Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Reversing the surge

Gov. Kate Brown was justified in taking action to try to reverse Oregon's unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases over the past couple weeks.

But some aspects of the Nov. 18 to Dec. 2 "freeze" that the governor announced Friday unfairly punish certain businesses. They're also inconsistent with the statements Brown and health officials have made recently in explaining the rapid increase in infections.

The situation is troubling, to be sure.

Oregon's rate of new cases has risen significantly during November, and not because more people are being tested. A higher percentage of people who are tested are infected, the statewide weekly positivity averages increasing from between about 5.6% and 8.5% in October to about 12.1% during the first half of November.

Baker County has had a similar surge, with 71 new cases reported during the first 2 weeks in November. That's one-third of the county's total during the 9-month pandemic.

These trends have the potential to stress hospital capacities. More vitally, they mean more people will get seriously ill, and more will die.

Brown, as the state's top elected official, could hardly ignore that reality.

Yet some of more severe restrictions in effect from Nov. 18 to Dec. 2 (and for at least 2 additional weeks in Multnomah County, the state's most populous county, where case numbers and test positivity percentages have been rising substantially) affect restaurants even though neither the governor nor her health advisors have named that business category as contributing to the recent surge.

Indeed, officials at both the state and Baker County level have repeatedly emphasized that social gatherings, including parties, are the biggest problem.

During a Nov. 6 press conference Brown said: "We have been asking Oregonians over the past several weeks to be mindful of social gatherings as they continue to be the main culprit of community spread in Oregon. The data is proving that not all Oregonians are listening."

But restaurants, many of which have already sustained major revenue cuts due to previous restrictions during the pandemic, will be limited to takeout meals during the 2-week freeze.

And although the governor also announced restrictions on the size of household gatherings from Nov. 18 to Dec. 2 — six people from no more than two households — it's logical to expect that some people, deprived of eating at a restaurant, will instead host gatherings at their homes that surpass those limits. In other words, the state's restrictions on restaurants could have the opposite of the intended effect, by prompting people to engage in the very behavior that health officials say is driving the surge in infections.

Restaurants are required to comply with mask mandates. They are used to stringent sanitation practices. They have robust ventilation. Restaurants, like schools, are more controlled environments than private households. Health officials have also said that schools, even with students returning to classrooms in many places, including the Baker School District, are not a significant source of new infections.

The governor certainly is justified in chastising people for being irresponsible. State officials, in discussing the COVID-19 surge, have cited Halloween parties in Multnomah County as an example, one of which had 100 guests.

But rather than call for people to limit even much more modest gatherings to six people from no more than two households — and directing Oregon State Police to work with local police to enforce those restrictions — the governor could have appealed to our better instincts rather than brandish the cudgel of law enforcement.

