

EDITORIAL

No time to boost pay

More than 550 Baker County residents have filed for unemployment benefits since March 15 — about 10% of the county’s nonfarm workforce. Given that nearly 60% of county residents live in Baker City, a majority of those who have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic likely live in the city.

Yet even as we deal with the worst economic catastrophe since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Baker City Council’s agenda Tuesday evening included a proposed pay increase for some employees.

The City Council wisely tabled a resolution that would have made nonunion employees eligible for 2% raises after they reach 10 or 15 consecutive years of city employment. The resolution would have given 7 employees a raise. Currently employees who reach 20 years are eligible for a 4% raise.

City Manager Fred Warner Jr. shouldn’t have allowed the issue to make it to the agenda at all.

The report to councilors written by Robin Nudd, the city’s human resources manager, acknowledges that it’s hardly an appropriate time to boost salaries when so many of the people who help pay those salaries are going without a paycheck.

Nudd’s report: “Knowing full well that current climate does not support increasing base salaries at this time, it is staff’s recommendation to complete a Pay Equity/Salary Compensation Study this year and present to City Council in January 2021.”

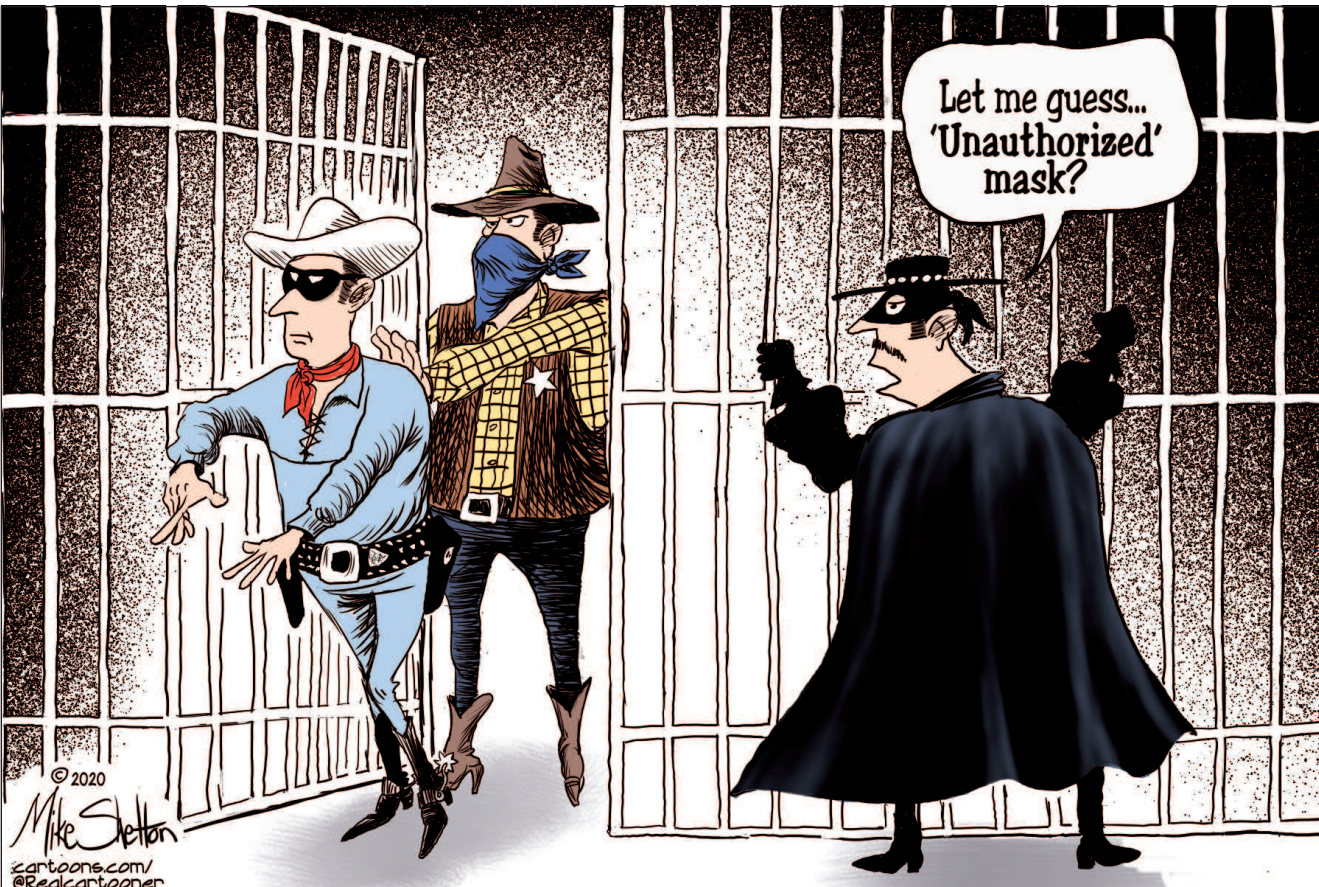
But whether the city changes the salary schedule or adds longevity incentives, it’s still a pay hike.

