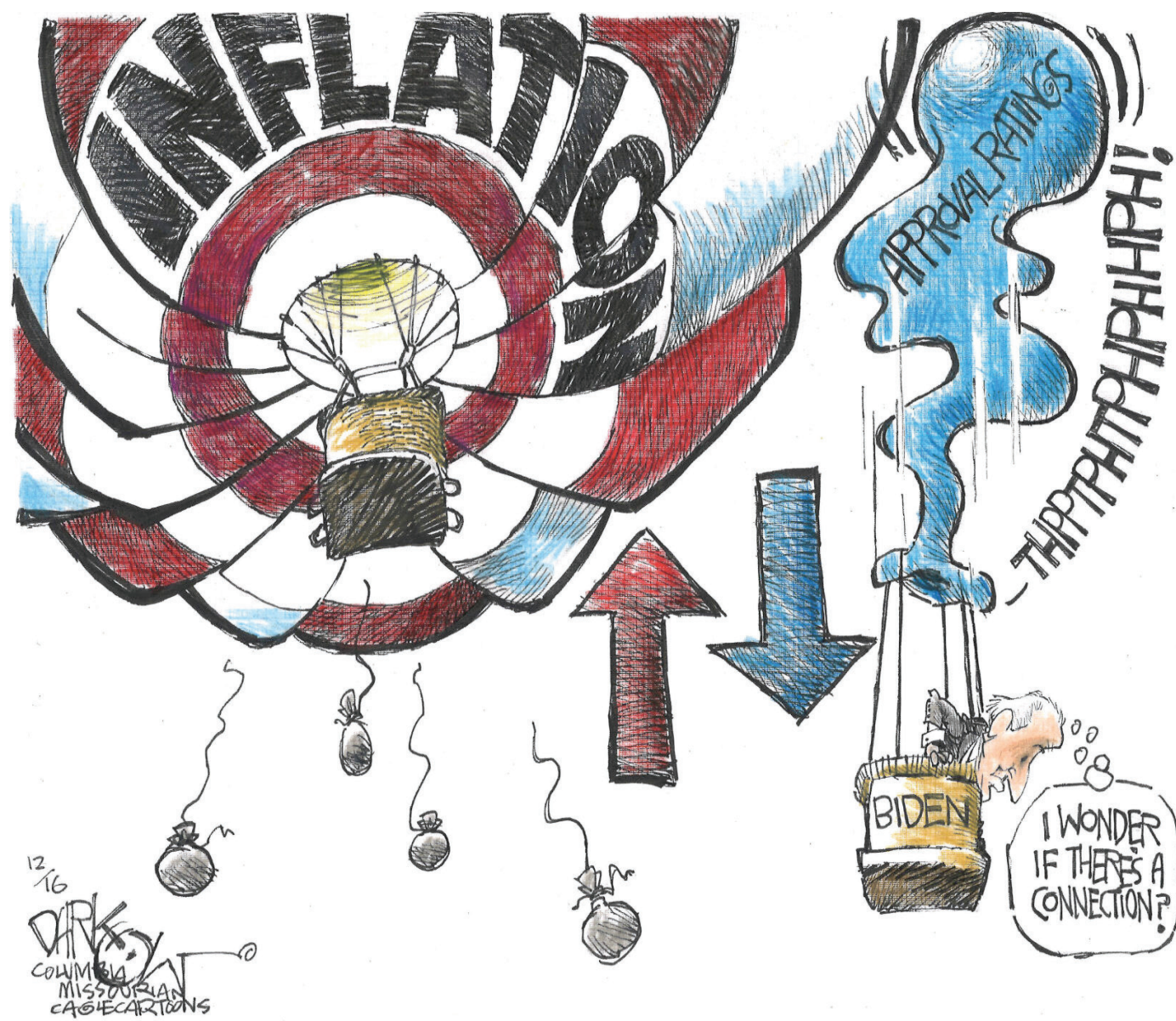
Yet it also was the latest example of how fragile this vital transportation pike seems to have become. It's not an exaggeration to wonder whether it's possible to get through even a modest storm — of which we can expect several in a typical winter — without a closure.

The culprit in the Dec. 13 closure — unchained trucks — is a common one in freeway closures, said Tom Strandberg, a spokesperson for ODOT in La Grande. In hopes of encouraging drivers to put on chains, in late September the state doubled the fine for failing to comply with the chain requirement from \$440 to \$880. That's a reasonable change. Unchained trucks not only are responsible for many freeway closures, which is at best annoying, but worse, they also pose a threat to other drivers.

The problem isn't limited to commercial trucks, certainly. All drivers on the freeway during winter need to be prepared for snow and ice, either by installing traction tires or by bringing chains. And all motorists should drive with caution, according to the conditions.

Over the past couple decades, ODOT has done many things to try to make I-84 safer, including building a third lane on steep grades such as Ladd Canyon and Spring Creek, installing electronic signs to warn drivers of bad weather and improving chain up zones.

Those are worthwhile improvements. But none can replace plain old common sense.



YOUR VIEWS

The hypocrisy of America

Another day in the hypocrisy that is America. Pro-life people in Washington ranting about the sanctity of life in front of the Supreme Court, while voting for pro-life politicians who won't do a thing to protect our children in schools, or anywhere, for that matter.