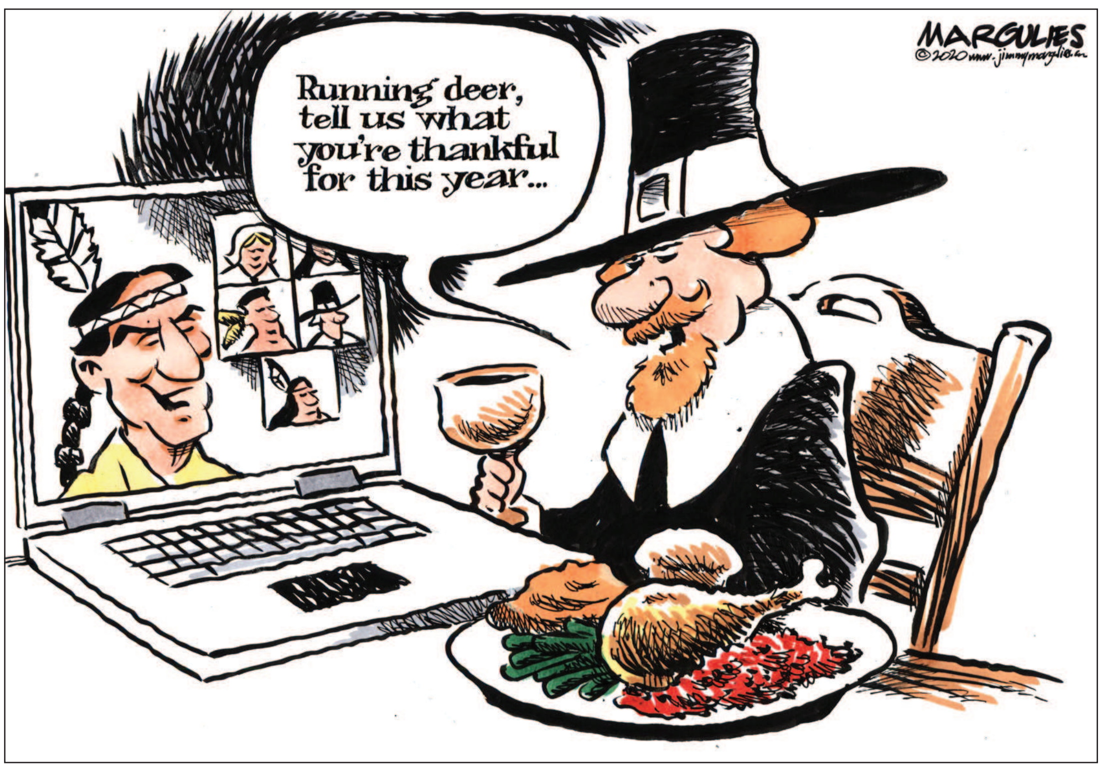
Some people, unfortunately, will ignore even precautions with proven benefits, such as wearing a mask in situations where distancing isn't possible.

But the new, arbitrary guidelines on the number of people at private gatherings, along with the potential for police involvement even though they're only likely to respond to egregious violations, seem likely to provoke resentment even in some people who have been acting responsibly and who earnestly want to continue to do so. What about families who, for instance, self-quarantine prior to a holiday gathering, or who are tested in advance of the gathering? Even if such a group exceeds the limits in place during the "freeze," the gathering would likely pose a smaller risk of spreading the virus than an event that complies with the guidelines but whose attendees haven't taken any proactive measures such as self-quarantining or testing.

Brown faces quite a quandary, to be sure. Her critics accuse her of employing a "one-size-fits-all" approach, but in a state with 4 million residents it's not easy to craft a policy to combat an invisible virus that fully addresses the myriad circumstances across the state.

But she and her team of experts should explain why the 2-week freeze has an outsized effect on businesses that haven't been implicated as a major part of the recent problems.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Trump deserves credit for work on the vaccine

By Jay Ambrose

Go away and hide, President Trump, because you botched the handling of COVID-19 except for one teensy thing, starting Operation Warp Speed to develop vaccines faster than history allows. Well, yes, the Pfizer Inc. pharmaceutical company right now has the leading one and pretty soon it could start protecting as many as 25 million lives. But look, Warp Speed is only providing $1.95 billion to the company for millions of doses it plans to distribute for free around the country, and therefore, you should admit guilt, hide your head in shame and take no credit for saving anyone.

It is amazing, utterly amazing that, no matter what Trump accomplishes, he hasn't done it, at least not in the eyes of regressive progressives, pseudo-intellectuals and some supposedly fair media analysts forever putting monster masks on friendly facts. And yet, for all of his front-page flubs, he has moved decisively and with impact on the virus from early on and has perhaps done nothing more important than instituting the Warp Speed adventure in answer to a sad issue.

That issue would be that finding a vaccine to stop a killer germ can often take four, five, 10 or 15 years if one is ever found at all. Phooey, said Trump, as he and his team worked with governmental agencies, scientists, universities and eager-beaver foreign and national pharmaceutical companies to get a reputable vaccine and get it in a hurry. It was almost as if Trump transmitted his own relentless energy into the project as unneeded regulatory hindrances were removed from the scene and new, more efficient methods of checking safety and effectiveness were developed.

