

EDITORIAL

Progress
in Baker
classrooms

The Baker School District’s plan for classes when the district’s 1,700 or so students return in late August is not ideal.

But did anybody truly believe that it would be?

Very little about life has been ideal since early March, when the coronavirus pandemic began its rampage through so much of what was normal about society.

It certainly wasn’t ideal to cancel in-person classes for the whole of the spring term.

But as proposed — and it would be naive to think there might not be changes over the next 2 months — the plan the school district unveiled this week is an improvement over what happened this spring.

Most notably, students would be spending time in classrooms, with their teachers — the best way to ensure students stay on schedule for graduation.

Elementary students, from kindergarten through sixth grade, would have the same 4-day schedule as in past years.

Students at the middle and high schools would spend 2 days per week in classrooms, and the other 2 days attending the same classes online.

The main reason for the different system, Superintendent Mark Witty said, is that elementary students, because they stay in a single classroom throughout the day, don’t spent as much time in crowded hallways as do middle and high schoolers, who move from one classroom to another multiple times per day. That makes it more difficult to comply with state guidelines, which give districts some flexibility but require that, among other things, they use “staggered schedules to avoid hallway crowding and gathering.”

Witty said the district understands that some parents will be reluctant to have their children return to school, and those students will have a completely online option.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from The Chicago Tribune:

If Americans took our national parks for granted before, they probably don’t anymore. Long weeks in COVID-19 lockdown, it turns out, have a way of renewing your appreciation for outdoor adventure. And with air travel and resort vacations in a holding pattern, many more families will be taking road trips this summer. Griswold family-style (minus, hopefully, the unfortunate death of Aunt Edna).

The heightened appeal of natural places and the need for them may have even played a role in motivating federal lawmakers to overcome partisan divisions to pass legislation for all of us.

Last week, the Senate approved a measure that will be good for national parks and public lands not only now, but for years to come. The measure ensures that the Land and Water Conservation Fund gets the \$900 million it is supposed to get every year. It establishes a permanent funding source — a share of federal royalties for offshore oil and gas drilling. It also provides \$9.5 billion to address a mountain of deferred maintenance.

The legislation, which President Donald Trump has promised to sign, now goes to the House of Representatives, where approval is expected.

The conservation fund was created in 1965, and it has helped finance some 41,000 projects in all 50 states. The Wilderness Society says it has been “America’s most important conservation funding tool.” Last year, Congress approved a

permanent reauthorization. But the fund has often gotten far less than its allotted share. Over the years, reports the Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition, Congress has diverted \$22 billion from it to spend on other items.

At the same time, national parks and other public lands have accumulated a \$19 billion maintenance backlog. Roads, trails, bathrooms, campgrounds and other facilities have deteriorated. Money is also needed to acquire land to protect sites that are vulnerable to nearby development.

Meanwhile, the number of visitors rose by 16% just in the past decade — until the pandemic forced the shutdown of more than 200 National Park Service sites. But with parks reopening and Americans eager to find safe forms of recreation this summer, the pressure of visitor traffic on facilities will resume.

That’s why this bill is so important, and why it attracted broad support. Former secretaries of the interior from both parties have endorsed it. More than 850 organizations, from the American Hiking Society to the Illinois Division of the Izaak Walton League to the Sierra Club, have endorsed it.

The 73 senators who voted for the legislation included a majority of Republicans. Among those on board are GOP Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Marco Rubio of Florida and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, as well as Indiana’s Todd Young and Missouri’s Roy Blunt.

“Funds provided in this bill will secure these vital resources,” the Land and Water

Conservation Fund Coalition said in a letter to congressional leaders, “while preserving water quantity and quality, sustaining working landscapes and rural economies, increasing access for recreation for all Americans no matter where they live, and fueling the juggernaut of our outdoor economy.”

Not only hikers and sightseers but hunters, birders, anglers and canoers gain from these outlays. National park visits, the coalition says, support more than 329,000 jobs and generate \$40 billion in annual economic benefits. Much of the spending will help revive communities that depend on park visitors for business, which have been badly hurt as the pandemic closed down tourism.

We’re not talking only about iconic sites, such as the Grand Canyon, the Boundary Waters and the Great Smoky Mountains. There are also benefits close to home. This year, the fund includes \$1 million for the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge here in Illinois, along with Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. It has previously provided money for Illinois sites ranging from the Shawnee National Forest to Chicago’s Jackson Park.

It’s not every day that our leaders in Washington can get behind a measure that invests wisely in ways that will pay off for decades. With it, future generations of Griswolds — ahem, Americans — will have as many opportunities to explore and enjoy the outdoors as we do.

Repression and radiation: The Soviet style

The summer when I was 15 I crossed the Berlin Wall, hiked in the Alps and was subjected to a modest dose of radioactivity of which I was not aware.

And I don’t mean a clandestine X-ray of my teeth or anything like that.

The Soviet Union was responsible for the first and the last of this trio of experiences.

The Alps would have been there regardless of Marxism-Leninism, so the hike probably would have happened even in a world without the October Revolution.

