

EDITORIAL

Restaurant restrictions

The Herald asked Gov. Kate Brown’s office recently to explain why, during Oregon’s current risk level system for COVID-19 restrictions, restaurants and bars are prohibited from having indoor dining in the 25 counties, including Baker, that are in the extreme risk category.

The question, which no doubt many Oregonians have pondered, stems from the lack of evidence that restaurants and bars have contributed significantly to the surge in virus cases that started this fall and has affected almost every Oregon county, including Baker.

Indeed, the governor and other government officials have said repeatedly that private parties and other social gatherings are driving the trend.

Liz Merah, the governor’s press secretary, responded to the Herald’s query with an email that fails to establish a connection between indoor restaurant dining and the troubling trend in the pandemic.

Merah wrote that the current guidelines restrict “businesses/activities that are considered high risk (for reasons such as requiring people to be gathered indoors for extended periods, requiring removal of face coverings, or being difficult to maintain strict physical distancing).”

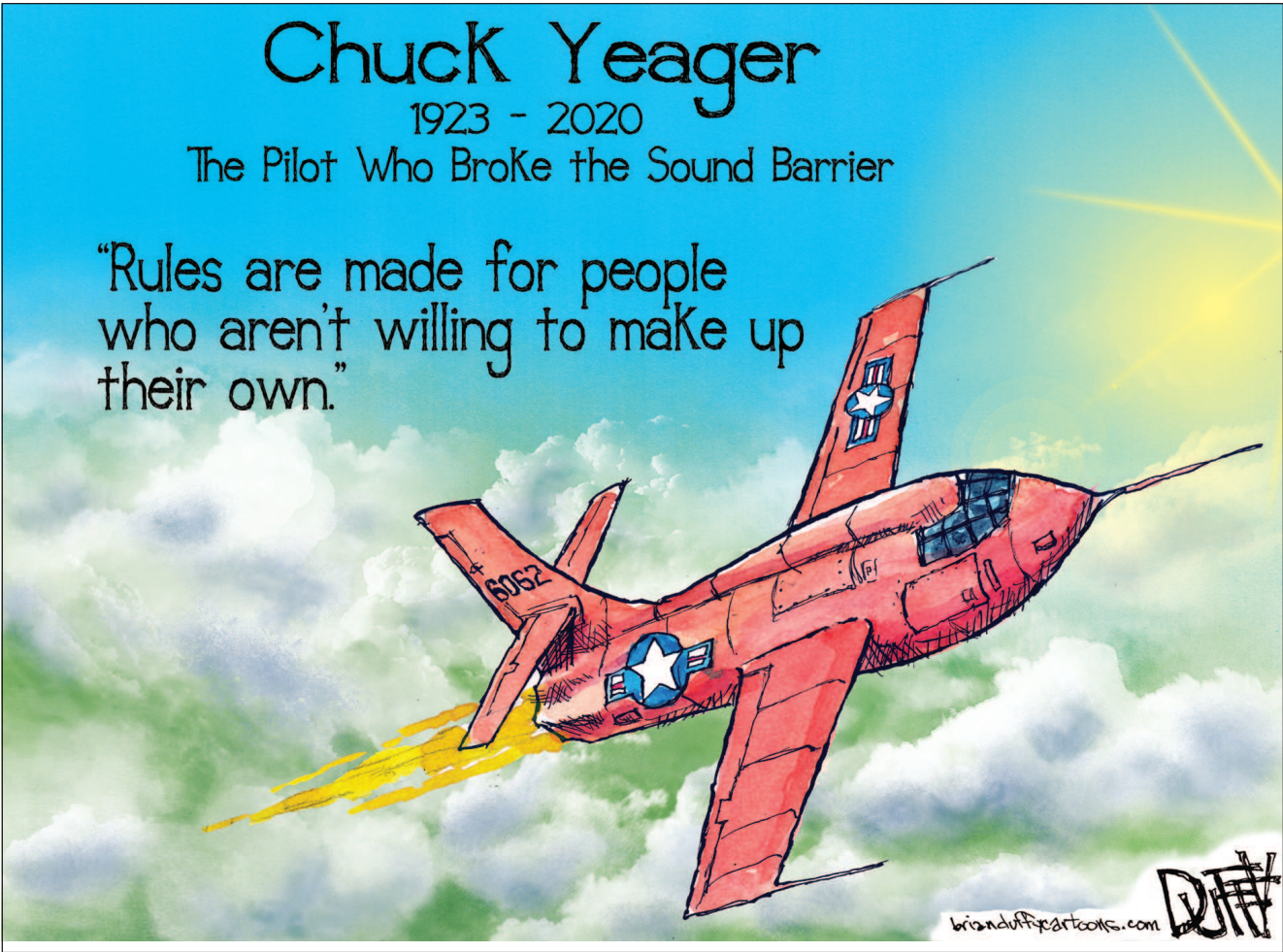
But the point here is not whether a business or activity is “considered” a high risk. What matters is whether there’s demonstrable evidence that a high risk exists.

