

EDITORIAL

County proceeds, but with caution

Baker County officials don't have a timeline in their effort to persuade Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to further ease restrictions on local businesses and events during the coronavirus pandemic.

But there can be little doubt that the process will be slowed by recent events a mere 40-minute drive on Interstate 84 from Baker City.

Union County, our neighbor to the north, is the site of Oregon's biggest coronavirus outbreak.

As Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett pointed out Monday evening, a few hours after Union County announced 99 new cases of COVID-19, "we have so much interaction with Union County." Bennett said a pause in easing restrictions, as Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced last week, is understandable.

On Tuesday state officials announced 119 more positive tests in Union County.

Baker County, meanwhile, still has had only one confirmed case of the virus. It's all but certain that more county residents have been, or are, infected. Just 2% of the Baker County's 16,800 residents have been tested.

The Union County outbreak starkly illustrates the potential for the virus to spread at large gatherings where participants don't follow social distancing. A state health official said 236 of Union County's 240 cases are connected to the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City. According to reporting by our sister newspaper, The Observer in La Grande, videos of services at the church show dozens of parishioners gathered around a stage in the church's parking lot, closer than the 6 feet experts recommend and without wearing face masks, in late April and May.

Under phase 2 of the state's reopening plan, which Baker County started June 6, certain gatherings, including church services, can have up to 250 people — provided they maintain social distancing.

When state officials announced earlier this month that most of Oregon's 36 counties, including Baker and Union, could begin phase 2, state epidemiologist Dean Sidelinger said residents should expect that phase 2 restrictions would remain in effect for at least "several months."

Bennett, who is serving as Baker County's incident commander during the pandemic, said Monday that the county plans to submit to the governor's office a proposal for what is, in effect, a "phase 2.5." That would further ease restrictions, including allowing larger gatherings and, potentially, reducing the social distancing threshold from 6 feet to perhaps 3 feet, in counties that do not have outbreaks.

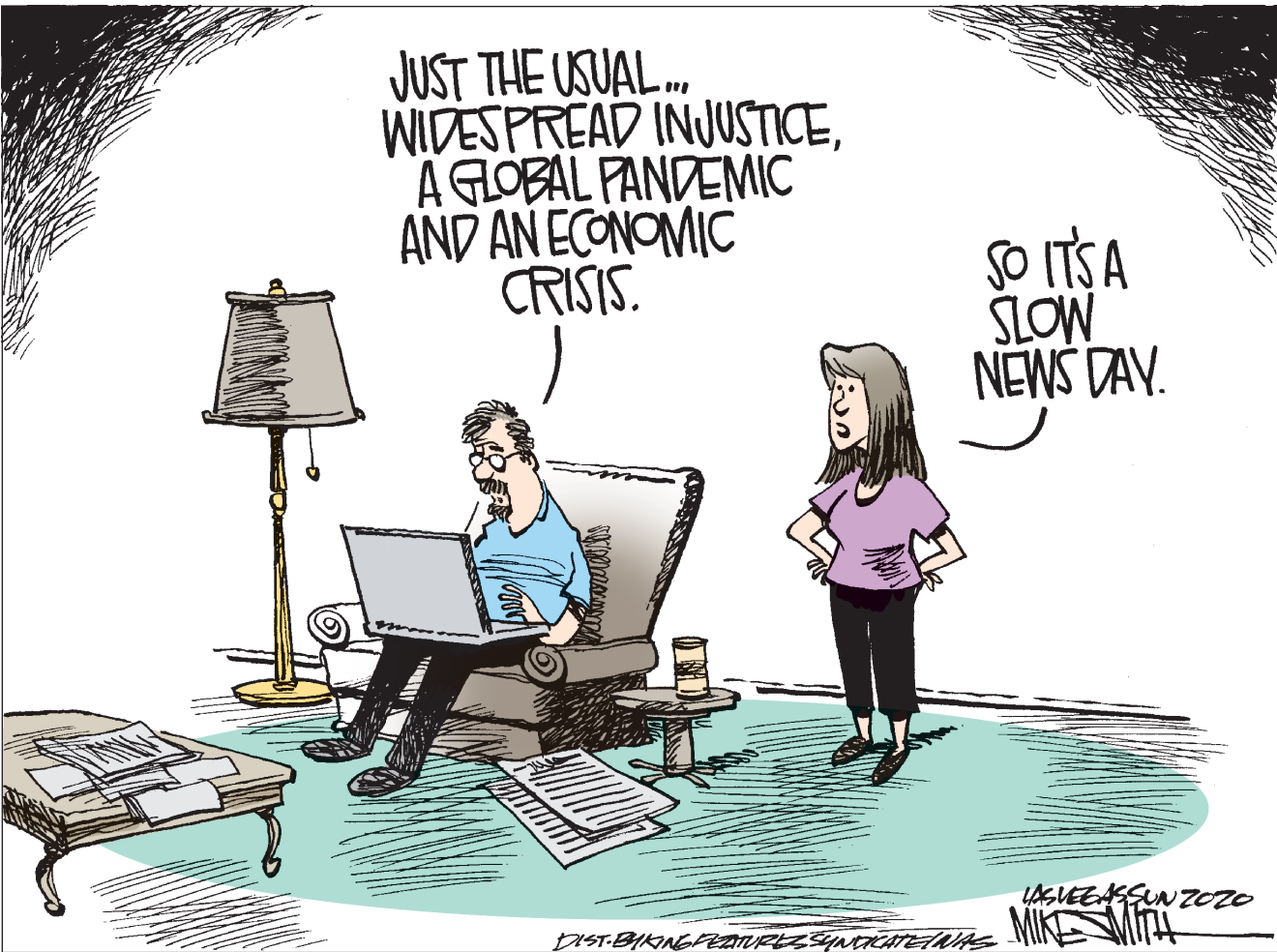
That's a reasonable concept.

