

EDITORIAL

Governor should OK reopen plan sooner than May 15

With three of Baker County’s signature events already canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic — Sumpter’s flea market and the Huntington Lions Catfish Derby during Memorial Day weekend, and the Hells Canyon Motorcycle Rally in Baker City in early July — Gov. Kate Brown needs to approve Baker County’s economic reopening plan sooner than May 15.

That’s the date the governor cited as a target for potentially allowing counties such as Baker, which have been lightly affected so far by the virus itself, if at all, to begin to reopen restaurants and some other businesses closed since mid-March.

But our economy needs immediate help. Businesses have already suffered significantly — more than 550 county residents have filed for unemployment benefits over the past seven weeks. And now the summer tourist season, which is so vital to many businesses, seems certain to be less of a boon that it usually is. It could be disastrously slow.

Restaurants, bars, beauty salons and other businesses need to be able to welcome back customers as soon as possible.

This isn’t about pretending the virus is no longer a threat and rushing forward irresponsibly.

The county’s reopening plan certainly does not — indeed, it proposes the sort of measured approach that Brown has advocated, with specific statistical guidelines, such as a rash of confirmed cases, that could put a halt to the reopening schedule.

But there’s no reason the governor shouldn’t allow the county to start the clock moving on its plan now. The county submitted the proposal on April 24. If the governor waits until May 15 to approve it, the county likely wouldn’t reach the second phase of the plan — a vital step because it would allow bars and restaurants to reopen, albeit with 50% of their regular seating capacities — until up to two weeks later. That pushes the reopening until the cusp of June.

Baker County remains without a confirmed case of the virus. That doesn’t mean nobody in the county is infected, or has been — indeed that’s unlikely given how rapidly it can spread, and the relatively low number of residents who have been tested (81, as of Monday). But it’s indisputable that the virus has not run rampant through the county’s residents. Moreover — and perhaps equally important based on the governor’s criteria for reopening the economy — the pandemic has not overwhelmed the county’s medical and emergency resources.

Quite the opposite, in fact — Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City has had so few patients to treat that it has had to reduce its workforce.

Baker County is ready to begin reopening its economy, under a thorough plan that’s responsible and that ensures the county won’t sacrifice residents’ health.

