

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Inflexible state rules

Baker County has been winning the battle against COVID-19 for almost past two weeks.

Our reward?

Two more weeks of the most severe sanctions on businesses and other activities imposed by Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

Oregon's system of COVID-19 restrictions is about as flexible as a strand of uncooked spaghetti.

It's reasonable that state officials look at two weeks of data to help determine whether each of the state's 36 counties is at the extreme, high, moderate or low risk for virus spread. That period affords a perspective that daily reviews would not. And of course daily changes to restrictions, besides being a logistical migraine, would be equally aggravating for business owners trying to plan ahead.

But state officials need to take into account statistical trends rather than relying solely on cumulative figures for the measuring period. Baker County's experience this month illustrates the point.

The county remains in the extreme category, which continues the ban on indoor dining that's been in effect for all but two weeks since Dec. 3. The reasons are that the county's case total for the two-week period exceeded 60 and its test positivity rate was higher than 10%. Exceeding either threshold puts the county in the extreme category.

But those totals ignore the trend for the latter week, when the county had just 12 new cases. That's a rate that would, depending on the positivity rate, qualify the county for the low-risk level. Instead, the county's risk level for the next two weeks reflects conditions almost a month earlier.

The state also continues to make Baker County, population 16,800, subject to the same standards as counties with populations up to 30,000. Baker County is in the medium size range, counties from 15,000 to 30,000. Yet every other county in that group has at least 23,000 residents. Baker County is closer to the 15,000-and-under group. The difference is significant, because the risk level for those smaller counties is based solely on total cases, with positivity rate not a factor.

The governor did ease restrictions slightly starting Friday, Jan. 29. But the change likely feels more like salt than a salve for the financial wounds that restaurant owners have suffered. The state now allows operators of Oregon Video Lottery machines to have up to six people indoors, but dining still isn't allowed. The state, of course, makes money from the lottery machines. Not so with restaurant meals.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald



Is Biden committed to unity?

By Kay C. James

President Joe Biden delivered a memorable inaugural address. In lofty rhetoric intended to echo through the ages, he spoke of unity and healing to a badly fractured nation.

But though the words were noble and welcome, the speech rang hollow. That's because, even before he delivered his address, Biden had declared his intent to implement a series of highly divisive executive actions on his very first day in the Oval Office. And on that, he delivered and hasn't stopped. A week into his presidency, Biden has taken an astonishing 40 executive actions — more than any president in history.

The orders address many of the issues about which Americans are most passionate, issues like the sanctity of life, immigration, climate and religious liberty. Historically, Washington has been able to bridge divides and weather disagreements over highly charged policy proposals through deliberation and debate, with fidelity to the rule of law. It's a slow, often painfully incremental process, but it's one that gives voice to all Americans and ultimately gets the job done.

While some executive orders are perfectly fine, what we are seeing now are examples of short-circuiting the democratic process by cutting out Congress and leaving no room for debate or dissent.

A president truly interested in healing divisions would seek first to find common ground, focusing on issues where there is much agreement and mutual interest between left and right. President Biden could have demonstrated his commitment

to unity by using his first day in office to take steps that address problems of deep concern to all Americans.

For example, he could have announced a three-step plan to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and ease the pain it has inflicted on American lives and livelihoods. A plan to make rapid self-tests widely available, reopen our schools and assure efficient vaccine distribution would find approval on both sides of the aisle.

Instead, he demonstrated a desire to satiate his left-wing base by unilaterally implementing their pet policies. Unfortunately, that approach will only further divide America — and leave us less secure, with fewer economic opportunities.

Consider just two of his executive orders on climate: one canceling the Keystone XL pipeline, the other putting the U.S. back into the Paris climate agreement.

The \$8 billion pipeline project has enjoyed bipartisan support for years. It offered thousands of good-paying and meaningful jobs. When completed, it would have carried up to 830,000 barrels of Canadian oil daily to refineries in the Gulf Coast, with practically no discernable environmental impact.

Blocking the project not only undermines the energy security of the United States, it will likely backfire environmentally by forcing producers to transport their crude via riskier, more inefficient methods. And the economic costs are huge. In the wake of Biden's action, TC Energy, the company behind the project, announced an immediate 1,000 layoffs, with many more to come as the work winds down.

As for rejoining the Paris climate agreement, that too offers essentially zero environmental benefits at a huge cost. To have any impact whatsoever on climate, the entire world would either have to quickly change the way it consumes energy or simply remain undeveloped. Both options are devoid of reality.

When the Obama administration proposed regulations and emissions reduction targets in response to the Paris Agreement, Heritage Foundation economists estimated it would cost the average family of four more than \$20,000 in lost income by 2035, an annual average loss of nearly 400,000 jobs and an aggregate GDP loss of over \$2.5 trillion. Although the energy landscape has changed since then, Biden's stringent emissions targets would likely impose similar drastic consequences.

While the extreme left has viewed the Keystone pipeline as a symbol of evil incarnate and the Paris Agreement as all things bright and beautiful, not all Americans are eager to suffer the economic consequences of these actions — especially at a time when economic growth and job creation are so desperately needed.

