

EDITORIAL

OHA owes Baker an apology

The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) needs to acquire a list of prisons in the state. Perhaps a map would be helpful as well. The agency needs to remember that the Powder River Correctional Facility is in Baker County. More importantly, OHA officials need to stop counting COVID-19 cases among inmates at Powder River, which is in north Baker City, when the agency is determining the county’s risk level and associated restrictions on businesses and other activities. Twice now, in the span of little more than a month, OHA has acknowledged making that same error. Inmate cases, although part of the county’s official COVID-19 total, are omitted when the state calculates risk levels, and for the obvious reason that inmates don’t circulate in the community.

In the first instance, in late December, the agency fortunately corrected its mistaken tallying of inmate infections before this actually affected the county. Baker County dropped from the extreme-risk category to high risk on schedule, allowing restaurants and gyms to resume limited indoor operation on Jan. 1. The state’s second failure, however, directly harmed businesses in the county. Baker County should have been in the high-risk category starting Jan. 29. Instead, the OHA erroneously put the county at extreme risk because officials again neglected to deduct positive cases among Powder River inmates.

OHA admitted the error early in the afternoon of Feb. 5, saying the county “immediately” moved from extreme to high risk. The state’s second gaffe cost restaurants and gyms at least seven and a half days of potential business they could have gained by allowing customers indoors.

OHA can partially offset that harm, although the agency has missed its chance to make a more significant difference. Baker County, due to a significant drop in new cases over the past three weeks, qualified to drop to the lowest of the four risk levels starting this Friday, Feb. 12. For at least two weeks, restaurants will be able to offer indoor dining up to 50% of their capacity, and they can stay open until midnight, an hour later than under any of the three other risk levels.

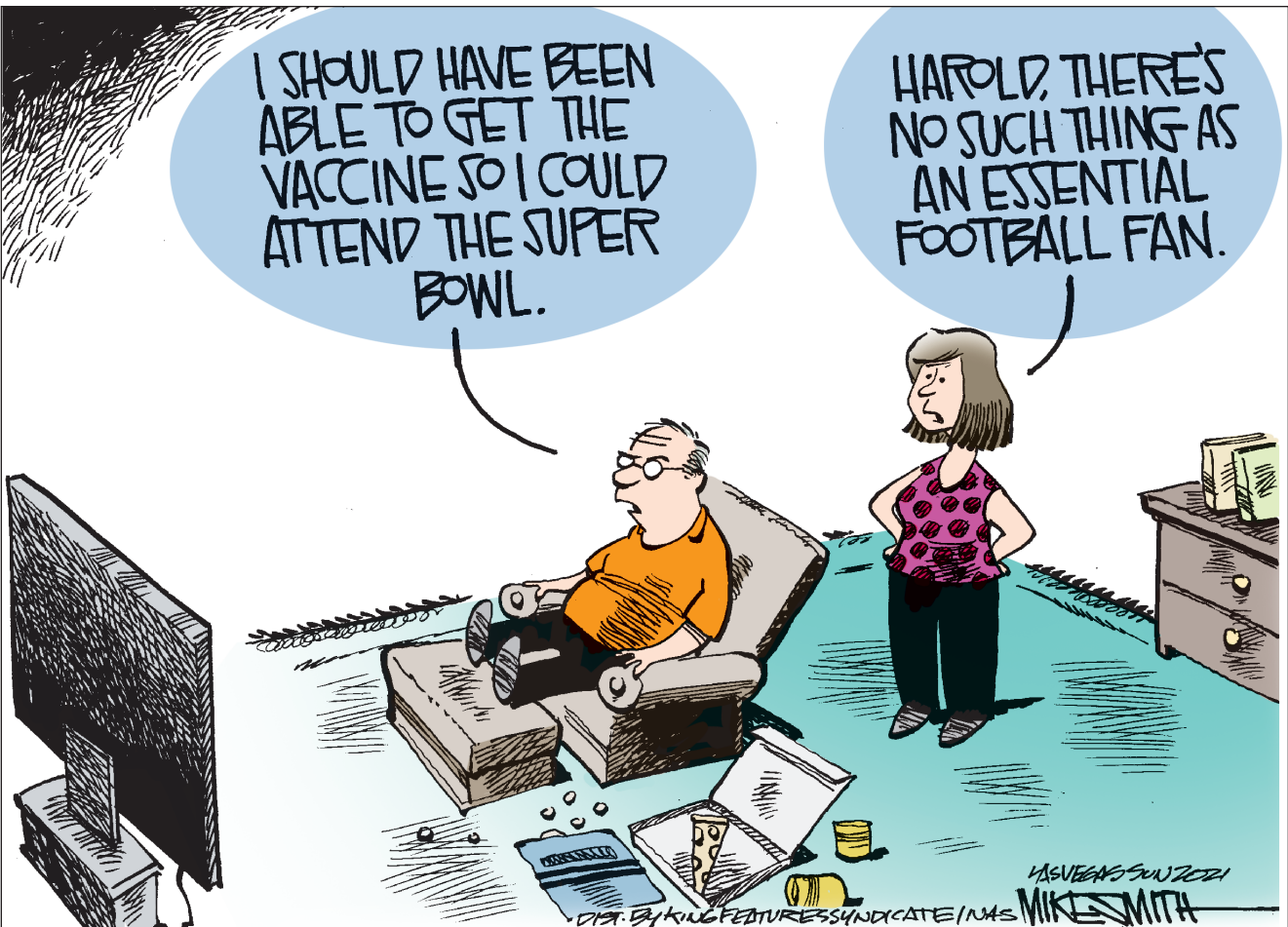
The same capacity limits apply to gyms, fitness centers, theaters and museums, as well as any other type of indoor recreation or entertainment activity. OHA should have dropped Baker County to that lowest risk level Monday, Feb. 8, to make up for the days when the county was wrongly, and unfairly, stuck at extreme risk. Making that change today, one day early, would offer a meager benefit, but it’s the right thing to do.

