

EDITORIAL

Hospitals in trouble

Oregon lawmakers passed on a chance to help ailing rural hospitals on Thursday, including Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City. The Legislature’s 20-member Joint Emergency Board needs to act the next time it meets — ideally as soon as possible.

At issue is \$50 million, a relative pittance out of the estimated \$2.45 billion the state will receive from the federal CARES Act to alleviate effects from the coronavirus pandemic. Gov. Kate Brown has proposed to loan the \$50 million, with no interest for the first year, to 33 rural hospitals, including Saint Alphonsus. The Emergency Board tabled the proposal Thursday, in part because some members, including state Sen. Lynn Findley, the Vale Republican whose district includes Baker County, argued that the money should be given as grants, not loans.

Findley is right. There’s no reason for the state to loan money that it received directly from the federal government.

Rural hospitals, which have been harmed not by an influx of COVID-19 patients but by the absence of regular patients, need help — now. With elective and other nonemergency procedures banned under a state order for more than a month, Saint Alphonsus has seen its revenue drop by 40% to 50%, said Priscilla Lynn, the hospital’s CEO. Those procedures could resume May 1, but the financial damage has been done.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

Your views

Baker’s gas prices stand out — in a bad way

Regarding article in Tuesday’s paper (April 21), “Gas Prices slower to plummet,” here are a few prices around the nation. An Army buddy of mine e-mailed from Jasper, Indiana, that he just paid \$1.499. A Facebook friend of my brother’s, from Dallas, Texas, paid \$1.059, last I heard. I paid \$1.999 in Orofino, Idaho, on April 15 and when I returned April 19, price had dropped a dime to \$1.899. Save Dallas, these other towns I mentioned are not exactly on main supply routes. Baker City is not as isolated as John Day, for instance, but gas is cheaper there. C’mon Baker City, let’s fall in line with other places around the nation.

Don Neugart
Baker City



Virus leads to abuse of power

As I see it, when it comes to health issues, it is our individual responsibility to protect ourselves and minimize our personal risks. We do that same thing when we cross a street or take a trip. What concerns me about the COVID-19 outbreak is in using it as an excuse to impose unjust rules and regulations on citizens. If a prudent man or woman feels the need to self-quarantine, wear a mask and practice social distancing out of self-preservation, they should do just that. We should not be coerced or forced to take certain actions mandated by politicians. Yet this is exactly what is happening during this pandemic.

Elected officials — local, state and federal — act as if this health crisis gives them the authority to impose rules over the private lives and activities of citizens in ways that conflict with the spirit and intent of our basic rights guaranteed under the Constitution. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer believes it is within her power to ban garden stores from selling fruit or vegetable plants and seeds. State officials in Vermont ordered large retailers selling critical items, such as food and prescription drugs, to stop the sale of “nonessential products,” such as clothing, electronics and toys. Other state officials have abused their power by issuing stay-at-home orders and empowering police to harass and



RICK STEBER

fine individuals for nothing more than taking a walk.

A passenger on a bus in Philadelphia was dragged off that bus by police for not wearing a face mask. In Colorado a father was handcuffed in front of his family for playing T-ball with his daughter in an empty park. The governor of Oregon closed all beaches, parks, boat ramps and trailheads. These are “public” places where Oregonians generally practice social distancing while feeding their mental and physical well-being.

We can ponder how many lives would have been lost if we had failed to take measures to minimize the spread of this particular disease. We will never know if any of the measures were effective. Were they even necessary? In making the decision — to purposefully gut our economy and shut down Oregon and America — one factor that was never considered by the bureaucrats was the trampling of the fundamental rights and freedom of citizens. The governor of Oregon issued quarantines, travel restrictions, and forced shutdowns of all but “essential business” — while keeping open state-run liquor stores and pot shops. This is

an example of hypocrisy, heavy-handed authoritarian overreach and an abuse of power.

Such strict and severe action should be reserved for a major national catastrophe and not a health issue that will most likely prove no more deadly than the flu, and certainly less challenging than the 300,000 people who contract Lyme disease each year and suffer under its crippling effects, or the 300,000 premature deaths caused annually by obesity.

Face it, this is not a war. There are no coronavirus boots on the beach. There are no bombs in the air. This pandemic has been used as a justification for expanding governmental powers and strict obedience to authority, at the expense of personal freedom. The question is, in the future, are we willing to destroy our economy and give up individual rights as Oregon and American citizens each time Henny Penny declares “The sky is falling”?

Rick Steber is an Oregon author of more than 40 books and sales exceeding two million copies. He has received national acclaim for his writing. His numerous awards include the Western Writers of America Spur Award for Best Western Novel, Independent Publishers Award – Best Regional Fiction, Oregon Library Association Award and Oregon Literary Arts Award.

‘Smokey and the Bandit’ gains 2 new fans

The coronavirus pandemic has created two new fans of one of the great characters in big screen history — Sheriff Buford T. Justice. I introduced my daughter, Olivia, who’s 12, and my 9-year-old son, Max, to the Texas county mountie, he of the dogged high-speed pursuit regardless of jurisdiction, on a recent homebound weekend.