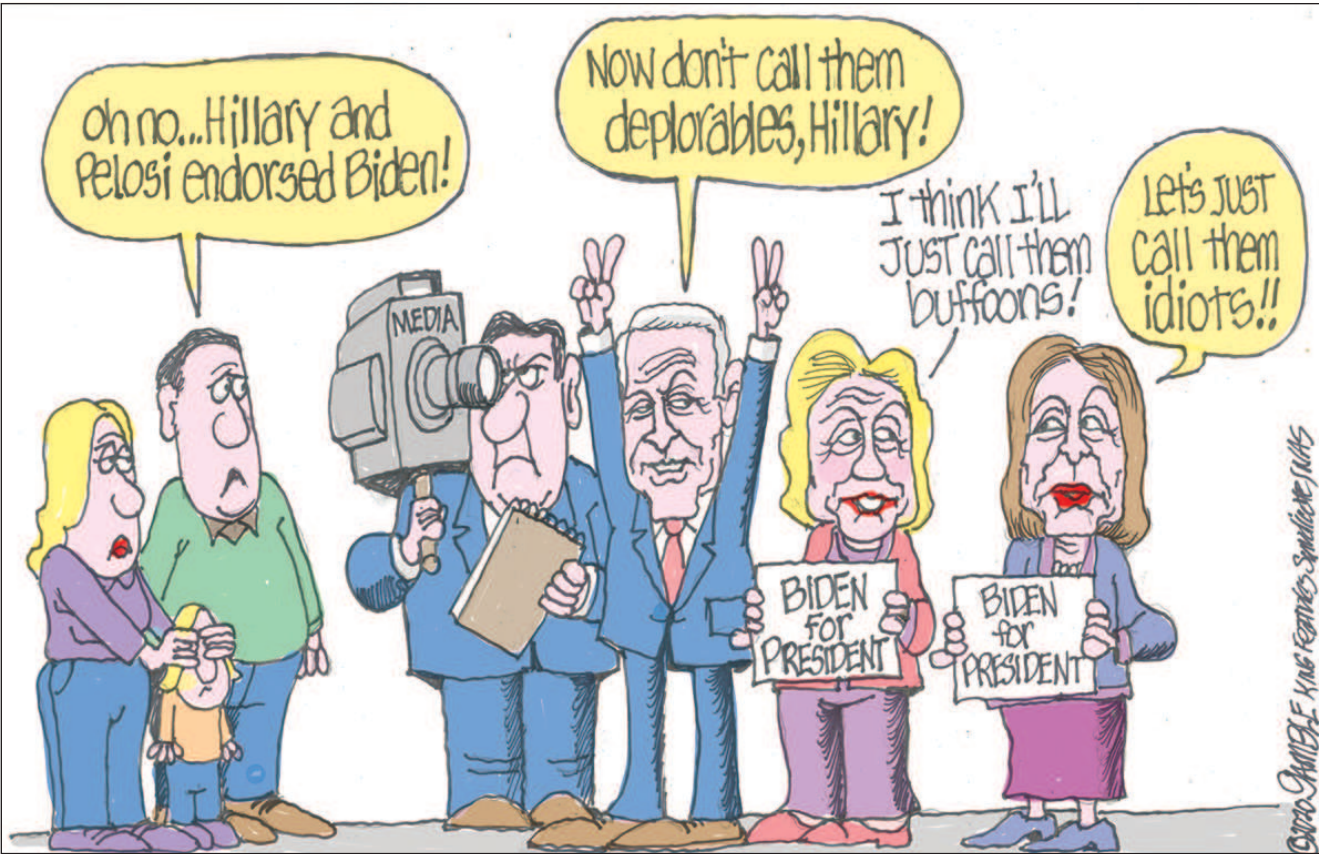
But right now the threat the virus poses to our health is largely, if not wholly, hypothetical. And there’s no reason to believe we aren’t well-prepared to deal effectively and rapidly with the virus when — it’s probably not realistic to say it’s a matter of “if” — its presence is confirmed here.

The damage that’s been done to our economy, however, is real, as tangible as a bill arriving in the mail.

Brown, to her credit, has acknowledged that the situation is quite different in many rural counties than in urban areas, and that she intends to treat them accordingly.

Now she needs to prove that by acting decisively and quickly.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Reconsidering beach closures

Every Californian has an unalienable right to a day at the beach. Or at least an hour or two.

OK, maybe just a few minutes day-dreaming in a car while marveling at the foaming breakers. Of course, most beach parking lots are now closed to you and me.

Going to the beach is our birthright as native Californians — and our promise to newcomers. It’s our gift from the Creator — a trade-off for all the quakes, wildfires, mudslides and smog.

Yeah, I know: Every right has limits. We’ve got the right to free speech but shouldn’t wade into the surf and yell “shark.” And we shouldn’t be spreading germs to other sunbathers.

So hire some beach patrols and enforce the rule about plopping down no closer than 6 feet apart. Maybe after a couple of warnings issue a citation for enough bucks to cover the administrative costs.

Although, honestly, I can’t envision a young couple adhering to the 6-foot rule for more than five minutes.

And forget about wearing masks on the beach. One of the ocean’s appeals is breathing in that salt air drifting in on a soft breeze.

My parents left Oklahoma and Tennessee in the 1920s searching for the California dream. They met at a Ventura beach party. I practically grew up on beaches between Ventura and Santa Barbara — Hollywood Beach, the Rincon, Carpinteria, East Beach — while sheltering in Ojai.