The report notes that the City Council hasn’t changed the salary schedule for the city’s 15 nonunion employees since 2014. But that doesn’t mean none of those employees, which include the police and fire chiefs and several other department heads or supervisors, has had a raise in six years. The salary schedule has five step increases — 2% at the first three levels, 4% for the latter two levels — that employees can reach every 12 months based on performance. And employees who get to the top of the salary schedule can qualify for 2% merit pay hikes.

Moreover, even the base pay for these 15 jobs is nearly equal to, and in most cases well above, the average annual salary of \$35,760 for all jobs, public and private, in Baker County. Twelve of the 15 positions have a base pay of \$51,600 or more.

It’s reasonable for the City Council, in 2021, to review the nonunion salary schedule. But this is a wholly inappropriate time to ask councilors to consider giving any city employees a raise.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



EO MEDIA GROUP SPONSORING CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE FORUMS FRIDAY, SATURDAY

We’re helping to inform voters

Elections are important. They are the bedrock of our democracy, the foundational element to our political system and are the body politic’s way to continue on with a series of lawmakers or make different choices.

That’s why I believe the upcoming online candidate forums, sponsored by the EO Media Group, are so important and, if you allow, necessary.

Especially now, an opportunity for voters to connect with candidates is crucial. This isn’t a typical election season. That’s why the online forums, which will be livestreamed and will not have a live audience because of the COVID-19 outbreak, are essential for voters.

The forums are slated on Friday, May 1, for Democratic candidates for Oregon’s 2nd Congressional District slot and Saturday, May 2, for Republican candidates. There are 16 candidates running for the congressional positions. The EO Media Group sponsorship of the forums is an important public service. We believe one of our core missions is to inform readers regarding issues that impact their lives.



ANDREW CUTLER

Elections — who wins and who does not — make an impact at the local level. The candidate we choose to represent us in Washington, D.C., is crucial to nearly every facet of our lives. That’s why we must choose wisely and the forums will allow area voters to gain some perspective on all the candidates.

Normally, as we all know, by this time in an election season there already would have been numerous open debates, fundraisers for candidates and other opportunities to list and ask questions of the candidates. Because that just isn’t possible now, the forums will help democracy by furnishing a platform for all of us to hear what the candidates have to say, their goals and their views on specific subjects. Election time is near. Ballots went out Wednesday, and the primary election is May 19.

So that means time is at a premium. That’s why I hope you all tune in, if you

can, and watch.

The forums are being livestreamed by La Grande-based Eastern Oregon Alive TV, a local internet TV station, and on the East Oregonian’s Facebook page. And if you are unable to watch the events live, the forums will be archived and available for viewing at your convenience on the East Oregonian’s website or on EOAlive.tv following the events.

The forums are being moderated by Chris Rush, the regional publisher of EO Media Group’s east side publications, including the Baker City Herald. Voters can submit questions to CD2forum@eomediagroup.com in advance of the forums or on Facebook Live during the event.

The only way voters can make an informed decision is to be able to hear what the candidates have to say.

So, if you get the chance, please go online and watch the forums. It isn’t only a good way to be informed, but it is important to our democracy.