The pharmaceutical companies, outstanding from the beginning, still had all kinds of needs not easily acquired, and the project said here they are. The government also entered public-private partnerships in which it has spent billions funding research and production at private companies. Pfizer, working with a major, genius-gifted, German medical firm, BioNTech, said it would pay for its own production but would happily accept a couple of billion dollars as the government purchases and delivers free doses as quickly and usefully as possible.

That's what really counts, as one expert has interestingly expressed it: the vaccination, not the vaccine. And this kind of delivery guarantee can keep a company plugging away even if things get tough. The New York Times reports that international health organizations caught on to the value of this technique long ago, and it is surely a good idea to copy good ideas. Pretty soon, Moderna, an American firm that did get Warp Speed production funding, is likely to announce its success, too, and some say the combined dosage could be enough to save the world.

Naturally enough, Trump's Twitter-encouraged enemies in politics, on the internet, in publications, behind bushes and starring in Hollywood don't want to grant him an inch even if he deserves a mile. It has erroneously been made to sound as if Pfizer has benefitted in no important way from Warp Speed, and a number are upset that deliveries are expected by the end of this year. Their argument is that the politically motivated Trump administration won't do the checking correctly and we should all wait for Joe Biden to be in charge even if the virus is right now surging wildly and killing 1,000 and more people a week. See how much they love you.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, a highly respected leader on the Trump virus task force and someone who himself has been in conflict with the president, sounds as optimistic as optimistic gets and is positive about 2021. Not everything is going to happen at once, but he says the vaccine "is going to have a major impact on everything we do with respect to COVID." There are many people deserving our gratitude, and the president is one of them, no matter how hard that is to believe.

Jay Ambrose is an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service. Readers may email him at speaktojay@aol.com.

OTHER VIEWS

The lure of lower taxation

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

Ronald Reagan said once, "If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it."

Update that for modern times as: If it breathes, tax it. If it moves, tax it. If it dies, tax it.

Sometimes it seems that is the governing impulse of so many of our fellow states, from coast to coast. The imperative is to pay for an ever-expanding government that promises to carry us from cradle to grave, so long as it can tax us from womb to tomb.

Here in Texas, we are lucky enough to still be able to look on this mode of governance with a mix of detached concern and pleasant recognition that other states' folly will be to our benefit.

The latest opportunity arises from yet another state that spends big, maintains deep debt and has high legacy governing costs looking to raise yet more money from a shrinking number of untapped sources. And Texas awaits a possible windfall in response.

We are talking about Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's planned meeting with representatives of major stock exchanges, including Nasdaq, which are looking to decamp from New Jersey, where their trading platforms operate.

Why leave the Garden State? Because New Jersey's politicians see investors' money flowing through the pipes of those platforms and it's too tempting not to try to carve off a slice for themselves.

It reminds us of the '90s movie "Office Space," where the plot revolves around a plan to just peel off a little, tiny bit of every transaction the company makes. Who will notice that quarter-of-a-penny here and quarter-of-a-penny there?

In New Jersey, it would add up to an estimated $10 billion a year in taxes. State Assemblyman John McKeon, who proposed the bill, was quoted in August saying the state needs the tax because it is "desperate for funds."

Desperation is a terrible circumstance in which to make decisions as serious as this.

And we cannot agree with New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive, that "proximity" to New York will make much difference. If we've learned anything in 2020, it's that the job can get done regardless of proximity.

We wish no ill on the good people of New Jersey. Their government has let them down by failing to address its costs over time. At some point, going back to the tax well isn't an option.

Texas is a national leader in technology, with every resource these exchanges could need and with excellent and affordable life opportunities for their employees.

Bring your business here and keep more of your money in your pocket.