Don't kill them in the womb! At least wait until they're in school so the sanctimonious can offer phony thoughts and prayers for their soon-to-be-forgotten lives. All while doing absolutely nothing to remedy this horrific problem.

Great countries don't allow their citizens to be slaughtered on a daily basis in schools, malls, mosques or churches. They don't talk out of both sides of their mouths or bend to the will of lobbyists so they can hang on to their cushy jobs.

Most pro-life people are just pro-birth. Make sure you have that baby! Just make sure you have it way

over there, and don't even think of asking for assistance of any kind.

What if all the senseless public shootings in this country had been perpetrated by either foreign terrorists or illegal aliens? The outcry would be deafening, the lust for revenge would be endless. Americans killing Americans with a gun? Cue the crickets. All is well, nothing to see here, move along and be thankful you don't live in a country where you can easily access a gun regardless of your mental capacity.

David Gracia
Hermiston

Thank you, Gilliam County Sheriff's Office

When we were traveling Dec. 11 down the Gorge in a miserable rain-storm accompanied by relentless wind, we heard a loud "wham" followed by other loud car noises as we quickly

pulled onto the shoulder of the road. We thought it was a blown tire but found the wind was so relentless it had blown the front bumper off and it was hanging onto the car as it was dragged underneath the front end.

We were surveying the situation when a Gilliam County Sheriff's Office vehicle pulled in behind us, and before I could get my coat and hat on, patrol deputy Matthew Beard got down under our car, disconnected what was still holding on to the vehicle, and we were able to drag the bumper out from underneath the car. We were very relieved that no additional damage was done and that we were able to continue our travel.

We are extremely thankful for the timing of and assistance from deputy Beard going above and beyond to help us. Thank you, Gilliam County Sheriff's Office and especially deputy Beard for your service.

Don and Pam Hefner
Hermiston

Stories can connect all of us



BETTE
HUSTED
FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

Interlibrary loan is a gift I'm grateful for not just at Christmas but year-round, and last week I got a notice that the book I'd been waiting for was here. Good news. But it wasn't on the "holds" shelf, and though they checked and rechecked, the librarians were stymied until they found a large red zippered bag containing multiple copies of my book. Enough for a book club, which of course is what I had mistakenly ordered.

Perhaps I could stand on the steps of the post office offering copies to my fellow citizens. By springtime, if we all shared the same story, we'd have something — an understanding — in common. We'd be the kind of neighbors who let each other go first in the checkout line and raise two fingers from the steering wheel when we meet on the county road.

I know, I know.

And yet, some version of this hopeful vision has inspired every English major in history. Small towns, cities, universities have believed in it, too, uninviting Everybody Reads programs. You probably believe it yourself: Think of the stories we share at Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanzaa, at solstice ceremonies everywhere. Stories can connect us, help us understand our lives.

As I carried the red bag down the

steps of the library, I thought about the title — "Hamnet," by Maggie O'Farrell — and the book's subtitle, "A Novel of the Plague." It might take an English major to recognize the name of Shakespeare's son who died when he was only 11. But who hasn't heard the word "plague" in these past two years? Surely the pandemic we've all been living through is a story we have in common.

But there are stories, and there are stories — something even English majors must acknowledge. Social media has offered a perfect platform for the stories of conspiracies and outright lies. Doctors have reported that even as they are dying, some patients don't believe in COVID-19.

And then, of course, there was that day in January.

Not long ago, 23-year-old Peter McIndoe decided to create a conspiracy story of his own, one so preposterous that surely no one would believe it: Birds Aren't Real.

What we think are birds are really robots created by the government to spy on us, he said. Billboards sprang up. T-shirts appeared. According to a recent article in the New York Times, this movement was Generation Z's way of pushing back against the adults in their lives who have fallen victim to absurd stories. The goal was not just to let us hear a generation giggling, but like satire everywhere, to guide us back to truth.

Of course, not everyone chooses the same story. We all have our favorite TV programs, movies, writers. You may prefer science fiction while your friend

wants a mystery, preferably one set in Shetland. But all good stories ask us to feel, to evaluate, to question, perhaps to reconsider. Is the story successful at what it attempts? In literature class discussions and at book clubs, readers share differing opinions. It's the thoughtful response that matters.

Pendleton Center for the Arts First Draft Writers' Series is a great place to hear the kind of stories that connect us. We've been meeting via Zoom during the pandemic — Britney Corrigan was terrific on Thursday, Dec. 16, as was the long-distance open mic — and we'll be gathering in person again soon. Poet, essayist and fly-fishing guide Cameron Scott, from Wallowa County, will be our featured reader on the third Thursday in January, and David S.J. Pickering, whose book "Jesus Comes to Me as Judy Garland won the Airlie Press Poetry Prize," will read in February. David Oates with "The Mountains of Paris" is scheduled for March, and much-loved Joe Wilkins, whose latest novel is "Fall Back Down When I Die," in April. I hope you will join us.

Maybe share some stories of your own.

Maggie O'Farrell's "Hamnet" is a story about grief and love, exactly the book I needed in this December's darkness. If you, too, order it through interlibrary loan, smile at the people you meet on the steps of the post office. It will be our secret book club.

Bette Husted is a writer and a student of tai chi and the natural world. She lives in Pendleton.