

EDITORIAL

Pausing to reflect on COVID-19

Baker County’s pandemic problems worsened Monday when Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced that the county, along with eight others, including Union, would begin a 2-week “pause” on Wednesday.

Brown said last week that counties with populations of 30,000 or less — Baker County has about 16,800 residents — would go on the pause list if they had 60 or more new COVID-19 cases in the previous 14 days. Baker County’s total was 64.

The pause is particularly troubling for some restaurants and other businesses that must limit their indoor capacity to 50 people, including customers and staff.

The governor’s decision doesn’t affect Baker schools, which will continue to have in-person classes for preschoolers through sixth-grade, while middle school and high school students, starting this week, return to their classrooms one day per week while taking online classes the other days.

Brown’s decision to exclude schools from the restrictions is sensible. Although four Baker 5J students have tested positive for the virus since late October — a third-grader at Brooklyn, a sixth-grader at South Baker and two third-graders at Haines Elementary — both Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, and Dr. Eric Lamb, the county’s public health officer, said contact tracing shows that students are neither being infected at school nor spreading it while there. So long as that remains the case, the Baker School District can continue to have in-person classes based on state regulations.

Staten said the chief culprits in the county’s recent surge in infections are “social gatherings” of families and friends, events such as birthday parties, dinner parties, potlucks and other indoor get-togethers.

Although schools might seem vulnerable to COVID-19 — they are infamous for being incubators of common communicable diseases such as colds — there is a key distinction. Schools are complying with the precautions that health experts say can significantly reduce the spread of the virus — students and staff wear masks, they’re assessed for symptoms, and surfaces, including hands, are sanitized regularly.

Although it’s not clear how many people attending social gatherings are doing the same — Staten said contact tracers don’t typically ask people whether they or others wore masks during such events — it’s a medical fact that these simple steps, though imperfect, are beneficial.

Gov. Brown is asking residents of counties on the pause list to limit gatherings in their homes to six people, if guests include people who don’t live in the home, and to have fewer such events.

The state won’t be enforcing these guidelines, and there are no penalties for failing to comply.

No legal penalties, anyway.

But if people fail to be cautious, if they fail to take the easy actions that we know can significantly limit the spread of COVID-19, then they, and quite possibly others, will suffer consequences.

