

# Opinion

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

# State needn't buy stamps

### Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

It's back. For the third time in five years, Oregon lawmakers are being asked to have the state pick up the tab for voters who want to mail their ballots to a county clerk's office. Senate Bill 861, introduced at the request of Gov. Kate Brown, would do just that. It remains as bad an idea as it was when it first was introduced in 2015.

Admittedly, the amount the state expects to spend isn't huge by government standards — estimates range from \$1.52 million to as high as \$2.9 million per biennium. Lawmakers are used to allocating billions, not millions, to some agencies, and even relatively inexpensive budget items receive more than the ballot postage is expected to cost.

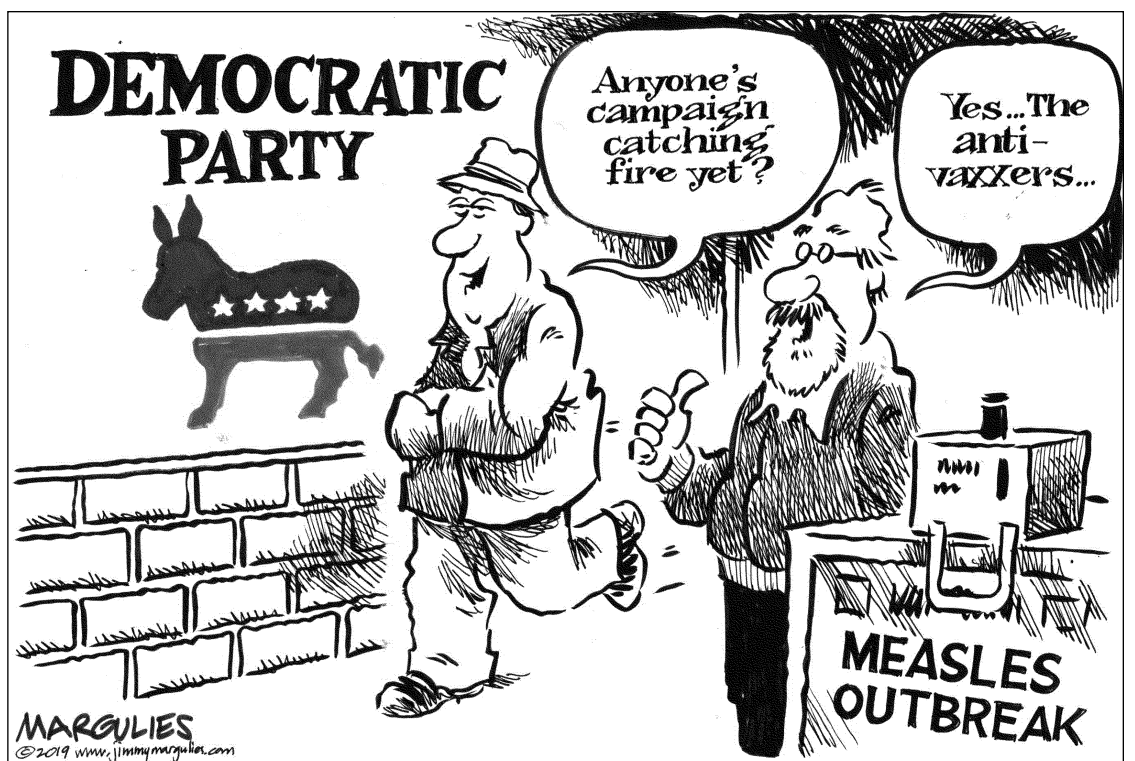
There are other things to consider, however.

The state expects to take in record revenues, up more than \$2 billion since the last budget was prepared in 2017. Even so, there are likely to be budget cuts in such areas as public safety, criminal justice and human services. Each of those areas is, arguably, as vital to the well being of Oregonians as K-12 education and the Oregon Health Plan, both of which are expected to get more money.

