

EDITORIAL

Risk level
revisions

In the end, Oregon officials got it right. After a month of stifling restrictions on Baker County businesses, including a ban on indoor dining at restaurants and bars and the closure of fitness centers, theaters and museums, the county has dropped from the extreme risk category for the spread of COVID-19 to high risk.

This is no panacea for businesses that suffered significant revenue losses for most of 2020, to be sure.

While the county is in the high risk category, restaurants and bars are still severely restricted, with indoor dining limited to 25% of capacity or a total of 50 people, including staff. The same limits apply to fitness centers, theaters and museums.

Fortunately, officials recognized the mistake in time to ensure that Baker County didn't languish even one extra day in the extreme risk category. Friday, Jan. 1 was the first day of the current two-week period during which all 36 Oregon counties will stay in a particular category. On Dec. 29, Gov. Kate Brown announced that Baker County would remain in the extreme category. But the next day her office reversed that, noting that state officials had mistakenly included nine inmates at the Powder River Correctional Facility who tested positive for COVID-19. Because including those cases, among people who are confined to a single facility, would have prevented Baker County from dropping from the extreme to the high risk level, they were not supposed to be counted.

(Inmate cases are still included in the county's overall COVID-19 case total.)

Moving from the extreme risk level to high risk is progress. Now, state officials should also consider a proposal from the public health administrators in six rural counties, including Baker, to eliminate the extreme risk category altogether and, more importantly, give county health officials authority to determine the restrictions in their areas. That's a more fair approach than the state's system, which relies solely on statistics and fails to consider factors, such as outbreaks that aren't tied to businesses, that could justify reducing restrictions on businesses and other activities.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

COVID aid needs to be refined

Editorial from Bloomberg Opinion:

President Donald Trump's call to raise the \$600 payments included in the recent COVID relief plan to \$2,000 gave Democrats the opportunity to deliver extra help to the economy while embarrassing the opposition. Their House majority, with support from 44 Republicans, quickly passed a measure to deliver the additional payments. The Republican-controlled Senate then blocked it. With crucial votes in Georgia's Senate runoff looming, Republicans are at odds with each other and with their president, and obstructing a popular proposal to boot.

The only problem is that, as Democrats ought to realize, there are far better ways of spending those funds. Tempting as it might be to press their political advantage, they should pause and ask how best to help those in need.

When the first big COVID relief plan — the CARES Act — was enacted in March, there was a good case for including generous and near-universal per-person payments. These could be delivered faster than more carefully targeted supports, at a time when concerns were high that demand in the economy

might slump. That's no longer the situation. In the aggregate, household incomes and savings aren't under pressure. If anything, as former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers points out, it's the opposite. For the great majority, the constraint on spending is the pandemic's narrowing of opportunities, not financial stress.

Despite all the strains of the pandemic, most Americans still have their jobs. Most aren't falling behind on rent or mortgage payments. Extra cash is always welcome, but most Americans don't need emergency financial aid. Yet many households are under severe financial strain and desperately need more support. For them, an additional one-time payment of \$1,400 isn't the right kind of help.

The recent COVID relief plan was indeed too small. Democrats insisted on this throughout and they were right — but not because the plans under discussion skimmed on the checks. The recent package should've included far more targeted relief for the neediest. Additional unemployment insurance should be put in place for the duration of the emergency. Support for renters

facing eviction should be extended and improved. Subsidies for essential low-income workers who've put themselves at risk make sense. And state and local governments should be a priority. They're having to deal with surging costs and diminished revenue — pressures that risk spilling over to teachers, health care staff and other workers, while undermining vital public services.

With interest rates close to zero, this is no time to be obsessed by fiscal rectitude — but spending almost half a trillion dollars on a relatively ineffective near-universal benefit isn't costless or even, as its more reluctant supporters might argue, better than nothing. By significantly expanding public borrowing, it will narrow the scope for the additional well-targeted help that so many people still need.

A new administration is poised to take office, presenting an opportunity to think again. President-elect Joe Biden and his team have rightly argued for additional fiscal support. They should make the case for a plan that's smart and responsible. Giving \$2,000 to most Americans whether they need it or not is neither.

10-4, good buddy: Let's go back to CB radio

America, mired in an endless exchange of angry diatribes aided greatly by the ubiquity of social media, needs to revert to a simpler, more organic form of communication.

I refer, of course, to the CB radio.

I had this epiphany recently while marveling at the profundity and scintillating syntax that define C.W. McCall's classic novelty song "Convoy."

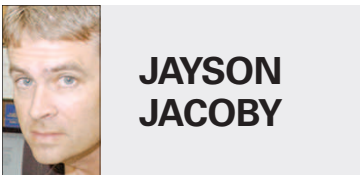
(I uncover epiphanies in the most unexpected places.)

"Convoy," released in 1975, introduced a goodly number of Americans to such piquant phrases as "cab-over Pete with a reefer on," which sounds like it involves marijuana but, unusual for the mid 1970s, does not, and "them smokeys was as thick as bugs on a rug."