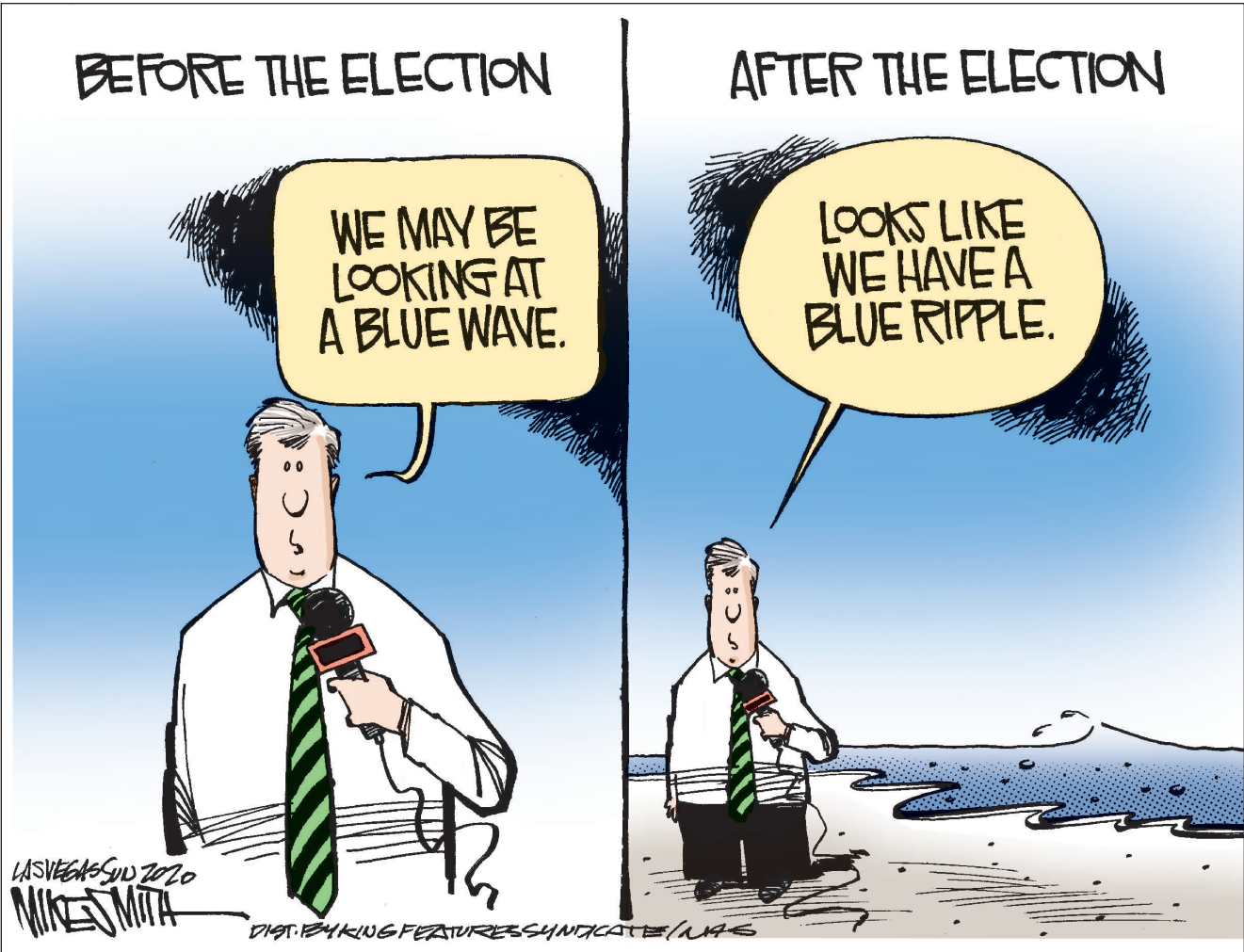
Some people will get sick, potentially to a life-threatening degree. County Commissioner Mark Bennett said Monday that an unknown number of county residents infected with COVID-19 have been, or are being, treated for severe symptoms at hospitals outside the county. Three county residents have died after testing positive.

Businesses will continue to struggle.

The positive aspect is that we know Baker County can keep COVID-19 at bay. Less than a month ago, from Oct. 10-23, the county had just three new cases. Over the next 2-week period there were 64 cases. These dramatically different trends weren’t coincidences. They reflect decisions that county residents made. And there’s every reason to believe that if we make wise decisions, following advice that we all understand, then this current “pause” will end the day before Thanksgiving.

Which would be something to be thankful for indeed.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Amid political turmoil, Americans seek civility

While the voting in the 2020 elections is finally over, we will have to suffer through and endure the ensuing political aftermath. At times I feel our republic is stuck between a Rod Serling “Twilight Zone” episode and “Groundhog Day.” Our daily attention is still wrapped up in a COVID catastrophe where the president and his administration consistently and blatantly downplayed, through its rhetoric and actions, the severity of a medical crisis consuming the country on a scale unseen since the pandemic of 1918-19.

Further, the nation has been embroiled with one political fiasco after another — a contentious Supreme Court appointment, Congressional inaction on a financial package desperately needed to help support millions of displaced American workers, an uncertain economy, divisive racial and

civil rights issues reminiscent of the 1960s, and now, baseless allegations about fraudulent voting.

Equally important, we remain divided about global climate change despite a plethora of scientific evidence that supports it, never-ending hunger in one of the world’s wealthiest countries, escalating international discord, rising global nationalism, and increased despotism. We wake up in the morning hoping that things will have changed overnight, but to no avail.

Like many older Americans, my parents suffered through the Depression and my father served in the Marine Corps in the Pacific theater during WWII. As a child growing up in a family of 10 children in the ’50s and ’60s in Oregon, life was much simpler in contrast to what is happening today. That is not to say we didn’t face similar challenges. In the past half century our nation weathered McCarthyism, the

Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, Vietnam and Stonewall riots just to name a few. In time we resolved many critical social and international issues that divided us, without the endless polarization, divisiveness and discord so commonplace in the 21st century political arena. Despite intense differences in the political and social viewpoints of the day, political decorum and civility were seemingly more respected, unlike the escalating vicious vitriol that marks all aspects of American politics today. I fervently hope that our political leaders respond to the walk-up call echoed by the national electorate and set aside their party differences to bring the country together once again.