Andrew Cutler is editor of the East Oregonian in Pendleton.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the

- accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be

- published.
 - Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.
- Mail:** To the Editor, Baker City Herald, P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814
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Computer modeling and the coronavirus

Much of the news about COVID-19 includes projections about where the coronavirus pandemic may be going. Many of these predictions are at great odds with one another, likely causing many to ask: How do prediction models work and can they be trusted?

Recently, the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation projected that COVID-19 deaths in the United States would drop to near zero by June. Last week, a group from Harvard University put forth a model suggesting a far different scenario: Absent a vaccine, COVID-19 will be with us for at least several more years.

Such disparity occurs because different types of models are used. Those who analyze the COVID-19 pandemic generally use either transmission models or curve-fitting models.

The Harvard projection is an example of the transmission model, which simulates how viruses spread through communities.

Transmission models can predict how quickly an infection can explode in a community that has no immunity. The model takes into account the number of people, on average, to whom an infected

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person can transmit the virus. Controlling the epidemic hinges on that number, which can be brought down by physical distancing and other measures.

But transmission models developed by different researchers can come up with results that don’t agree because the values used in the modeling equations vary. One prognostication might reflect infection rates that change with the season while another keeps them constant. Some models assume once the infected recover, they are permanently immune, while others assume immunity wanes over time. As of now, we do not know whether COVID-19 has seasonal patterns or if immunity will be long-lasting.

The Harvard transmission model used data from previous related coronaviruses to determine how easily COVID-19 can spread. The model shows that without a vaccine, we may need intermittent periods of physical distancing to avoid overloading health care facilities — and that the COVID-19

epidemic will recur in multiple waves.

Curve-fitting models use available COVID-19 data to try to determine if trends exist. That’s the method the Institute for Health Metrics used, gathering data from multiple countries to look for patterns.

Researchers building curve-fitting models can get very different answers. One reason has to do with the input data that are used. While numbers of confirmed cases might seem like an obvious choice of data to plug in, surges in confirmed cases could reflect more testing is being done or an actual increase in infections.

The Institute for Health Metrics model, which is frequently cited by the White House, used data on COVID-19 deaths. However, deaths from COVID-19 may not be completely reported; New York City’s health department recently adjusted upward the city’s death count by 3,700 to account for potential undercounting.

To make predictions, curve-fitting models simply extrapolate curves into the future. These models can give very different answers depending on the shape of the curve used for extrapolation.

For example, if the commonly used bell-shaped curve is extrapolated far enough into the future, it eventually will show that projected deaths fall to nearly zero, which may not be accurate. In contrast, if a curve is extrapolated that doubles every week and heads dramatically upward — known as an “exponential growth curve” — very different conclusions emerge and the projected death toll would soar.

Because of the pitfalls of extrapolation, the Institute for Health Metrics model’s prediction of nearly zero COVID-19 deaths this summer is not considered reliable and should be viewed with extreme skepticism.

The many and varied numbers coming out of various COVID-19 models can be confusing to the public and to policymakers. Colorful graphs with smooth curves convey a false sense of precision and mask the uncertainties in the numbers. The builders of these models need to work especially hard to communicate to the general public and policymakers, in lay terms, why they got the results they did and what key assumptions they relied upon.

Curve-fitting models are useful for making very short-term

predictions, but beyond that many researchers, including me, don’t have much confidence in them. If you are looking for longer-term clues regarding how the pandemic will play out, pay attention to transmission models, even though they have their own built-in uncertainties.

Predictive modeling is one of the tools that will influence the decisions policymakers will make about when and how to reopen our society, so we need to be critical consumers of them. These models can help guide decisions about how much testing we need and how many trained contact tracers must be in place before social distancing measures can be safely relaxed. Builders of these models need to be transparent about their models’ assumptions, strengths and weaknesses, and make clear what purpose they are best used for.

A little clarity can go a long way as we try to navigate our way out of this pandemic.

Ron Brookmeyer is dean of the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. As a biostatistician, he has done modeling for diseases including AIDS and Alzheimer’s.