(Surely it is also the only Top 40 hit whose lyrics include the words "chartreuse microbus," or at least in that sequence, which I think is significant. The difficulty of incorporating "chartreuse" into the meter of a song can hardly be overestimated, even when the words are spoken, as they are in "Convoy," rather than sung in the traditional sense.)

The historical record isn't as clear as I would like it to be on the vital question of whether "Convoy" drove America's CB craze or whether that strange period already had enough momentum that something like the song was inevitable.

I suspect there was a synergy at work regardless. In any case, "Convoy" was so perfectly of its time that I can scarcely imagine it succeeding had it been recorded even



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a few years earlier, when America was preoccupied with Vietnam and Watergate, or later, when we suddenly, inexplicably, abandoned rationality for the disco beat.

The advantages of CB radio over the internet as a way to communicate are many and varied, but chief among them is range.

Specifically the lack of it.

CB radio signals rarely extend more than 15 miles or so, even if your rig has one of those antennas so tall and so flexible that in a high wind they pose a decapitation threat to low-flying birds.

This limitation means the number of people you're able to engage with at any given time might scarcely reach into double digits. And that's presuming the potential listeners, as the CB lexicon so nicely puts it, have "their ears on."

With social media you can reach almost all 7 billion people on the planet simultaneously, most of whom, even though they don't care what you think about climate change and the dangers of vaccines, will gleefully explain that you're not only wrong but that you hate children and that your favorite hobby is clubbing baby seals.

(While your idling snowmobile belches hydrocarbons into the nostrils of polar bears stuck on drifting floes.)

CB radios encourage brevity,

since you have to hold down the microphone button, which can make your hand ache arthritically. Not for nothing does CB use, in place of certain phrases, a series of numerical codes, all starting with "10." For instance, 10-100 indicates the need to visit a bathroom for the function which takes somewhat less time than the similar 10-200.

Besides which, most people are prone to a sort of stage fright when they know their words are going out over the public airways, so they're more likely to stammer than to indulge whatever rhetorical talent they might have.

Twitter's character limits aside (a term with a definite double meaning), social media instead tends to provoke a sort of word diarrhea, a noxious miasma of inappropriately used capital letters and superfluous punctuation that suggests the author earns a hefty financial reward for every exclamation point. The absence of a direct and immediate connection with another person, which defines social media, also makes it all too easy, it seems to me, to pretend, while online, that you're not communicating with another human but rather with an "account" or a "user."

And it's much easier to call an account a moron than it is to say the same to a real person who can actually talk back.

CB radios, it should also be noted, have a knob labeled "squelch."

There isn't nearly enough squelching in social media.

But the greatest difference between these forms of discourse is that CB radio is a sort of club. And

clubs, as anyone knows who has ever belonged to one, tend to foster not only camaraderie but also congeniality.

Social media fosters camaraderie, too.

But it's not the sort of fellowship whose members share secret handshakes.

It's more like a gang that goes out looking for people to punch out.

Although there is a type of CB radio intended to be used from home — a base station — the technology, as exemplified in the lyrics of "Convoy," is decidedly mobile.

CB radios are made to be installed under the dashboard, the microphone connected to the radio by a coil of plastic-wrapped wire.

People don't engage in sober discussions of weighty topics by CB.

They alert fellow freeway travelers to speed traps manned by "smokeys" and "bears."

The terms, both used liberally in "Convoy," refer to police. Their inspiration is Smokey Bear, whose hat is similar to the headwear that is part of the uniform for many state police troopers.

Cellphones have of course supplanted this particular function of the CB radio — and with the added utility that lets you check football scores and watch YouTube videos of people jumping bicycles off garages and landing in swimming pools.

Still and all, the shorthand of the digital age seems to me an ersatz version of CB jargon.

"LOL" conveys its meaning well enough.

But it lacks the humanity and joviality of "10-4, good buddy."

We had a frosted spice cake in the kitchen recently and one day when I was home for lunch I approached the plastic container with fork in hand and saliva moistening my mouth.

But when I pried off the lid I recoiled, as though I had seen a tarantula crawling across the tasty confection.

There was no arachnid.

Yet something nasty, albeit human, had gotten at the cake just the same.

A frosting peeler.

A swath of frosting had been scraped from a goodly section of the cake, the operation done as neatly as a blade clearing snow from a section of sidewalk. It was obviously the work of a creature with an opposable thumb.

I can scarcely conceive of a more treacherous culinary crime.

Without frosting, a cake is just a waste of flour and sugar.

To steal the frosting and leave the cake intact is akin to siphoning the carbonation from a bottle of beer and then putting the cap back on.

I alerted the other members of the household to this deed, emphasizing that each was a suspect.

There were no confessions.

I can only hope the guilty party, however sweet the larceny seemed in the moment, is plagued still by the bitterness of deceit.

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