Failing to deduct inmate cases isn’t the only mistake OHA has recently acknowledged when it comes to calculating Baker County’s risk level. The agency also noted, in its Feb. 5 announcement, that “in working with Baker County’s Local Public Health Authority, OHA found discrepancies in Baker County’s percent positivity data related to electronic laboratory results submitted from Idaho health systems.”

Put more simply, the state was double-counting dozens of positive tests, greatly inflating Baker County’s positivity rate, one of the two figures (new cases is the other) that determine the county’s risk level. That mistake, which had been going on for several weeks, fortunately didn’t affect the county’s risk level.

But it’s passing strange that OHA either didn’t notice that, or investigate why, the agency’s own database, prior to the correction, showed Baker County with 2.7 times more positive tests than cases, and that although the county’s case rate ranks 12th among the 36 counties, its positivity rate was second-highest.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Be selective in the sources of information you read

There has recently been two letters from people who have their doubts about the outcome of the election and who have referred to the Navarro Report as a source of information. I had never heard of this report, so Googled it and found that it is the product of Peter Navarro, who was a top adviser in the prior White House! If he wanted to keep his taxpayer-funded position he HAD to promote Mr. Trump’s line of “alternative facts” — which in itself is a contradiction in terms. To find sources of more reliable information try Googling The Media Bias Chart. Here many sources of news are rated for both reliability and bias. Choose some at the top-center of the curve, and you will be well informed with real facts.

Kirsten Badger
Baker City

Peaceful discourse can help us solve our problems

In the Jan. 28 issue of the paper we

saw two letters to the editor. One, from a successful American patriot. He was a veteran (USMC), a squared-away guy who served and then furthered his education after discharge. His path that was similar to that taken by many thousands of young men. After my term of service (USN) I wandered through a series of life’s adventures. Eventually I was contacted by the VA. They said I had educational benefits that would expire if I didn’t use them. I took that to heart and went to school. The experience allowed me to develop skills that paid benefit to the community.

I suggest any young person look at the benefits to be had by serving your country. Lessons learned in service combined with additional educational benefits post-service can give an individual the foundation for a successful life. Ask any vet.

The second writer, Moscow Mike, seems to find his role in attacking people with non-facts and outright lies. Lacking the intellect to follow

global references he delights in insulting others from the safety of his room. He offers nothing of value. Rather, he resorts to calling people out by name. Perhaps, by naming them, he thinks he can intimidate them to silence. If he wants to keep putting my name before the public, I’m okay with that as long as he doesn’t descend to slander. With that additional publicity I may even decide to run for City Council, again.

