

# Opinion

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Merkley: Make a choice

### Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Portland, really, really wants to be president. He's enough of a realist, however, to recognize that his chances of winning are slim, and he'd like to hold on to his Senate seat as well, in case things don't work out.

Winning a third term in the Senate might be nice for Merkley, but in those circumstances it's far from nice for Oregon voters. We deserve a senator who wants the Senate seat as much as Merkley wants to be president.

There have been hints about Merkley's ambition for over a year now, and he's done nothing to squelch them. Rather, he's ramped them up in a variety of ways, from visiting New Hampshire to creating political action committees.

Among the most important, he's talked with Oregon lawmakers to see if they're willing to change a state law barring a candidate from running for more than one "lucrative" office at a time. Both the Senate and the presidency are considered lucrative. Unfortunately for Merkley, change is unlikely. That doesn't prevent him from running in presidential primaries in other states, however, and running for the Senate in Oregon. It's an idea he has yet to dismiss.

Oregonians should expect more from a U.S. senator. We may be a relatively small state but surely we deserve a candidate whose interest in Oregon and Oregonians goes beyond our value as a stepping stone to higher office or as a safety net if presidential ambitions don't pan out.

If Merkley wants to be president, fine. He should do everything in his power to get the job. First on his list, however, must be a public announcement that he won't seek re-election to the Senate. That way Democrats, Republicans and others can look for candidates who really want the job.

### Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

## GUEST EDITORIAL

### Editorial from The Charlotte Observer:

A man who had spent time in a mental institution just seven months earlier walked into a Fort Mill, S.C., Cabela's, bought a gun, walked out with it and an hour later shot a 19-year-old grocery worker five times, killing her.

How is this possible?

Christopher Benjamin Mendez had said he was having suicidal and homicidal thoughts and as a result spent more than a week in hospitals being treated for mental illness in June 2017, Solicitor Kevin Brackett told the Observer editorial board.

But that wasn't even a speed bump in his buying a gun. On Jan. 23, 2018, he went to Cabela's and on a required form checked "no," he had not ever been committed to a mental institution. The clerk ran Mendez's application through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, which approved

the sale.

About an hour later, Mendez gunned down Karson Whitesell in an act of random violence. On Tuesday, he was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

"Obviously nobody on either side of the gun rights issue is interested in having people who are mentally ill being able to purchase firearms," Brackett said, according to the Rock Hill Herald. "This is apparently a defect in our system, because he was able to check 'no' and walk out of Cabela's that day with a .45."

People who are involuntarily committed to a mental institution are banned from buying guns. Why wasn't Mendez in the national database as being prohibited from buying a gun given his commitment to a mental institution? And could others slip through the same crack in the system?

In response to questions from the Observer

editorial board, Brackett did some more digging. This is what he found:

Mendez voluntarily went to Springs Memorial Hospital in Lancaster saying he had suicidal and homicidal thoughts. Doctors examined him, concluded he was a danger and admitted him involuntarily to Colleton Medical Center in Walterboro. He was there a week, got on medication, then attended a court hearing. By that time he had improved and the judge did not commit him to the hospital. So he was involuntarily admitted by a doctor but not involuntarily committed by a judge. That's why his information was never sent to the national database.

It appears South Carolina, Cabela's and NICS all followed the procedure set out in law. Yet a man who said he was having homicidal thoughts could buy a gun on demand. It's impossible to know how many other people are

doing the same thing.

Brackett suggests, and we agree, that states should consider whether patients who have been involuntarily admitted by a doctor should be reported to the federal database just as those committed by a judge are. Or South Carolina and other states could consider having such patients referred to judges who would assess whether that person's right to own firearms should be temporarily suspended. Several states have adopted laws establishing extreme risk protection orders, or ERPOs. Under those, family members or law enforcement can petition a court to temporarily suspend a person's gun-ownership rights if he is deemed an imminent danger to himself or others.

Mendez should not have been able to purchase a gun, given the danger he posed at the time. South Carolina, North Carolina and other states need to close this hole in the safety net.

## CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

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**Oregon Gov. Kate Brown:** 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; [www.governor.oregon.gov](http://www.governor.oregon.gov).

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**Oregon Legislature:** Legislative documents and information are available online at [www.leg.state.or.us](http://www.leg.state.or.us).

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**Baker City Hall:** 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Mike Downing, Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe, Rosemary

Abell, Arvid Andersen and Adam Nilsson.

**Baker City administration:** 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Dustin Newman, police chief; John Clark, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

**Baker County Commission:** Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

**Baker County departments:** 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Matt Shircliff, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Chindy Carpenter, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

**Baker School District:** 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m., Baker School District 53 office boardroom; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.



# Renewable power: Starting now

There are certainly storm clouds on the horizon for OTEC, but they're coming from a very different direction. While we appreciate the utility's open acknowledgement of the threats they perceive, much of the recent article in the Ruralite was badly misdirected, and it doesn't get to the heart of the issue.

Pushing water across the dams more often means more juvenile fish returning home in the future. That's what all the numbers show. A carbon tax on the use of fossil fuels by power producers that returns that cash directly to consumers is one of the proposals before the legislature. That would cut down on carbon emissions and put money in the right pockets. That would be something we should all lobby for, not against.

As for the four Snake River dams, their problems are economic. Sediment is filling the reservoir behind Little Granite so quickly that only millions of federal tax dollars will save Lewiston from drowning. How long will the rest of the country be willing to do that? More importantly, in 10 to 15 years, what power those dams do produce will be unneeded and go unused. That starts to get to the eye of the storm that lies ahead.

The Bonneville Power Administration's problems go well beyond fish. Summer power sales to California have collapsed. So much solar energy is available in that state they hardly know what to do with all of it. Since



**NORM CIMON**

the cost of storing that power is coming down very rapidly, they have plans to do just that. So they'll be looking for places to sell the excess.

It won't be in Colorado. That state's utility will eventually replace all its coal fired power with wind and solar power — and storage — because those combinations are cheap and getting cheaper. The power companies in sunny Nevada and Arizona are planning for that very same future. They bought in after consumers rebelled when those utilities tried to short-circuit solar power.

Meanwhile, Idaho Power has worked hard to slow down the rise of renewable energy in that state. They successfully lobbied the utility commission to change the rules, and a \$200 million dollar storage project proposed for Twin Falls was denied a long-term contract to sell power to the utility. Why? Because solar power was in the storage mix. That's a holding action at best, one that makes it clear how unneeded the proposed Boardman to Hemingway power line is.

BPA is now forced to rethink their business. They expect to lose utility customers in the next 10 years to this changing landscape and that will mean higher prices for the customers who

are left. They're working to reinvent themselves; scrapping a plan to build one more power line through the Willamette Valley and planning for a future where customers roll their own power. OTEC needs to go down that same path.

It's clear that the 100-year-old business model that worked well is disappearing. Having the chief financial officer speaking for OTEC in the Ruralite trying to preserve that outmoded way of doing business is the wrong approach. This is a seismic shift which will require real creativity on the part of the board, and a clear understanding of the challenges ahead. That's something that goes well beyond bean-counting.

Oregon Rural Action has worked to find viable models that could help OTEC with that transition, models that would allow them to partner with their customers. There would be savings for both those consumer/producers and for OTEC, and the utility would benefit from learning how to gather power from the ground up instead of the top down. While OTEC has yet to buy in, it's only a matter of time before they will be scrambling to do so.

Given the speed of the renewable revolution, they need to move quickly. It can't happen soon enough.

*Norm Cimon of La Grande is a member of Oregon Rural Action's energy team, which reviewed this column.*

