

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Counties should set vaccine priorities

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown should give counties flexibility in how they administer COVID-19 vaccines.

For Baker County, that means allowing the county to make older residents a priority for the limited supply of doses, along with teachers and other school employees.

The state's current vaccination guidelines — which Nancy Staten, director of the county's health department, said the county must follow — do not reflect the situation in Baker County, or the relative danger the virus poses to older residents.

Brown announced last week a significant change in the state's vaccination priorities.

Previously, the plan was to offer vaccine doses to two groups starting Jan. 23 — Oregonians 65 and older, and education workers.

The governor said that proposal was based on a pledge from the federal government that it would increase states' weekly allocations of vaccine doses. State officials were anticipating about 128,000 additional doses this week, said Jonathan Modie, a spokesman for the Oregon Health Authority. That number was an estimate based on "public messages" from federal officials, who didn't give the state a specific number of doses to expect, Modie said.

Regardless, the additional doses aren't coming this week, Brown said.

As a result, she announced a scaled back vaccination schedule. Education workers will remain the top priority, with inoculations starting Jan. 25, while older residents will have to wait. Vaccinations for people 80 and older will start Feb. 8, Brown said, followed by people 75 and older on Feb. 15, those 70 and older on Feb. 22, and ages 65 and older starting March 1.

It's reasonable to make school employees a high priority for vaccinations. Those workers have made it possible for Baker School District students from kindergarten to sixth grade to return to in-person classes, full-time, since Oct. 14. And they teach and work with Baker Middle School and Baker High School students, who have attended in-person classes one day per week since Nov. 9.

But the evidence shows that the school district's precautions have prevented the virus from spreading. The handful of cases among students and staff were tied to events outside school.

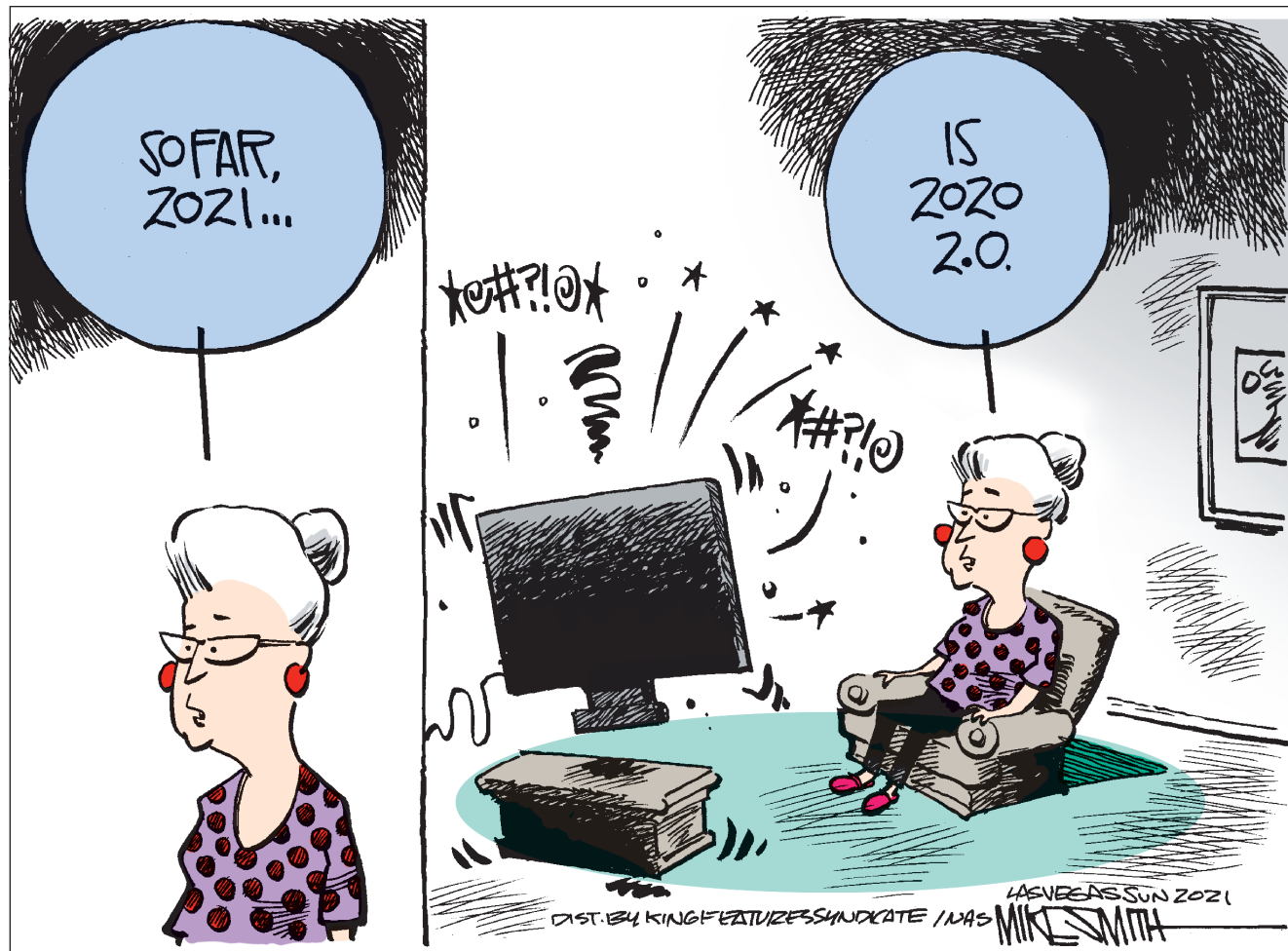
Inoculating teachers looks to be a necessary component for resuming in-person classes in Portland and some other urban school districts. But that's just not the case in the Baker School District, which has proved that it can have in-person classes without exposing teachers or students to a higher risk of infection compared with the situation outside schools.