Merah also wrote that the restaurant restrictions “model the changes we need Oregonians to make in limiting gatherings and physical contact with others ...”

But it’s clear that not all gatherings pose a comparable risk. Eating at a restaurant might seem similar to having a party at your home, but the data from COVID-19 contact tracing shows that the parties, not the restaurants, are the problem. This is hardly surprising. Restaurants, when open for indoor dining, required masks. They limited seating to maintain distancing. They sanitized. Their buildings have better ventilation than a typical home.

The governor should reconsider the current slate of restrictions, in particular those on restaurants and bars. Taking steps to curb the COVID-19 spread is wise. Imposing severe limits on one group of businesses, without a definitive benefit, is neither wise nor fair.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Let Austin serve as Defense Secretary

Editorial from The New York Daily News:

Lloyd Austin knows the military top to bottom, and that’s good. After graduating from West Point in 1975, the retired general served the Army and his nation for four decades, rising to lead the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan, then to command troops in Iraq, then to run U.S. Central Command.

Even as the prospect of his becoming the first Black defense secretary inspires a diverse nation and military, Austin’s successes and failures on these many tours of duty warrant serious scrutiny from the Senate, as does his consulting work and service on various corporate boards since retiring.

What need not reflexively trip up his nomination as Joe Biden’s choice to oversee the Defense Department is that he hung up the uniform in 2016, which means he’ll need a waiver from Congress to run the Pentagon.

Federal law requires a military officer wait an arbitrary seven years, down from 10, before taking over the DOD. The sound reason: Ever since George Washington went from politician to general to politician again, America has prided itself on ironclad civilian control of the armed forces. Here, in stark contrast to lesser nations, men with chests full of medals take orders from officials elected by the people, and the latter never reflexively defer to the former.

It is well and good to test Austin on his independence from what Gen.-President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 dubbed the military-industrial complex, but there’s no magic to the particular seven-year cooling-off period.

If most senators thought retired Gen. Jim Mattis — who’d been in civilian clothes four years when Donald Trump tapped him — deserved a chance, they should also extend one to Austin. After voting no on a waiver, New York’s Kirsten Gillibrand was the sole senator opposing Mattis’ confirmation. Will she stand on principle now against Austin?

Letters to the editor

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- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
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The enduring mysteries of historical sites

There is the sort of historical site with paved paths and informative signs and generous parking lots, and there is the sort of historical site where you might end up needing a tetanus shot.

I prefer the latter.

And not only because I’m current on my inoculations.

I happened to visit one of each type of historical site, the pair separated by a single day and a handful of miles.

Both places are in Grant County but both, and one in particular, also have connections to Baker County.

Persuaded by the summery weather that persisted into the first weekend of October, we decided to take one final trip for the year with our tent trailer.

Our destination was the Dixie campground on the Malheur National Forest along Highway 26, about 55 miles southwest of Baker City.

I was skeptical, though, that that’s where we would end up sleeping.

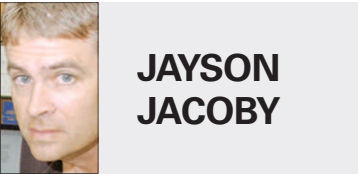
It was the first weekend of deer season, an event that brings thousands of people to the hinterlands, and I expected that choice campsites such as Dixie, being close both to the highway and to vast expanses of public land which bucks frequent, would be claimed.

I needn’t have worried.

There was a handful of trailers at Dixie but about half the sites were vacant.

I’ve driven past the entrance to the campground probably a couple hundred times but this was my first encounter with the campground proper.

It’s quite a fetching setting. My wife, Lisa, and our kids, Olivia and



JAYSON JACOBY

Max, agreed that it was the most attractive of the 10 or so places we set up our trailer this year.

The campground, as forest campgrounds most generally are, is set among trees. But the forest at Dixie is denser than we’ve seen in most other places, with a scattering of mature tamaracks and lodgepoles (the former just starting to turn yellow during our stay) and an understory of adolescent trees that screened our site from the others. It felt as though we were alone in the deep woods. Except when a diesel pickup truck or four-wheeler rumbled by on the road.