When the rabble-rousers shut up and let the adults gather for peaceful discourse we can address the problems with our collective wisdom. With forethought, contemplation and respect for each other’s viewpoint we may achieve a fair consensus for a constitutional, fair society. I know the people we need to hear from live in our town. I have spoken to many of them. Perhaps they will write to us via the paper. Keep the faith.

Rick Rienks
Baker City

Smaller aid plan appropriate

By Tyler Cowen

Although President Joe Biden’s \$1.9 trillion aid and stimulus package now appears likely to pass, the current state of the economy suggests that a much smaller program would suffice. Vaccines are on the way, many state budgets are in OK shape, household balance sheets are robust including many for the poor, real estate is booming and retail sales are above where they were a year ago.

Make no mistake: A faster and better public health response is imperative, both to save lives and to drive a recovery. It is not necessary, however, to “juice the economy” at the scale being proposed. Both Lawrence H. Summers and Olivier Blanchard, two of the best Keynesian macroeconomists in the world, have said so. But in the current debate, they are not being refuted so much as dismissed because they are not left-wing enough.

There are, to be sure, arguments for such a large package. But they do not represent the best economic advice.

The first principle of economics is opportunity cost, namely that any policy should be compared with possible better alternatives. Under this analysis, the current plan falls short. It has far too much for consumption, and not nearly enough investment. Major plan components include a \$1,400 cash transfer, a lot more unemployment insurance, aid to schools, paid leave provisions, aid to state and local governments, and temporary transfers to families.

A lot of this cash will be saved, diminishing its effect as stimulus. There is also the risk that distributing

goodies will become a periodic vote-buying mechanism, a practice that will be abused but would never be popular if the public had to pay for it up-front. At the very least, some elements of this package should be linked to future economic conditions.

Nonetheless, after the failures of the response to the Great Recession more than a decade ago, the notion of spending almost \$2 trillion, much of it on the poor, represents a kind of catnip for progressives. It is so geared to their natural inclinations that they cannot help but support the proposal.

Leave aside the political question of how aggressively to pursue an agenda of a larger, more activist government (and keep in mind that I am more libertarian than many of the participants in this debate). Take a Big Government as a given. History shows that consumption still ought not be the priority.

First, wise public sector investments are better for the poor than one-time wealth transfers. The U.S. is still reaping the benefits of the great public health and public works achievements of the 20th century. Second, the most enduring and beneficial government-transfer programs, such as Social Security, have been built on sustainable majorities.

Progressive societies are fundamentally based on a valorization of investment — in physical structures, in software, in sustainable policies. This argues against a “Let’s grab this policy win while we can” attitude, no matter how popular that stance may currently be on social media. It’s foolish to think that no other policy combination is politically feasible, and if the president’s

advisers and supporters really believe that, they are in for a long and unsatisfying four years.

It’s not as if there aren’t obvious candidates for alternative investment: green energy, broadband and public health infrastructure for the next pandemic, to name a few. Yes, I am familiar with the argument that spending the extra trillion or so now will make it possible to spend more trillions later, including on such policies. But whatever kind of complicated political story you might tell, the basic laws of economics have not been repealed. Increasing current expenditures does, in fact, involve foregone future opportunities.

Another possible direction would be to rework Sen. Mitt Romney’s proposed child support plan and turn it into an enduring policy. It is an expensive idea, but at least it would represent a greater investment in America’s future than mere one-off cash transfers.

The defenders of the president’s plan argue that inflation and an overheated economy are not major risks. Maybe so, maybe not — but that is not the crucial issue. Instead, ask yourself this question: Does this program, or this rhetoric, recognize the paramount importance of investment, whether public or private? If not, you needn’t look much further.

Tyler Cowen is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He is a professor of economics at George Mason University and writes for the blog Marginal Revolution. His books include “Big Business: A Love Letter to an American Anti-Hero.”

Letters to the editor

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Mail: To the Editor, Baker City Herald, P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814

Email: news@bakercityherald.com