The lack of money in programs that protect the youngest Oregonians has been a contributing factor in ongoing abuse and even deaths in the foster care system. A 2018 performance audit by the Secretary Of State's Office found too few foster homes, too little state oversight and a need for some 800 more full-time caseworkers to correct the situation. The 2018 Legislature did up the Department of Human Services budget, but by nowhere near enough to make serious inroads in those shortages.

True, the money that would be spent on ballot postage won't fill the DHS gap. But it will help, if even just a little. It could mean additional caseworkers, or the money to make being foster parents a reality for a few more Oregonians. And that could mean fewer cases of abuse, even death, for children whose plight is not of their own making.

Lawmakers need to get their priorities straight on this one. Voters who cannot afford to mail their ballots can take them to a drop center or the county clerk's office. Money for ballot stamps must be set aside and the money redirected to programs that involve people's lives.



## Your views

### Extend playground effort spirit to political commentary

It raised my spirits to read the three Heart to Heart letters in support of the Moda Assist All-Abilities Playground that were published in the Herald's March 11 paper. I have voted every day for this new playground for Baker City. Cassie LeTourneau and her group have done an excellent job of getting the word out and promoting strong community support. Our collective votes have created a strong lead in this contest and the prospect for playground funding looks good.

On the next page of the paper, however, I was dismayed to see yet another political cartoon criticizing Democrats, specifically

### 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.

our new US representatives that are women of color. We need to extend the same support and respect that we are demonstrating for our children to other members of our community, especially when they devote their time and

energy to running our city, state and nation.

We don't need to agree with our elected officials or our fellow citizens about everything or approve of each viewpoint they hold. Quite the opposite. We need to voice our opinions clearly and stand up for our values with passion, but we can do this respectfully and without creating division and setting up an "Us vs. Them" attitude.

Let's harness this positive energy that will help bring a wonderful new playground to Geiser-Pollman Park and use it for other creative projects that will benefit our local and national community.

**Gretchen Stadler**  
Baker City

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# Carbon taxation and the rural-urban divide

Oregon's rural-urban divide is a fixture of the state's political landscape but oftentimes, it seems to me, this yawning ideological chasm serves only as conversation fodder without being a truly malevolent force.

It is of little consequence to Baker County residents, for instance, whether Portland bans plastic grocery sacks.

But occasionally this regional difference is reflected in a proposal which has the potential to cause profound harm to rural counties whose denizens have little chance of thwarting, or possibly even influencing, the plan.

House Bill 2020, the carbon emissions-limiting legislation under consideration at the Capitol in Salem, might be the most dramatic, and potentially the most damaging, example of this phenomenon to cast a pall over rural Oregon in the past few decades.

The bill goes by multiple names.

Proponents, many of them living on the urban side of the political divide (which is west of the state's great geographic divide, the Cascade Mountains), call it the Clean Energy Jobs bill.

That moniker ought to evince considerable skepticism from everyone except the most gullible acolytes of any legislation which purports to be "clean."

That adjective is no more convincing to a savvy reader than the attempt to obscure a new tax by cloaking it with the flimsy euphemism "revenue enhancement."

It is not without reason that the most common analogy for the legislative process is the making of sausage, a task which involves a certain griminess.

The bill's boosters, not being



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satisfied with trying to cleanse the legislation with a word more often applied to products used in the bathroom, doubled down on the condescension by tossing in "jobs" as well.

The notion that the government can create jobs — whether clean, dirty or slightly soiled varieties — or even that lawmakers should try to do so, concerns me.

I've seen little evidence that the legislative branch insinuating itself into the economy is likely to yield widespread economic benefits — or indeed any benefits at all except perhaps to allow lawmakers to issue self-congratulatory press releases about their sponsorship of "clean jobs" bills.

Conversely, the evidence is quite persuasive that House Bill 2020, as written, would result in the closure of Ash Grove Cement Company's Baker County plant at Durkee.

Ash Grove is one of Baker County's bigger private employers, with about 115 workers (some of whom live outside the county).

