

Opinion

BAKER CITY
Herald
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter
news@bakercityherald.com

EDITORIAL

Help, not harm

Whitney and Shannon Black, a Baker City couple who own a fuel distributing business, have prompted a worthwhile conversation at City Hall, and in the community, about how pandemic restrictions have harmed local businesses and residents.

The City Council heard from several people on the topic during its Tuesday, Feb. 9, meeting. The city also received a couple dozen letters. Most writers endorsed the Blacks' proposal that the Council approve a "common sense sanctuary" that would call for city businesses to determine their own precautions, such as mask requirements.

The frustration is understandable, especially when the state has twice erred in calculating Baker County's risk level and associated restrictions. The second mistake resulted in restaurants, gyms and other businesses being subjected to the most stringent rules for a week longer than they should have been. That's inexcusable.

But there is no clear legal avenue for the city, by way of a resolution, to supersede state mandates. Similar attempts, including a lawsuit filed last spring in Baker County, failed.

The Blacks' letter is eloquent. Their legitimate concerns about the community they love are heartfelt.

But elected city councilors should understand that even an implicit encouragement that business owners flout state regulations could harm rather than help those businesses. The city is not in a position to defend business owners facing fines, license suspensions or other punishments.

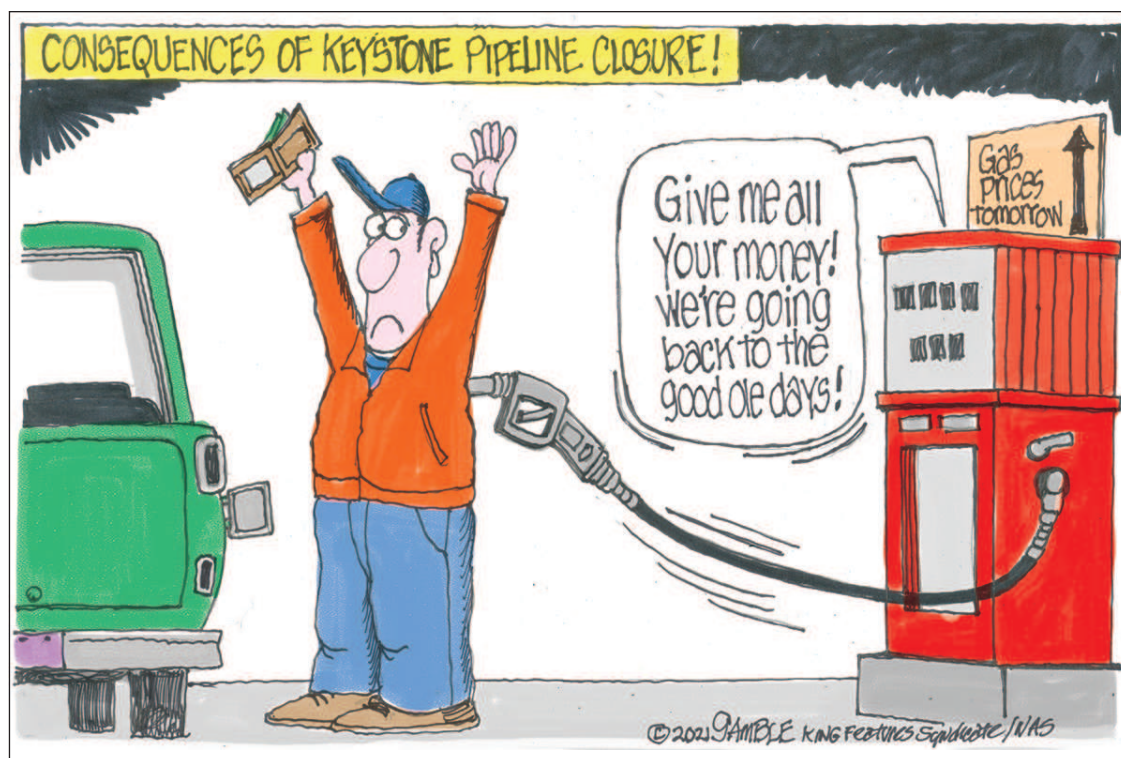
Some people don't like to wear a mask to go shopping. But others wouldn't feel comfortable patronizing a local business that didn't require masks. And there is reason to believe that local residents who do wear masks when required or recommended, and who take other precautions, are helping businesses. Baker County's virus cases have dropped significantly over the past few weeks. As a result, the county's risk level dropped Friday, Feb. 12, and restrictions on restaurants and other businesses are less strict than they've been since November. This is progress.