As always, the American people will roll up their sleeves to meet our challenges head on.

Anthony Johnson
Baker City

COVID-19 and mask trends

By Hana Ryan

Who wears a mask? In short, not enough people. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines recommend that Americans wear face masks to limit transmission of COVID-19, yet Americans have low compliance levels with this policy.

While 65% of Americans self-report regularly wearing a face covering in stores, only 44% report that other people in their communities regularly wear a mask. Another study found that observed mask wearing in public rose sharply in March and April, but has since plateaued and hovers around 59% today. These aggregate numbers hide salient trends: Men, those without college degrees, those in rural areas and those who are younger and have fewer pre-existing medical conditions are less likely to report wearing a mask.

Another major predictor of mask wearing is political party; Democrats are more likely to wear masks than Republicans (76% versus 53%), even after controlling for differences in COVID-19 impacts in their communities, with conservative Republicans self-reporting mask wearing at 49%. Individuals who report voting for President Donald Trump in 2016 are at least 25% less likely to wear a mask than individuals who did not.

Why does this matter? Mask wearing is clinically proven to decrease transmission of COVID-19. Wearing a mask decreases the risk of getting COVID-19 by at least 30% and decreases the transmission of COVID-19 to others by at least 65%.

Put in perspective, if 95% of Americans wore masks from today to Feb. 1, more than 62,000 lives could be saved. Moreover, Goldman Sachs suggests that if everyone wore masks, the U.S. could avoid a \$1 trillion economic loss — equivalent to 5% of national gross domestic product — by preventing

future “lockdowns.” America is predicted to face a second wave of the virus — and in fact, the virus count is now increasing in a majority of states. Comprehensive scientific models suggest a national winter surge in cases, leading to 2,250 deaths a day by mid-January, unless behaviors change.

So, if masks can offer so much benefit, why aren’t people wearing them? Well, firstly, behavioral economics holds that the perceived relevance of information available to us matters. If individuals do not know of anyone who has had COVID-19 or do not see those around them wearing masks, they are less likely to wear a mask themselves. Behavioral economics also describes optimism bias, which is particularly common among younger populations who overestimate the probability of positive events, such as not becoming seriously ill, and underestimate the probability of negative events, like death.

Studies have also found that men are more likely to be affected by optimism bias, including with regard to COVID-19. Perhaps the biggest contributing factor, however, is reactance bias — the human tendency to reclaim our sense of freedom when we feel it being taken away. At the start of the pandemic when rural, predominantly Republican America was told by urban, predominantly Democratic America to wear masks, it likely sparked a reactant reflex. Governors refusing to

issue mask mandates due to perceived constraints on liberty, the connection between lockdowns and mask use, and President Donald Trump’s refusal to wear a mask, all likely entrenched reactant beliefs.

So what do we do with this information? There has been a recent push for a national mask mandate. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, suggested a national mask mandate last month. While a national mask mandate might be the best policy tool from a public health perspective, behavioral economics suggests that its effects will be limited unless reactance bias is addressed. A blanket mask mandate would likely increase adherence among those who sometimes wear a mask, but very possibly activate further reactance bias and decrease adherence among those who seldom wear a mask, severely limiting the policy’s efficacy.

In order to decrease the transmission of COVID-19, there needs to be an emphasis on addressing reactance to masks. In addition to increased regulation encouraging mask wearing, there needs to be policies of sustained public service announcements that are direct and localized, and that reframe mask wearing as a way to support an individual’s freedom to gather and to engage in commerce — instead of being an infringement on personal rights.

Research shows that in times of uncertainty people look to local communities for information. Local PSAs may mitigate reactance biases associated with top-down mask mandates and may activate availability biases by suggesting that COVID-19 is a present problem for the local community.

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Letters to the editor

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