Opinion

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EDITORIAL

State harms businesses

Oregon's COVID-19 restrictions are not working for Baker County.

Since the state instituted the four-tier risk system in early December, the county's weekly rate of new infections has not fluctuated wildly.

The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) has reported two COVID-19 outbreaks in the county during that period. One, at Ashley Manor Care Center in Baker City, included just four cases, the first on Dec. 18.

The much larger, and ongoing, outbreak is at the Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City. As of Sunday, Jan. 10, the outbreak at the minimum-security prison, which houses about 320 inmates, included 56 inmates and 13 employees. That single outbreak accounts for 30% of the county's total of 226 cases between Dec. 3, when the four-category system started, and Jan. 11.

Appropriately, the OHA is not counting cases among inmates if doing so would push Baker County to a higher risk level. Because inmates are confined, they don't pose the same level of risk for spreading the virus in the community. Inmates do share indoor spaces with employees, but the relatively low number of infections among staff suggests the prison's precautions are somewhat effective.

But even though the statistics show that COVID-19 is not spreading rapidly in the community, Baker County was subject to the most severe business restrictions for the first four weeks, Dec. 3-31. Restaurants and bars were limited to takeout orders. Fitness centers, theaters and museums were prohibited from opening.

The county dropped to the high-risk category on Jan. 1, albeit with the barest margin possible. Had there been even one more positive test during the previous two-week measuring period — 60 rather than 59 — the county would have remained at extreme risk.

But the respite was short-lived.

Starting on Friday, Jan. 15, Baker County returns to the extreme-risk level. That will remain in effect at least until Jan. 28. It was again a close thing. Per OHA guidelines, Baker County is at extreme risk if either of two thresholds is met during the two-week measuring period — 60 or more new cases (after deducting Powder River inmate cases); or a test positivity rate of 10% or higher. Baker County had 64 new cases, according to OHA. And the county's positivity rate was 12%.

The COVID-19 situation in the county hasn't changed significantly since Jan. 1. But for certain businesses the difference between high risk and extreme is, well, extreme.

Restaurants and bars, which have welcomed customers indoors since Jan. 1, albeit with occupancy limits, must revert to takeout.

Fitness centers have to close again.

It's unfair for the state to put business owners in such an untenable and unpredictable position, in which they learn, just three days in advance, how, or even whether, they'll be able to operate.

Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that these business restrictions play a meaningful role, if any role at all, in curbing the spread of COVID-19 in the county.

