

OUR VIEW

Don't boost tax on brewers

When it comes to special favors, Congress can sure dish them out. And nobody can get as much grief for dishing them out as Congress.

Remember the Bridge to Nowhere? It was used to batter Congressional pork barrel politics. It was actually a bridge from Ketchikan, Alaska — population of some 8,000 — to Gravina Island — population of far, far less. The island, though, also has the region's airport. Not exactly a bridge to nowhere.

Another Congressional practice can get roundly criticized. In Congressional lingo, they are called tax extenders. They are tax breaks inserted into bills. They can be narrowly targeted. For instance, there was one horse owners could use to write off the total investment in the time it takes horses to get a chance at the Triple Crown. Bunches of such tax breaks by different members of Congress are typically bundled together in one big package so they pass.

Oregon's Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat, got some attention recently for a tax break he crafted to help small breweries and wineries. It was rolled into this year's year-end package of bills. It could be in jeopardy because President Donald Trump is unhappy with some aspects of the package, though he didn't call out this one.

So is this tax break an undeserved special favor for a niche industry? Sure doesn't seem so.

The provision makes permanent a cut in excise taxes for producers of beer, wine and distilled spirits. It was first put in place by Republicans in 2017. Wyden aimed to make it permanent.

It's easy to understand why. Craft distillers pay a federal excise tax of \$2.70 per proof gallon on the first 100,000 proof gallons they produce. As of Jan. 1 it is set to go up 400%. And craft brewers who brew fewer than 2 million barrels — that would include your favorite craft brewer in Oregon — pay \$3.50 per barrel. After Jan. 1, that is also set to double.

Wyden's idea would stop that from happening. He brewed up the Craft Beverage Modernization and Tax Reform Act. The key provisions were merged into the year-end tax extenders.

Breweries are bright spots in American manufacturing. They create jobs. And unlike many other types of manufacturing in this country, they have been growing. Some economic research suggests that the tax breaks brewers received have translated into more jobs and holding prices down for consumers.

If Congress doesn't act, one of the bright spots of American manufacturing gets hit with a big tax increase during the pandemic. That would make no sense.

It's not always bad for Congress to single out special treatment for the right cause. Do you know what else got special treatment because members of Oregon's Congressional delegation inserted them into packages in the past? Central Oregon Community College got money. An expansion of the Redmond Airport got funding. La Pine got money for a senior center. Madras got money for a workforce training center. We don't know what you may think of the way that money was spent. For us, Congress and President Trump should support Wyden's effort.

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My mom died from COVID

By Suzanne Fouty

Today my mom died of COVID. Today in the early morning hours of Christmas she took her last struggling breath and her heart went still. My mom was 88 years old and while Alzheimer's had slowly taken her memories, her body had remained strong as did her enjoyment at seeing the young children at the Mount where she was being cared for, at being outside experiencing the seasons with its colors and fragrances, and listening to music. And while she had forgotten who I was, I could remember for the both of us.

From the earliest days of COVID, the Mount sought to protect those who lived and worked there. These protection measures meant that families could no longer visit. Meals with other residents stopped. The children in the Mount's daycare facility no longer filled the halls with laughter and joy and small voices saying "hi." The Mount grew quieter and quieter. Their hope was that these measures would be temporary, that the virus would be contained but too many saw and still see masks and social distancing as an infringement of some right rather than a powerful temporary forcefield that would help keep each other and those we loved safe. These refusals increased the dangers of infection for those who could not and cannot stay home and wait it out. Some have jobs that refuse to protect them, many are without financial and healthcare safety nets. And so COVID spread as droplets of moisture emitted when talking,

sneezing, coughing without masks were left behind. And then others unknowingly encountered the droplets, some which contained the virus, and became infected and numbers climbed.

COVID is not a gentle passing — it is a body at war with itself. My mom's heart beat at 120-170 beats per minute even as her oxygen levels dropped and her body dehydrated. Morphine was increased from 2.5 milligrams every four hours to 5 mg per hour to 10 mg per hour to 20 mg per hour to help her stay comfortable. I did what I could. I read her stories, sang to her, played music for her and shared memories via Zoom but I could not hold her hand and give her comfort. Instead, I sat 300-plus miles away — held hostage by COVID and those who refuse to wear a mask and so accelerate its spread. And as I watched my mom dying I knew that everyone who was caring for my mom and doing so with love and compassion was at risk.

My mom is now a COVID statistic. It is hard knowing that the need of some to make a political statement matters more than my mom, more than other people's moms, dads, kids, friends, sisters, brothers, husbands and wives. That is what really killed my mom — a lack of caring because the spread of this virus would have been greatly slowed if individuals and our nation had been determined to keep each other safe. It would have been the virus struggling to get past that powerful forcefield of compassion and love as scientists raced

to understand it and create a needed vaccine, not my mom or someone else's loved one struggling for breath.