The City Council can help in other ways. Councilors can ask state officials to redesignate Baker County from medium population to small. That would mean the county's risk level would be based solely on new cases. Now, the county is rated on that metric and on its test positivity rate. The change would make it more likely that the county remains under the least-severe restrictions.

The City Council can also press state officials to justify, with data, restrictions that have outsized effects on restaurants, gyms and theaters. The current situation in Baker County, for instance, where people can watch movies in theaters but they can't buy popcorn and candy, is nonsensical. And it's keeping the Eltrym Theatre closed.

The city's elected councilors can, and should, advocate on behalf of their constituents, including business owners. But councilors need to ensure that advocacy doesn't potentially create new problems for people who have already suffered so much over the past year.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

America still depends on oil

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

Most Americans, in fact nearly all Americans, get around using vehicles that use gasoline. And nearly all of our goods are delivered in trucks that use diesel. If there's no fuel, those vehicles don't magically start running on water or banana peels or old gym socks or any other substance, natural or man-made.

This is a hard, difficult truth that Americans must absorb as the White House seeks to cut greenhouse gas pollution that comes from burning fossil fuels. The administration is putting a fair amount of energy into strategies that do not support that stated goal. Among these is President Joe Biden's executive order to halt leasing on federal lands for oil and gas production. If America produces less oil, drivers will still fill their tanks, only with fuel made from oil produced somewhere else.

Two weeks ago, Biden announced a set of executive orders designed to meet the goal of significantly and quickly reducing carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to climate

change. Among the orders is a directive to the Department of Interior to pause all oil and gas leasing on federal lands until the department can review its fossil fuel leasing policies. Reviewing policies is a good move; halting leasing is not.

Search Google for maps of federal land, and you will find images of the U.S. that look like someone took a paintbrush to the western half of the country and ran out of paint at the Rocky Mountains. Federal land includes much more than National Parks and forest preserves. In the Western states (not Texas), most land belongs to the government, and the money generated by those lands goes to federal and state coffers.

Further, federal land contributes a chunk of total U.S. oil and gas production. According to the American Petroleum Institute, federal land, both onshore and offshore, in 2019 contributed about 22% of total U.S. oil production and 12% of natural gas production. (About 70% of federal oil production comes from offshore.)

Halting leasing won't immediately halt production, as oil and

gas companies operate existing wells and drill on leases already in hand. But zero leasing means production will most likely begin to taper off, and the ultimate decline will depend on how long the moratorium remains.

That's a sad way to punish oil companies and their employees, plus the communities throughout the West that support them. Oil companies faced losses that will go down in the history books in 2020, as the pandemic-related recession reduced oil and gas consumption, and many have already cut back production anyhow, before the leasing moratorium. That makes 2021 a pretty good time for the government to review its leasing policies, but a terrible time to halt leasing.

We join the Texas members of Biden's own Democratic Party in recommending he allow leasing to continue. And we join the White House in asking the Interior Department to review oil and gas leasing policies, but to do so after a period of public comment. A series of public forums throughout the affected states, where local people can weigh in, would be welcome.

Peculiar politics: Pelosi agreeing with Trump

The saying that politics makes for strange bedfellows is a tidy aphorism, but I'm not sure it covers a situation as peculiar as Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi sharing a section of squishy pillowtop.

And with Chuck Schumer getting in the way besides.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

But then Trump is anything but conventional. And I suppose it ought not shock anyone that in the waning days of his presidency he would manage to maneuver his way into the familiar position from which he dominates the national conversation.

And simultaneously reveal, whether intentionally or not, the hypocrisy of some of his more bitter opponents.

The erstwhile president must have chortled when Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, agreed with him that the \$600 per person payments in the second pandemic relief bill, although "significant" according to Pelosi, are too small.

Both the former president and Pelosi, whose disdain for Trump is so palpable that she often seems to be in physical pain when talking about him, lobbied for \$2,000 checks.