Biden's unity message made for a great speech, but his executive orders tell a different story. If our new president is going to be more interested in pandering to his base than in delivering for all Americans, he'll go down in history not as the great healer, but as just another lip-service politician who squandered an opportunity to bring our country together.

Kay C. James is the president of The Heritage Foundation.

Enjoying a strip of wildness within the city

We went for a walk along the Leo Adler Memorial Parkway the afternoon of the Sunday before Christmas, and we had an encounter with a couple of river otters.

A rather distant encounter.

Which is precisely the sort of encounter I prefer to have when it comes to semi-aquatic mammals that have sharp teeth and are quite slippery besides.

I have been fortunate enough to avoid such a predicament, but I suspect that trying to keep an otter from latching on to your arm would be akin to bringing a dachshund to bay after it's tipped a bottle of vegetable oil all over itself and rolled around for good measure.

It was an unusual day, by Baker City weather standards, for Christmas week.

The sky was a nearly uniform gray, except for whiter tendrils of fog that partially obscured even the nearby foothill ridge southwest of town.

And the clouds, which typically would dispense snow on the day before the winter solstice, were producing a steady smattering of raindrops. But for the temperature, which was in the upper 30s, the scene was more reminiscent of the Oregon Coast than of the Blue Mountains.

(And of course the absence of the



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rich aroma of the seashore, a mixture of dank water in tidepools and empty crab shells and the bracing scent of salt on the moist wind, a combination I quite enjoy.)

We were just south of Geiser-Pollman Park, where the Adler Parkway hugs the Powder River's east bank, when my daughter, Olivia, spotted an otter.

And then, almost immediately thereafter, a second.

One was sitting on a patch of ice.

Actually an otter can't be said to "sit," in the way that a person or any other animal with relatively long limbs sits.

I think both "loll" and "recline" are better verbs to describe an otter at rest.

Regardless, otters neither sit nor loll for long.

We watched the pair for a few minutes and they were in motion almost constantly.

At times we could see only the pair of heads, barely breaching the river's surface. Occasionally one otter would do a flip or roll, executing the maneuver with the speed

and grace that is hallmark of the species. Once they leave a solid surface, that is, on land (or ice), otters' abbreviated legs make them seem clumsy, but they are transformed when they enter the liquid world for which they are ideally designed.

It was just my second otter sighting along the Powder.

Several years ago we saw a lone otter languishing — or so it seemed to me — on a rime-coated boulder that makes up one of the weirs that workers built in the river a couple of decades ago. These structures, which consist of a pile of rocks extending into the channel from each bank, are designed to accelerate the water flow toward the center of the channel, reducing the accumulation of ice and the resulting ice jams that can cause flooding.

We enjoyed the respite from our pre-Christmas stroll.

My son, Max, reminisced about the otters we watched a couple of years ago at the Oregon Zoo.

That was a fun day, too.

But I'd rather watch wildlife in something approximating a natural setting — one which demands no admission fee and where there is a lesser chance that a kid will ram into me from behind and spill most of a soda down the backs of my legs.

The Adler Parkway is hardly a wilderness, to be sure.

The path is paved, for one thing, and you don't as a rule tread on asphalt in actual wilderness areas.

The background hum of traffic, and the need to cross several streets, also contribute to an atmosphere more urban than primeval.

And yet the river, however tamed it has been by a dam and by the rip rap banks that confine it to its channel, remains a ribbon of relative wildness as it flows past parking lots, beneath concrete bridges and between backyards strewn with kids' plastic toys.

I forget this sometimes.

I walk some stretch or another of the Adler Parkway a couple of times each week on average, and although I always glance occasionally at the river, I don't necessarily appreciate the waterway and its attributes.

Our Sunday walk refreshed my gratitude for this modest river. The Powder is similar to streams that bisect many towns, of course. But I've become so accustomed to the Adler Parkway, most of which was built about 20 years ago, that I can scarcely remember when it was there. I take for granted the access to the river, but until the path was built, thanks in part to the posthumous donations from Leo Adler, Baker County's greatest benefactor, the easiest way to sample the

Powder was to float it on an inner tube. This is an attractive option on a torrid July afternoon. It is less so in late December, what with the ice, the low volume and, potentially, a tussle with an aggrieved otter.

The pair that Olivia saw wasn't the only wildlife sighting during our hour-long jaunt.

Near the Parkway's northern terminus, where the path is on the west side of the river, I spied an American dipper doing its distinctive deep knee bends while standing on a midstream stone.

Dippers, also known as water ouzels, are stocky little birds that, unlike most of their feathered cousins, satiate their appetites by diving into streams and collecting insects, larvae and other morsels.

Like otters, dippers seem about as well-suited to life within a literal stone's throw of a subdivision as they are in a mountain stream, miles from the nearest home.

It gives me a little thrill to know that the same species which right now are thriving in, say, the snowbound Eagle Cap Wilderness, where like as not no wilder walk for months, are also making a living near a path where dozens of people stroll every day.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.