The key question is when would it be responsible to relax restrictions in certain counties.

Certainly we need to have confidence that phase 2, with its greater flexibility, does not spawn an outbreak. And it's clear that we're more likely to avoid such problems if people who attend larger gatherings practice social distancing, proper sanitation and, depending on the venue, wear face masks.

Baker County officials, meanwhile, will continue to work on their intermediate phase proposal for the governor to consider, as they should. Brown has already shown that she and her medical advisers are amenable to reasonable proposals — phase 2 guidelines largely mirror Baker County's suggestions — that reflect local effects of the virus.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Support police but also hold them accountable

Human beings are capable of critical thinking, but often we get stuck in old ways of thinking. Sometimes we present complex circumstances as simple either/or decisions and we lose sight of the range of possible responses. One false belief circulating recently is that we either completely support the police or we are completely against them. But there is a lot of room between these extremes and most of us can see the answer is not so simple.

We can be thankful for police in our community, especially when dangerous situations arise, such as a father and son racing at over 100 mph while intoxicated, or an armed robbery at a local gas station. At the same time, we can be horrified by police brutality when we see the video of Derek Chauvin using extreme force ending in the murder of George Floyd. We can be outraged when federal law enforcement uses tear gas and flash-bang grenades against peaceful protesters in Washington, D.C. We value safety and we are also angered by unnecessary violence used against fellow citizens.

We support law enforcement and want our tax dollars to provide them with adequate funding, but we also hold these agencies accountable for regularly reviewing their policies and guarantee-

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.

ing that staff are trained appropriately and disciplined when necessary. We may also conclude that some of the responsibilities that have fallen on policing agencies are better handled by non-law enforcement personnel specially trained to work with homelessness, addiction and mental health issues. None of these responses mean that we are against police or do not value their role in our community, rather they show that we are taking an active role by speaking out for change and working for solutions.

Many of us were brought up to believe that being a good citizen meant voting in every election. What some of us are discovering is that in today's world true citizenship demands more commitment and participation. It requires each of us to develop and use our critical thinking skills and compassion to be active, positive forces in our local community and at the national level.

Gretchen Stadler
Baker City

Union County COVID-19 outbreak too close to home

Anyone been to Island City lately? The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Union County. At least 236 coronavirus cases have been linked to an outbreak at the church, which is located in Union County's Island City.

This is too close to home. Are we opening too fast? How many of these attendees have traveled all over eastern Oregon in the past few days?

Folks, I don't like seeing small businesses struggle and being confined to my home any more than anyone else, but to ensure the safety of my friends, neighbors and family, I will follow the advise of the governor and health officials. Stay safe.

Don Worley
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

Abolishing police won't improve public safety, but reforms can do so

Editorial from The Minneapolis Star Tribune:

Sparked by the horrific death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the phrase "Defund, dismantle the police" has become an oft-chanted protest rallying cry. In fact, a majority of Minneapolis City Council members recently said they support either slashing the police budget or doing away with the department altogether for a "police-free" future.

Although related calls for changes in policing strategies are welcome, talk of eliminating law enforcement in Minneapolis is irresponsible. Defunding or abolishing the Police Department won't improve public safety. It's also politically unrealistic and would violate the city's charter, an obstacle some council members propose to remedy through a ballot initiative this November.

Substantial reform through the kinds of changes in hiring, training, discipline and union contracts that the Star Tribune Editorial Board has endorsed for years is the way forward. The overhaul also could involve re-allocating some police funding to improve community policing, better handle the demands of mental health calls and rebuild trust in the department.

The council members who have pledged to "begin the process of ending" the Minneapolis Police Department should instead work with, not against, Chief Medaria Arradondo and Mayor

Jacob Frey on seeking meaningful community involvement in reinventing MPD.

As the state's largest city, with more than 425,000 residents, Minneapolis needs a highly functioning Police Department with adequate resources. It's a growing city with complicated public safety issues. The city needs officers who are dedicated to public service, smart enforcement techniques and peacekeeping through de-escalation. It must protect and serve — not be an occupying force that is feared in some communities.

Law enforcement must meet a range of needs: Keeping downtown safe for residents, workers and visitors. Helping to prevent and solve neighborhood crime involving drugs, guns and assault. And reducing gun violence.

Cops are currently asked to be the first responders for nearly every social ill, including homelessness, poverty, mental illness and addiction. Some demonstrators say we'd be better off to spend directly on those problems, instead of law enforcement and prisons. Certainly, those areas merit investment. But Minneapolis will always need community-based, culturally competent policing. That means adequate staffing so that cops get to know the areas they patrol and view residents as something other than threats. It also means holding officers accountable when they mistreat or abuse citizens.

The Editorial Board has long made the case for police reform not just in Minneapolis and St. Paul, but across the state. On multiple occasions, we have endorsed many of the recommendations from the Obama administration's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, and the findings of this year's use of deadly force report by Attorney General Keith Ellison and Public Safety Commissioner John Harrington offer good fodder for legislative action.

St. Paul's mayor and City Council are taking the right approach. Rather than dismantling the SPPD, they're working on needed reforms.

Sharing that view are many area small businesses and the Minnesota Business Partnership, which represents some of the largest companies in the Twin Cities. We share their interest in seeking legislative changes to make it easier to discipline and dismiss problem officers, including changes in collective bargaining provisions. Partnership executive director Charlie Weaver summed up another argument against defunding or dismantling policing: "Getting rid of crime fighters won't eliminate crime."

This national moment of reckoning about police practices is rightly giving new momentum to overdue reform efforts. George Floyd's death moved Americans to say "enough" and demand change. It should come soon.