This is, I’ll concede, among the lesser-known, and perhaps the least important, effects of the virus.

But it’s also a benign effect.

And for an infectious agent rightly maligned for its malignancy, it’s refreshing to be able to cite cases where the pandemic isn’t perpetuating problems.

I’ll admit that some people might argue with my contention that it’s harmless to add to the roster of people who enjoy watching Jackie Gleason’s antics as the aptly named sheriff in the “Smokey and the Bandit” movie franchise.

These films are not renowned as cinematic achievements.

The original, released in 1977, and its 1980 sequel starred a trio of actors who had, or would have, esteemed careers — Gleason along with Burt Reynolds and Sally Field. Field has won two Academy Awards. Gleason, who died in 1987, and Reynolds, who died in 2018, were each nominated for one.

But you’re not likely to find either film sharing space on a list with,



JAYSON JACOBY

say, “Citizen Kane” or “The Godfather.”

(The same can also be said for the third film in the “Smokey” series, but I’m confining my comments to the first two because, although Gleason reprises his role in number three, Reynolds makes only a cameo, and Field none at all.)

I’ve been a “Smokey and the Bandit” fan since I was a boy. I don’t recall when I first watched either the original or its sequel but I suspect it must have been in the early ’80s, after cable TV arrived in Stayton, where I grew up.

In any case I was just about the right age — I was born in 1970 — to appreciate a movie that was little more than a series of tire burnouts and car chases interspersed with brief interludes of mainly silly dialogue.

This was also the era when “The Dukes of Hazzard” was my favorite TV series, and the “Smokey and the Bandit” movies were basically extended versions of a “Dukes” episode. Although I confess that I preferred the Duke boys’ Dodge Charger to the Bandit’s Trans Am, and my adolescent hormones were

more, well, invigorated by Catherine Bach than by Sally Field.

I was also intrigued at the time by the CB radio fad, a cultural curiosity surpassed, in sheer silliness, perhaps only by the contemporary national fixation on disco music.

My dad installed a CB radio under the dashboard of our 1971 Chevy Blazer and that, combined with my affinity for C.W. McCall’s hit novelty song, “Convoy,” ensured that I could no more avoid “Smokey and the Bandit” than I could stay out of the local arcade if I had a spare quarter to slide into the Ms. Pac Man console.

Despite my own history with the franchise, I’m convinced that I wouldn’t even have considered asking my kids to watch the movies if not for the coronavirus.

We’ve kept ourselves occupied, during these times of severely limited social interaction, with books and yard work and hikes.

But once dusk begins to fall we’ve made it something of a habit to gather on the couches and try to agree on a movie or TV program that satisfies our dramatically different tastes.

(I’m happy with idiotic fare in the “Dumb and Dumber” genre, but my preferences are by a wide margin the shallowest among my family — and the most juvenile, though I’m the eldest member.)

The original “Smokey and the

Bandit” happened to be airing on a cable channel earlier in the day, and it piqued my curiosity. I thought at first that the movie might be a bit more risqué than I would prefer for the kids, but I noted that it was rated PG. Even accounting for it being released prior to the PG-13 designation — the rating I suspect it would earn by today’s standards — as I watched I realized the film wasn’t nearly as vulgar as I remembered.

Indeed the movie’s frequency of profanity — and more so the level — seem almost innocent compared with the R-rated comedies prevalent over the past couple decades.

The 1970s has a reputation as a permissive decade, a period when American society went astray, our values fading beneath a pall of marijuana smoke and amid a ticker tape parade of no-fault divorce decrees. This isn’t an altogether unfair depiction, certainly. But I was surprised by how much has changed over the past 43 years in what’s considered acceptable to mainstream film audiences.

In any case it wasn’t the occasional mild bouts of cussing in “Smokey and the Bandit” that Olivia and Max seemed to notice.

They were enthralled instead by Buford T. Justice. And perhaps even more so by his buffoonish son, Junior, whose only purpose, besides being left at the altar by Field’s

character, is to be a foil for Gleason’s creatively profane rants (why, exactly, a “tick turd” should be a slur I’m not sure; tick excrement, if nothing else, must be minuscule).

The kids laughed so hard at several points that they were gasping for breath.

They liked the first movie so much they clamored to watch the sequel the next evening.

And after that they resorted to searching for their favorite clips on YouTube. My wife, Lisa, and I finally had to impose a moratorium on the topic.

I suppose it’s possible that the kids’ fascination for the films reflects boredom rather than true affinity.

But when I listen to Max dissolve into the manic laughter that is one of his trademarks, as Junior plummets into a river after Buford T. Justice tries, and fails, to jump his patrol cruiser over a partially open drawbridge in the sequel, I detect nothing but the genuine article in Max’s mirth.

And in these times, when so much that children see and hear is tinged with danger, it seems to me that laughter, and in particular that sort of laughter that leaves us helpless against its power, is among the more valuable commodities.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.