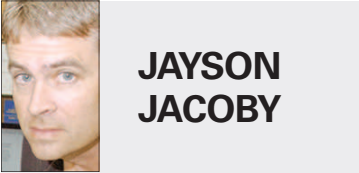
The USSR was not only still around that summer of 1986, but the hulking giant behind the Iron Curtain seemed energized by the ascendancy of its youthful new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

That America’s nemesis for the previous four decades was in fact decaying, the germs of its destruction already circulating, to flame into rampant infection just five years later, would no doubt have shocked even many astute geopolitical pundits.

I was not one of those.

I was a naïve teenager who had never been east of the Mississippi River but was suddenly installed, rather as a character in a Victorian novel, in a palatial home on the shore of a glacial lake south of Munich.

The Mueller family was the first of two I lived with during my stay in Germany — known then, and for a few more years, as West Germany to distinguish it from its



JAYSON JACOBY

Soviet-controlled neighbor to the east.

(President Ronald Reagan had yet to exhort Mr. Gorbachev to tear down that wall, and David Hasselhoff had yet to stand atop the cement barrier and sing. I’ll leave it to you to decide which event was more significant.)

This trip, which also included time with the Woerwag family in Stuttgart, was arranged by my high school German teacher, Roger Danielson.

Considering that I have flown on a commercial airliner just twice in the ensuing 33 years, and left America not at all, my half-summer abroad remains a milestone event in my life.

But so far as I can tell, after plumbing my own admittedly unreliable memories, as well as the journal I kept that summer and several letters I wrote to my family, I was ignorant of what had happened several weeks earlier at Chernobyl, in Ukraine.

(The journal and letters, all written in the execrable style that was my hallmark at the time, reveal an author fixated on cataloging banal details and stricken with homesickness even as he was visiting medieval castles and meeting friendly German girls at a beer gar-

den. When I read these passages today I am afflicted by a mixture of emotions, chiefly the strange stew of embarrassment, wonder and, lastly, affinity for a boy who seems, if not a stranger, then at least not as familiar as he ought to.)

I surely must have heard of Chernobyl by the time I flew from Portland the first week of June.

On April 26 the unit four reactor at that nuclear power plant exploded, spewing a cloud of radioactive debris into the atmosphere and contaminating a swath of Ukraine with fields of deadly gamma rays.

It was, and remains, the worst accident at any nuclear power facility.

I’m tempted to attribute my blissful ignorance to my age. I don’t believe I was an atypical 15-year-old in my general lack of interest in international affairs. Besides which I was of course focused on visiting a country where I knew nobody and whose language, notwithstanding my report card A’s, was, well, foreign.

But my thoughts on the matter have changed considerably since reading Adam Higginbotham’s 2019 nonfiction book, “Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World’s Greatest Nuclear Disaster.”

The key word in that title is “Untold.”

Although Higginbotham is masterful in his exhaustive description of the Chernobyl explosion and its aftermath, his book also lays bare the Soviet Union’s proclivity for concealing the truth from its

citizens, both in what the regime said and what it did not.

Indeed it’s likely that the only reason the outside world learned about the catastrophe is that the toxic by-products of fission are uniquely exempt from the repressive tactics of even the most authoritarian regime. When radiation monitors in Sweden began to show alarming numbers, the Soviets forever lost the ability to conceal their deadly secret.

Which is not to say the Communist oligarchs simply surrendered to the physical realities of fallout.

Higginbotham writes at length about their obfuscation. A typical passage: “Slowly at first, but then with gathering momentum, the Soviet public began to discover how deeply it had been misled.”

Nor were the Soviet citizens the only victims of this misinformation campaign.

Higginbotham also describes a technical conference that took place on Aug. 25, 1986, in Vienna. The Soviet scientist chosen to explain the incident to an international panel on nuclear power, Valery Legasov, delivered a speech that, in Higginbotham’s words, “held his audience spellbound.”

But Legasov’s talk was a triumph not of truth, but of public relations.

“Glasnost or not, the organs of the Soviet state were no more ready to disclose the truth about the myriad failures of Socialist technology than they had ever been,” Higginbotham writes.

Yet the Soviets were even less forthcoming to their own citizens. The book is a depressing litany of repression — hospital records doctored to delete any reference to radiation, state-sponsored lies about the levels of radioactivity and the resulting dangers, casting blame not on the inherent flaws in the design of the Chernobyl reactor (which had little in common with those operated safely for decades in the U.S. and other western nations) but on the men who operated it.

When I finished this fascinating but troubling book I had to concede that even had I been something other than a teenager with much on his mind besides nuclear reactors when I landed in Frankfurt in June 1986, the chances were virtually nil that I could have known what had happened on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

I certainly could not have understood that the verdant grain fields of Bavaria through which I passed on my way to Schondorf, where the Muellers lived, carried on their waving green stalks a tiny but very real burden of radioactive isotopes.

Ultimately, “Midnight in Chernobyl” is not a condemnation of nuclear power, but of the ossifying effects of a political system that has such little regard for its citizens that it prefers to expose them to deadly substances rather than to the truth.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.