So did Schumer, the Senate minority leader whose descriptions of Trump include both the aggressively adjectival — "despicable" and "monstrous," among many others — as well as straightforward nouns such as "moron."

(Perhaps Schumer is not aware of the latter word's noxious connec-



JAYSON JACOBY

tion to the eugenics movement. Or perhaps he is. When the subject is Donald Trump, normal standards of decorum are as relevant to political discourse as a suit of armor is to modern combat.)

Schumer's senatorial colleague, Bernie Sanders — also unlikely to have an autographed copy of "The Art of the Deal" on his bedside table beside the nation's most famous pair of mittens — even joined in threatening a filibuster to force the GOP-controlled Senate to allow a vote on the \$2,000 stimulus payments.

The whiff of hypocrisy wafts across the years from 2018, after Trump signed the tax cut bill that was a milestone of his first year in office.

Back then, it seems, Pelosi, Schumer and their Democratic colleagues seemed to think it an affront to America that people ought to be able to keep more of the money they earned. Considerably more than \$600, for tens of millions of Americans.

Not one Democrat, in either the House or the Senate, voted for the legislation.

Pelosi said the tax bill was "designed to plunder the middle class," to cite just one of her inane statements that would make a

C- student in Econ 101 feel much better about himself.

A mere three years later, this same bunch insisted that it's perfectly reasonable — necessary, even — to dole out a couple grand to many of those same people.

Trump was at least consistent.

He thought middle class Americans ought to get an income boost in 2017, and he thought they should get one during the pandemic.

And a bigger one than his Republican buddies — that supposed cabal controlled by Trump the puppet master — were willing to endorse.

The ex-president's role in constructing the wall of partisanship that looms so imposingly in America is beyond dispute.

But Trump has laid many more bricks with his words — most notably his infantile verbal attacks on his opponents — than with his actions.

His policy positions were too eclectic to fit neatly into a box labeled "Republican" or "conservative."

Trump's disdain for entangling America's military in foreign wars, to cite a prominent example, hardly endeared him to the neocons who not so long ago dominated the GOP.

And his promotion of bigger stimulus payments suggests to me that had Pelosi, Schumer and the rest of the Democratic leadership in Congress paid a bit less attention to the president's bluster over the past four years, and a bit more to what he advocated, that barrier

between the two branches of government might have been revealed as a much less formidable obstacle than we had supposed it to be.

I went for a walk in town just around dusk earlier this winter and while I was out there, strolling along, a blizzard came down off the Elkhorns.

The storm arrived as such tempests often do, which is to say rather suddenly.

A light fall of flakes was fitting down when I left my house, but then the flurry thickened into serious snow and in what seemed to me the span of a minute or so the visibility constricted to a couple of blocks.

A stout wind from the east-southeast, which is one of the two common winter wind directions hereabouts (switching round to the northwest with the passage of a cold front), slapped my nose and cheeks and I had to squint to keep my eyes clear.

A single snowflake is an insubstantial thing, of course, scarcely felt.

But a constant stream of flakes, propelled by the gusts, has a palpable weight.

As I trudged along I wondered how I must look to anyone who was inside one of the dozens of homes I passed, and who happened to glance out from a place of warmth and light at the storm and the indistinct figure moving through the

thick and shifting white cloud.

I walked with a distinct hunch, though I carried no physical burden.

It was a curious experience but mainly a pleasant one, despite the constant buffeting and the soft caress of the flakes, feeling like nothing so much as fingers lightly tickling my face.

The combination of the failing light and the volume of snow in the air made me feel confined, but not in a disturbing, claustrophobic way.

I felt instead as though I were inside the full-scale version of a snow globe. The Christmas decorations that still graced many yards heightened the illusion.

It was quiet out there in the storm.

Snow, of course, absorbs noise. But still I was surprised at how soft the sounds were when a car drove past, albeit at a modest speed appropriate for slippery residential streets.

Because I couldn't see far my own progress seemed distorted; I felt that I was moving much more slowly than usual even though my pace was normal. I had little sense of how many blocks I had to cover, how many minutes before I reached home.

I felt acutely alone, a single organism amid a white maelstrom that made the distinction between town and country, between the tame and the wild, seem flimsy.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.