What is beyond dispute, both here and statewide, is that COVID-19 is dramatically more dangerous for people 60 and older. In Oregon, 91% of the 1,800 COVID-19-related deaths were people 60 or older. Yet that age group accounts for just 18% of the COVID-19 cases. The five Baker County residents whose deaths are related to COVID-19 infection were ages 82, 83, 85, 90 and 95.

The governor should allow Baker County health officials to offer vaccinations to residents older than 65 so long as doses are available, even as the county also tries to vaccinate teachers and other school employees.

Given how heavy a toll the virus has taken on older residents, both in Baker County and elsewhere in Oregon, the state should not force that group to wait for more than two weeks, in the case of those 80 and older, and more than a month, for those between 65 and 70, to have a chance to receive what could be a lifesaving inoculation.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Biden's daunting challenges

By Gromer Jeffers Jr.

When Joe Biden was inaugurated Wednesday, Jan. 20, as the 46th president of the United States, he faced a nation torn by deep political and social divisions, and a coronavirus pandemic that has killed almost 400,000 Americans and hurt the economy.

Biden's challenges are more daunting than those faced by any president since Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had to lead the nation through the Great Depression.

In 2009, Biden was sworn in as vice president under President Barack Obama, and the new administration had to steady a country racked by an economic crisis. But that doesn't compare with America today, where the coronavirus pandemic is claiming lives, tearing at the economy and leaving many Americans without jobs.

And Biden is following one of the most controversial presidents in history. The country is only two weeks removed from an insurrection, where marauders stormed the U.S. Capitol looking to do harm to lawmakers and Vice President Mike Pence.

As Biden takes the reins of government, he'll also have to deal with the vestiges of Donald Trump's term, including a second impeachment trial in the Senate.

"My fellow Americans, the decisions we make in the next few weeks and months will determine whether we thrive in a way that benefits all Americans, or whether we stay stuck in a place where those at the top do great while economic growth for most everyone else is just a spectator sport — where America's prospects dim, not brighten," Biden said in unveiling his pandemic rescue plan. "They will determine whether we reassert American leadership and outcompete our competitors in the global economy or whether we watch them catch up and pass us by."

Here are three things that Biden must tackle during the early days of his administration.

Get control of the pandemic

The last year of Trump's administra-

tion was marred by the emergence of COVID-19.

Thanks in part to Operation Warp Speed, there are now vaccines available to help bring the pandemic under control. But the distribution of the vaccines in many states has been troublesome, and more Americans are dying of COVID-19 than at any point of the pandemic.

Biden's first job is to fix problems with the distribution of the vaccine. The sooner Americans are inoculated, the sooner the economic and employment outlook will improve.

So much of the current vaccination plan relies on state officials who aren't qualified to run such a massive program. It would be nice to develop public-private partnerships to speed the process because private industry is much better at supply chain management and other logistical issues.

Biden has proposed a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue plan that, among other things, would provide an additional \$1,400 in direct payments to most Americans, raise the minimum wage to \$15, provide a \$400 per-week unemployment benefit through September and produce \$350 billion in state and local government aid.

The new president must also make sure that the nation is ready to respond to future pandemics, and along the way bolster the need to trust science and logic.

Restore the nation's reputation around the world

It's difficult for American leaders to preach the virtues of the nation's democracy when it appears so flawed to the rest of the world.

Biden must make sure America is leading the way on the issues facing the world, including the economy, climate change, trade, human rights and combating terrorism.

That means not only getting our house in order, but developing consistent policies.

Trump's move to reevaluate some trade agreements and the details of other alliances were necessary to make sure such contracts were in the best

interest of the American people. But there are other areas of foreign policy measures that Biden will have to tackle, including foreign interference in our elections and keeping a proper check on Russia.

Biden also will have to assess our lingering presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and stay vigilant in the fight against terror, both abroad and at home.

The new president also is expected to work with European allies on a unified China policy.

Healing a divided nation

The most obvious and toughest challenge facing Biden is bringing together a fractured nation.

Nearly half the country didn't vote for Biden. Worse, there's a nasty divide between Democratic and Republican voters that's unhealthy and counterproductive.

Biden campaigned on healing the nation, and he'll have to use the relationships he's developed in his more than 40 years in politics to remind folks that we have more in common than what separates us.

It won't be easy.

Trump's Senate impeachment trial will make it difficult for Biden to appeal to Trump voters. And if Trump becomes a martyr, the country could remain hopelessly divided for years.

In politics, a divide is not problematic when there's an avenue for compromise.

If the promise of Biden's presidency is realized, he'll be able to work across party lines to break gridlock, even if it's only for the most important issues facing the nation.

Biden has already set an example by appointing a diverse Cabinet. He must strive to show Americans that diversity is not a threat to anyone, but an asset for a great future.

Once he takes office, Biden should always look ahead and not get trapped in revisiting Trump's fractious term.

Gromer Jeffers Jr. is a political writer for *The Dallas Morning News*.

Your views

I support our new Congressman, Cliff Bentz

I am writing in support of Congressman Cliff Bentz. I have known him for many years. He is a decent, honest, hard-working person who has successfully represented our District in Oregon for many years and will continue to do so as our representative in Congress. He has my total support. In response to the letters from Mr. Meis, Mr. Reindl and Mr. Cimon, I must fall back on my Southern heritage. Anyone from the South will know what this truly means, "Bless their hearts."

Brenda Holly
Baker City

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Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Councilors Lynette Perry, Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Heather Sells and Johnny Waggoner Sr.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlflinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.