So, the next time you prepare to go out into community spaces without a mask, or only kind of use one, and plan to ignore social distancing, please pause and remember all the moms and dads and friends and kids who have had to say goodbye from a distance. Please pause and take a deep breath. And in that pause, in that breath that you can still take, reimagine the mask and social distancing not as an infringement of some right or a nuisance but as a statement of defiance against COVID. A statement that says to everyone you encounter I am doing my part to protect you, me and those we love and get our community up and running again. As you slip the mask on and wear it correctly, think to yourself, I hereby choose to serve and protect, even in the midst of my frustration, anxiety and uncertainty. I hereby invoke the incredible protective power of compassion and community because you and I and all of us matter.

There will come a time when once again we can safely share meals, have long conversations over tea or coffee, work together, all the things we miss — but that time is not here yet. Let's do our part, seemingly so small and yet so powerful, to keep each other safe. Let's mask up and social distance and in the process find our way back to a sense of community.

Suzanne Fouty lives in Baker City.

The ugliness of vaccine politics

By Robert A. George

The Christmas gift many Americans are eager for this year arrived a few days early: a vaccine against COVID-19. Unfortunately, there is no such inoculation against political opportunism — which is exactly what those who criticize politicians for getting the vaccine are engaging in.

Last week, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recorded herself getting her COVID vaccine shot and shared it with her 8.2 million Instagram followers. This being 2020 (and this being AOC), her decision attracted a lot of criticism, much of it along the lines that she's only 31 and not likely to face serious health issues if she contracts COVID. Then 49-year-old Sen. Marco Rubio also got his shot — and also found himself criticized, as a reckless hypocrite for getting it after having attended campaign rallies for President Donald Trump where few people wore masks.

As a matter of law, all members of Congress, as part of the legislative branch of government, are eligible to "cut the line" for a vaccine, regardless of their age, thanks to continuity-of-government protocols. Last week, under the same protocol, Vice President Mike Pence got his shot.

Still, the question is legitimate: Just because elected officials are allowed to get the vaccine, should they? Some congressional colleagues of Rubio and Ocasio-Cortez — including AOC ally and fellow squad-member Rep. Ilhan Omar

— say the answer is no.

"We are not more important than frontline workers, teachers, etc. who are making sacrifices everyday," Omar tweeted on Sunday. "Which is why I won't take it. People who need it most, should get it." Omar's choice puts her in agreement with Republican Sens. Ted Cruz and Rand Paul — maybe the first and last time that's likely to happen.

But AOC has good reason, beyond a self-serving, jump-the-line one, for getting vaccinated. As she tweeted, she had to "weigh the potential misinfo consequences of what wld happen if leaders urged ppl to take a new vaccine that we weren't taking ourselves."

COVID has taken a terrible toll among Black and Hispanic communities. In the spring, when New York City was the epicenter of the pandemic's first wave, Ocasio-Cortez's Bronx-Queens district was the epicenter of the epicenter. At one point the district, which is 58% Black and Hispanic, had more cases than all of Manhattan, despite having one million fewer inhabitants.

AOC is also right that there is skepticism about the vaccine in minority communities. Two weeks ago, I had a conversation with my sister. She lives in Atlanta, with her two daughters and our mother: "You're not going to take that vaccine now," she told me, in a friendly tone. It wasn't a question. When I told her I didn't have any concerns about the vaccine, she said that the speed with which it was developed made her nervous.

And, no, this wasn't about Trump. My sister was wary about what she saw as a general rush to get vaccines approved. My pushback on the historic importance of the polio vaccine rollout was met with a reminder that a "bad" batch of live polio sent from a lab had led to infection and death. Restoring the public's trust required getting Elvis Presley to take a shot just before going on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

Our conversation probably wasn't too dissimilar from those taking place among families across the country — particularly in Black and brown households. My sister didn't bring up the Tuskegee experiment (our family is largely West Indian-born), but that episode — of Black men observed but untreated for syphilis over 40 years, until the experiment was ended in 1972 — still casts a long shadow.

There is probably no modern-day pop-culture equivalent of Elvis. So instead, America has members of Congress (and vice presidents and presidents-elect) getting vaccinated.

There are legitimate points on both sides of the debate over whether members of Congress should be rushing to get vaccinated. But on this issue, in the spirit of the holidays, maybe it's appropriate to give our elected officials the benefit of the doubt.

Robert A. George writes editorials on education and other policy issues for Bloomberg Opinion. He was previously a member of the editorial boards of the New York Daily News and New York Post.