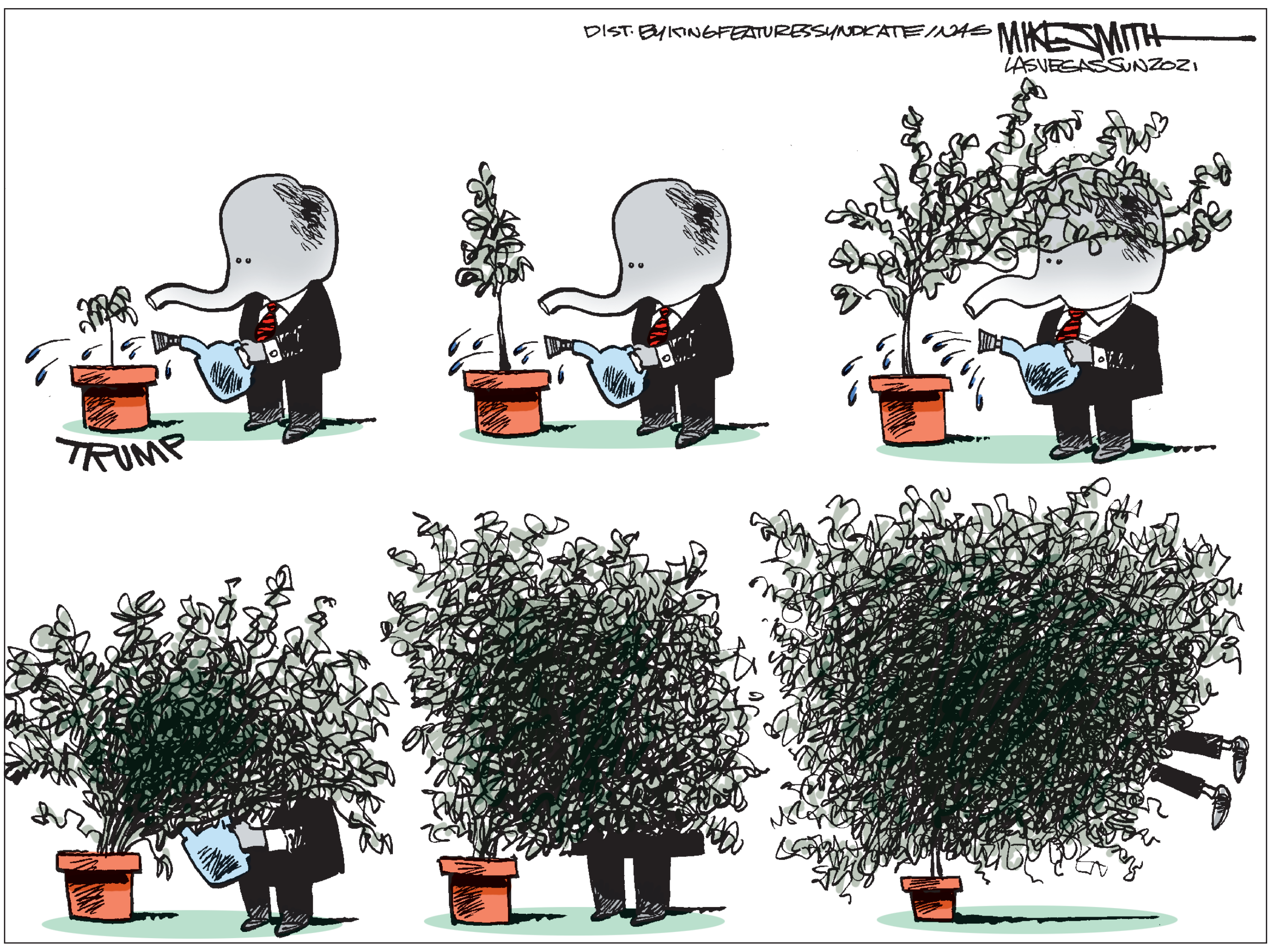
Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, said on Monday, Jan. 11, that the department has not identified restaurants as places where people are infected.

Staten, along with public health administrators from five other rural counties, has asked state officials to let local officials set risk levels, or to remove the extreme-risk category. County Commissioner Mark Bennett said he has asked state officials to consider an exemption that reflects the lack of evidence that business restrictions have any effect except to harm local economies. State officials have done neither.

Baker County will recover from the pandemic.

But if state officials continue to impose rigid regulations that fail to reflect local conditions, some of our businesses might not recover.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Twitter's Trump decision risky

By Tae Kim

Twitter Inc. has done something that was once thought unimaginable. It shut down one of its biggest attractions — Donald Trump's account — and in doing so also canceled a sitting U.S. president.

The ban and public safety rationale behind it are part of a wave of crackdowns on the public digital spaces where the president's most radicalized supporters congregate, and it comes in response to the violence and bloodshed of last week's assault on the Capitol. Over the weekend, fledgling conservative social network Parler was effectively shut off by the technology giants it relied on to reach its user base – including its removal from Google's and Apple Inc.'s app stores and the decision by Amazon.com Inc. Amazon Web Services to stop hosting Parler's service. While the logic behind the actions was legitimate, the latest developments illustrate the power these companies possess as gatekeepers of content and information; their willingness to exercise that power opens a new chapter in the story of Big Tech.

The actions were the right thing to do and inevitable at this point, as I argued last week, even if they do raise larger questions about technology companies as the arbiters of discourse and highlight the arbitrary nature of the standards and rules that govern content across the industry. The evidence is incontrovertible that the angry mob had used Facebook, Twitter and Parler to coordinate their Jan. 6 attack. Twitter said one of the main reasons for its suspension was a proliferation of posts planning future armed rallies after Trump's most recent tweets. To allow the same extremists to again use public platforms to incite more violence would be irresponsible given the events of last week, so it's good they've been shut down.