At Ventura College, I often took my reading assignment down to a secluded beach on the Rincon. Later at San Jose State, I immediately noticed how pale most northern students were at summer’s end compared to Southern California beach worshippers. In Santa Cruz, the sun shined less and the water was colder. But it was still paradise.

Recently, it was reassuring to notice that Ventura politicians still get it. Beaches are the substance of local peoples’ lives. The City Council decided to open them on the first spectacular weekend of the season “in support

of balancing residents’ physical and mental health,” it announced.

Yes, a warm sun, calm breeze and a little body surfing will do wonders for the mind, relaxing it and enabling the toleration of all manner of aggravations while sheltering at home. You can’t find therapy that good no matter the fee.

Of course, leaders of my old beach town weren’t very hospitable to outsiders. They told Angelenos to stay out.

“To our L.A. County brothers and sisters, normally we like you to come here, but not right now,” county Executive Officer Mike Powers was quoted in the Ventura County Star, which gave me my first daily newspaper job while at VC. “If you have to travel, keep it to essential travel where you live.”

Guess you can’t blame people in Ventura, which has avoided being hard hit by COVID-19, for fearing being overrun by residents in more densely populated LA, where the coronavirus continues to spread.

LA has kept its beaches closed. But they were opened in Orange County. And the Newport Beach City Council rejected a proposal to close down the beach in May after people swarmed there on the hot weekend.

Unfortunately, city parking lots at the beach were closed, so beachgoers invaded nearby neighborhoods.

“I think you should reopen them,” state Sen. John Moorlach (R-Costa Mesa) said Tuesday. He’s a former Orange County supervisor who represents some beach communities. “People should have access to facilities.”

Moorlach says he understands why people flocked there on a beautiful weekend.

“You need to trust people,” the senator says. “If they exercise proper social distancing, you’ve got to let people be people. If you’re part of a vulnerable group, shame on you for going to the beach. For everyone else who’s sheltering in place, the beach may be the best

medicine.”

“We haven’t seen the ‘surge’” in virus contagion that was feared, he continues. “And I’m not seeing a wide band of people in ICUs. I see hospitals in my district struggling because they don’t have patients. Something’s amiss. Maybe people are seeing that too.”

What Gov. Gavin Newsom saw — those crowded beach scenes — made him angry.

“Those images are an example of what not to see ... what not to do,” the governor declared during his Monday virus briefing. “You didn’t see those images at LA beaches and San Diego beaches and (in) Northern California because we had strong guidelines that were not only adopted but were abided by.”

So amend the guidelines and loosen up.

Instead, sadly, the governor announced Thursday he’s closing Orange County beaches. Thankfully he backed away from closing all beaches in California.

“The TV angles were bad” and made the beaches look more crowded than they really were, Moorlach says.

“Everyone did social distancing. (It) was real cooperative and very respectful. They just wanted to get out and get some sun, which is really healthy.”

If it’s unhealthy, if people are being infected with the virus by being drawn to the ocean as humans always have, show us some data. Do people who go to the beach contract the virus more than people who don’t? Show us the numbers.

Until then, here’s my declaration of independence from shallow thinking: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Californians are endowed with certain unalienable rights. Among these are sun, surf and a day at the beach.”

Newsom could use some beach time.

Political columnist George Skelton has covered government and politics for nearly 60 years and for The Los Angeles Times since 1974.

Your views

I’m voting for Nichols

When in a war, you choose integrity, knowledge, effort, determination, experience, and concern for the troops

when looking for an officer. You look for training, efficacy in the subject at hand, and a refusal to ignore facts. You hope to find a willingness to serve even at

personal risk. I will be voting for Bruce Nichols.

Brent Gyllenberg
Baker City

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State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

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. Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe, Lynette Perry, Arvid Andersen, Larry Morrison, Jason Spriet and Doni Bruland.

Baker City administration: 541-523-

6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; Sean Lee, interim 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; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, 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. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.