We got to the campground on Saturday morning and after arranging the trailer we headed for Dixie Butte. A scrim of wildfire smoke smudged the horizon but the top of this Grant County landmark — at 7,592 feet the highest point between the Greenhorns and the Strawberry Mountains — is a worthwhile destination regardless.

After hiking to the top and tracking down a geocache that Max insisted we search for, we drove back to the highway to the Sumpter Valley Railroad Interpretive Site. It’s on the south side of Highway 26 just west of the Dixie Summit.

This is the first sort of historical site I mentioned. There’s ample parking — especially when nobody else is there, an absence that surprised me on such a fine day in a season that can be capricious, equally capable of pelting your face

with snow flurries and sunshine that feels more of August than of October. The trail loop, which covers about 1 1/2 miles, is nearly flat, paved in places and well-tended gravel elsewhere.

The site, as its name suggests, aims to preserve the legacy of the Sumpter Valley Railroad, the famous Stump Dodger. The narrow-gauge line started in 1890 in Baker City, was extended to its namesake gold-mining town in 1896 and, in June 1910, reached its ultimate terminus in Prairie City, 80 miles from Baker City.

The Stump Dodger made its final run in 1947. But the section which the interpretive site, well, interprets, between Bates and Prairie City, was abandoned in 1933.

The Malheur National Forest, which built the site, did good work. It’s the ideal place for a traveler, fatigued by a long drive, to stop for a half hour. A series of signs give a brief, but interesting, overview of the history of this railroad that hauled tons of gold-bearing ore, tens of millions of board-feet of prime ponderosa pine timber, and until 1937 paying passengers, through the Blue Mountains.

The next morning we visited a much different historical site.

The Boulder Group mine, long abandoned, has a much more tenuous connection to Baker County than the Stump Dodger does.

But pretty much every mine in Eastern Oregon owes its founding, at least tangentially, to Henry Griffin’s discovery of placer gold on Oct. 23, 1861, in a gulch near what would become, a few years later, Baker City. Griffin’s find kicked off the region’s gold rush. Although in Grant County the more significant

bit of panning was done at Canyon Creek less than a year later, in 1862.

The Boulder Group mine, which was never patented and so remains public land, is at the end of the sort of steep, rough road that always seems to lead to a mine (or a fire lookout, come to that). There are no signs. I parked off the road on a tilted piece of ground that included a water bar. As I maneuvered our Toyota it lurched so suddenly, and violently, that Max and Olivia looked at me as though they wondered whether I had forgotten how to operate a clutch.

It is a fascinating place, as abandoned mines tend to be. I was surprised that a couple of sections of iron tracks for an ore cart remain. I was even more surprised when, later that day back home, I read a state report that showed the Boulder Group wasn’t a significant mine. Indeed, the single report for the operation in the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries’ treasure trove of an online database states that there was no record of actual production of gold or other metals.

But surely the mine must have yielded something of value, to justify the laying of the rails as well as the construction of a cabin some distance up the west fork of Dads Creek.

The cabin is crumbling. Most of its roof lies in what was its single room.

The site is a mess. But such an interesting mess, a jumble of artifacts so numerous and so disparate, that it’s hard to focus on any individual piece.

I was trying to decipher the script on a flattened can of Maxwell

House coffee — 12 cents — when my eye was distracted by a glass jar; its lid screwed on tightly, that was stuffed with Lipton’s tea bags.

Old mine sites like this one remind me of nothing so much as a museum that has been hit by a powerful storm, perhaps even a tornado, and then gone to nature, the erstwhile exhibits left wherever the storm winds lost their grip.

The mixture of detritus always confounds me.

Some is logical enough — a gas can, a metal bed frame so rusted you know that if you shook it you would spawn a shower of red-stained flakes.

But how to explain a small toy car?

Did one of the miners have a child who lived in this remote and rugged place?

Or did a different child, one who came here after the miners had left, set the toy down while examining the jetsam and, having been distracted as I was, forget to reclaim the car?

(I am childlike in many ways, including my preference for circus peanuts.)

As historical questions go it’s difficult to imagine one less important.

Certainly a child’s plaything, unlike, say, a narrow-gauge railroad, is unlikely to prompt the construction of an interpretive trail.

But I still wonder how that toy, which must be buried by snow for something like half the year, wound up where it is, and whether someone still has occasion to think of it, with the faint sadness of nostalgia.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.