It's the county's third-largest property tax payer, at about \$739,000 annually.

The closure of the Durkee plant would be the most significant single blow to the local economy since Ellingson Lumber Company closed its Baker City sawmill in 1996.

Gov. Kate Brown, who has publicly endorsed House Bill 2020, told a Baker City audience on March 1, in response to a question about how the bill could affect Baker

County, that her goal is to ensure the legislation doesn't worsen the economy for rural counties.

But unless the final version of the bill includes an exemption for Ash Grove — something Brown did not mention — it seems all but certain that the carbon bill will indeed stifle the county's economy.

Jackie Clark, a spokesman at Ash Grove's headquarters in Overland Park, Kansas, said no existing technology would allow the company to meet the proposed carbon emissions limits in the bill.

And the cost of buying emissions credits — the "trade" part of the bill — would increase the company's costs to a point where it would no longer be economical to make cement here, she said.

(To illustrate the narrow margins of the market, Clark said Chinese cement can be shipped across the Pacific to Portland at a lower cost than Ash Grove's product can be moved by rail from Durkee to Portland, a considerably shorter journey.)

The reality of Oregon's barely detectable carbon footprint dictates that proponents of House Bill 2020 acknowledge the legislation, if it becomes law, would have a statistically minuscule effect on the world's carbon emissions, and thus on the campaign to curb global climate change.

That's a vital campaign, and one I wholeheartedly support.

The climate is warming, and this has the potential to harm Baker County's economy, most particularly the farms and ranches that need an adequate supply of water and that constitute the economy's largest sector.

But the notion that we should — much less that we must — deci-

mate the economy of a rural county such as Baker for gains that are negligible seems to me the grimest sort of calculus.

(Negligible at best — it's hardly inconceivable that any drop in the production of cement and other necessities in Oregon due to the carbon bill would be replaced by companies in other countries, such as China, that care little if at all about emissions. Which would leave the globe worse off, even as some naïve carbon-haters "feel" better.)

This defies common sense — and common decency.

What strikes me as passing strange about this scenario is that, even though I started by citing the rural-urban divide, I'm not convinced that's the true culprit.

At least not as we typically define it.

It seems to me that most rural Oregonians, when they talk about that divide, really mean the voting bloc in the Portland area and the Willamette Valley. It's a legitimate point, certainly — 60 percent of the state's 2.8 million voters are confined in five counties — Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Marion and Lane.

Most rural residents with a modicum of interest in political matters can cite an example of how westside voters flexed their electoral muscles to exert their will on their numerically weak fellow Oregonians who live in less densely populated precincts.

Brown's election last November is a recent case. She easily defeated Republican challenger Knute Buehler, but in Baker County Brown received just 19 percent of the votes to Buehler's 73 percent.

But in the case of House Bill

2020 it's not voters, but rather lawmakers and Brown herself, who will decide whether to impose limits on carbon emissions.

And here's the strange part — there's reason to believe that were the matter to go on the ballot, the westside majority, whatever its predilections for tougher environmental laws, would not thwart the wishes of the rural minority.

For compelling evidence we need only look to our neighbor to the north, Washington state.

This example is compelling because the two states have quite a lot in common. The Cascades divide both states not only climatically but also politically. If anything, Washington hews more to the left than Oregon does. Donald Trump received 36.8 percent of the votes in Washington in 2016, compared with 39.1 percent in Oregon.

Yet when Washington voters, in the November 2018 election, had a chance to pass an initiative imposing a carbon emissions tax similar to what's proposed in Oregon's House Bill 2020, they soundly rejected it — 56.3 percent to 43.7 percent.

This suggests to me that the rural-urban divide is not quite so monolithic as we might believe it to be.

More to the point, it tells me that if Oregon lawmakers pass House Bill 2020, they might be defying not only voters in places such as Baker County, who likely have more at stake, economically speaking, but also many of their urban constituents who, sensitive though they may be to carbon emissions, can recognize a bad deal when they see one.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.