However justified the moves were, Twitter especially faces concrete business implications. For better or worse, banning Trump — whose constant controversial statements and posts stoked much of the fervent debate and discussion on the platform in recent years — will curb user growth and engagement. The numbers speak for themselves: The president's account had roughly 90 million followers, compared with the 187 million monetizable average daily active users Twitter reported in its most recent quarter. Many of his supporters are already threatening to leave Twitter in protest. Good riddance? Perhaps. But investors have already grown skittish over the risks. The company's stock price declined 4.5% since the riot, and then fell an additional 3.8% in after hours Friday, Jan. 8, following the Trump ban news.

Unlike the other technology giants that have taken a stand — all of which have strong balance sheets and generally thriving businesses — Twitter has been struggling to fix several core problems, from lack of innovation to inferior ad-platform technology and security lapses. On top of all that, CEO Jack Dorsey has come under criticism from activist investor Elliott Management. Despite a recent rebound in its stock price since last summer on rising optimism for an advertising recovery, Twitter now faces a bumpier future. And while the curbs on competitors such as Parler may on the margin keep some of Trump's users from departing, it won't be enough to overcome Twitter's challenges.

What should Twitter do? It needs to attract more users through innovative features beyond its core service and find ways to monetize them. It has failed to do either over the last decade. To be fair, the company has been trying in recent months. Last November, Twitter launched Fleets, a knock-off version of Instagram Stories and Snapchat Stories. So far, however, it doesn't seem to be taking off. In my experience, a large portion of the stories on Fleets are just screenshots of individual tweets, defeating the purpose of the new feature. Twitter is also testing an audio-based chat room product called Spaces, again copying the competition — this time venture-backed startup Clubhouse. But the success of these two offerings is not assured.

Perhaps most demoralizing for Twitter's investors is that the company's user base is driving the surging growth behind two of the hottest startups out there — the aforementioned Clubhouse and paid email newsletter service Substack. Anecdotally, Twitter may have already fallen too far behind both. Since linking my Twitter account to Substack and Clubhouse, I have received frequent daily notifications that show a stunning inflow of Twitter users I follow joining the startups' platforms. It's not just word of mouth either: Substack's emails and Clubhouse's app offer single-click access to subscribe or follow these new accounts. The reality is they are riding on Twitter's rails for free in expanding their memberships. In a year, Twitter shareholders may again lament how the company missed out on the next big thing in these two lucrative new growth areas Twitter should have dominated.

At the end of the day, Twitter should be applauded in putting public interest over its profits. But its future, already cloudy, is now decidedly more complicated.

Tae Kim is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology. He previously covered technology for Barron's, following an earlier career as an equity analyst.

Your views

GOP: stay off Trumpoline

Political parties do have their ups and downs as they bounce between their lows and highs. At present the GOP appears to be on the low part of a bounce cycle. History indicates to us that they will likely bounce up again. I'd like to suggest that on their next bounce up, the GOP use something other than a Trumpoline.

Buck Pilkenton
McEwen

OTHER VIEWS

Time to end stock trades by Congress

Editorial from The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

Watchdog groups have long been barking for ethics changes on Capitol Hill. Rightly so.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., is taking up the cause. Again.

She is relaunching a bill designed to prevent lawmakers from making individual stock trades while working on the taxpayer dime.

The Justice Department is tasked with oversight of any allegations involving share sales that are suspected to have resulted from inside information that lawmakers get in the course of fulfilling their public duties. The bar is high for criminal charges, as it should be. Everyone, including our elected officials, is entitled to due process. While many investigations may be launched by the Justice Department, few will end in prosecution.

The logical recourse is to avoid not just a real conflict, but even a perceived conflict. That can be done by restricting our federal leaders from trading stocks while they're still in office. It's not too big an ask. At stake is the credibility of our government, which arguably can't get any shorter in supply these days.

Warren is not only looking for a ban on stock trading. That's just part of her anti-corruption proposal, one she was pushing during her recent campaign for president. While she is using her influence in the Senate, Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., has introduced a companion bill in the House. They are seeking a lifetime ban on lobbying by former members of Congress and a legal block on lobbyists fundraising for political candidates. These additional measures may be too utopian to stand a chance of passage.

The best move — the first move — is to narrow the focus of the Warren/Jayapal Anti-corruption and Public Integrity Act: get on the books, once and for all, a clear ban that will forestall even the temptation or suspicion of lawmakers using private information gleaned from congressional briefings for their self-interest in playing the stock market. The way things stand, temptation to do wrong is too great and the optics are just plain bad.