

EDITORIAL

Baker City's flawed COVID-19 resolution

Resolution 3881, which the Baker City Council passed by a 5-2 vote on Tuesday, March 23, cites the economic and social damage resulting from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders during the pandemic.

Businesses have suffered. So have students. So too some seniors and others who have spent so much of the past year alone. Criminal suspects who normally would have been detained for at least a night or two in the Baker County Jail have instead been cited and released due to limits on occupancy to reduce the risk of the virus spreading in that confined setting. Not all of these resulted directly from Brown's decisions, but all reflect the atmosphere prevailing in Oregon.

The City Council reasonably questions whether the governor has recognized the vastly different situations between rural areas such as Baker City and, say, the Portland metro area.

The City Council made a similar point earlier this month when it voted to send a letter, written by Councilor Jason Spriet, to the governor chastising her and other state officials for failing to consider the opinions of local officials in setting regulations during the pandemic.

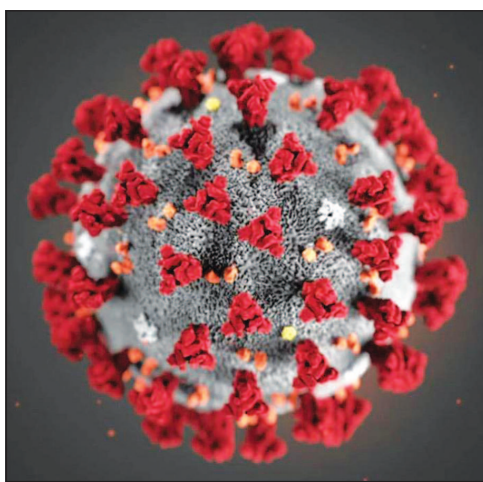
Resolution 3881, however, is a much less focused, and thus flawed, document.

The resolution, drafted by Mayor Kerry McQuisten in consultation with City Manager Jon Cannon and the city's attorney, rather than focusing solely on Brown's orders and their harmful effects, and advocating for financial and regulatory relief for struggling businesses, also implies that COVID-19's danger is exaggerated. The resolution, though it concedes that the virus is contagious, goes on to state that "contagious viruses do exist in the world."

Indeed they do. But what's the point of noting the obvious? Has any other virus caused or contributed to the deaths of more than half a million Americans in little more than a year?

The resolution: "COVID-19 is overwhelmingly survivable and lockdowns do not stop its spread."

The second part of that sentence is a



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
A depiction of a coronavirus particle.

legitimate point, and one that relates directly to the issue of whether Brown's executive orders have all been necessary. The first part, however defensible statistically, is cold comfort to the loved ones of the 12 Baker County residents who have died after testing positive for the virus. Downplaying the danger of COVID-19 is to be expected in a partisan political screed, but it is wholly inappropriate for a resolution purporting to represent all Baker City residents.

The resolution notes that "our local hospital and health care system are not overwhelmed with COVID cases, and never have been." This is disingenuous, and another misguided attempt to portray the pandemic as a minor medical issue. County officials have said that most local residents who contracted the virus and needed treatment, including ventilators, have been sent to a Boise hospital. The relatively minor effect COVID-19 has had on the local health care system reflects not that the virus is benign, as the resolution implies, but that it is, for some, dangerous enough to require a higher level of care.

Rather than focusing solely on restrictions the governor has imposed — decisions that have significantly harmed the local economy and residents — the resolution also delves into the issue of face masks. The resolution claims Brown's "lockdown and masking mandates" — the former having a much more direct, and harmful, effect on businesses — "are actively creating division and unrest

with the increased potential of physical violence within our community as those of one opinion are encouraged by it to impose their opinions over the free will of those of another in a physical way ..."

The issue of masks is a divisive one, to be sure. But the resolution offers no evidence of resulting violence except the "potential" for such. Moreover, the resolution, which in an earlier clause states that "we do believe our citizens are fully capable of making their private, individual healthcare and lifestyle decisions themselves" now implies that some of those citizens, due to mask mandates, might not be able to resist the urge to commit physical violence. Unless we're to believe the only people likely to get rough are those who wear masks and are mad at those who don't. Which is farcical.

This isn't the only unclear or inconsistent clause in the resolution. It also states that "we believe in the kindness, compassion and common sense of our citizens and businesses to help protect the most fragile and susceptible in our community." The overwhelming consensus of medical experts is that wearing face masks, in certain situations, is an effective way to reduce the likelihood of spreading the virus. It's fair to call mask wearing, to borrow from the resolution, both "common sense" and a way to "protect the most fragile and vulnerable." Yet the resolution attacks "masking mandates" as being divisive, without acknowledging their medical benefits.

The final "whereas" clause in the resolution features a selection of famous quotes from American founding fathers.

This is standard fare, of course, in documents alleging that the government is infringing on citizens' rights. But the inclusion of Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" vow is curious in this context. Do the five councilors who voted for the resolution believe their constituents, including those who have been infected with COVID-19, must choose between total rejection of the governor's orders, and untimely death? The very traits that the resolution touts in local residents — "compassion" and "kindness" — are the ones that reflect our willingness to take temporary steps, including the trifling matter of occasional mask wearing, to reduce the risk to those for whom this virus is dangerous.

The resolution has a more promising conclusion, in part. It states that the city will support financial reparations for businesses, and back ballot initiatives to limit the governor's emergency powers. The former, in particular, is vital to economic recovery, and something the Council is right to advocate for.

Yet the final clause is another exaggerated statement that serves no purpose except to inflame. "The City recognizes the citizenry of Baker City are free, sovereign individuals within a Constitutional, Representative Republic, not subjects or slaves, and will be recognized as such as we firmly stand to represent them."

Invoking slavery in this context not only reflects the hollowness of the argument, but it detracts from the admirable aspects of the resolution.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

Your views

Arkansas resident keeps track of what's going on in Baker City

I'm Charlie Carpenter and I live in Arkansas but I've visited Baker City many times.

I keep an eye on things on social media and I've noticed a few things I really like.

I saw that the police department was seeking input from the public on things they perceived as opportunities for improvement. I think that's really cool!

I also noticed the new mayor has embraced a level of transparency politicians talk

about but very few actually attempt. I hope the community will embrace that and get involved with the council.

I love the historic downtown area. I hope people in those businesses have survived the craziness of the pandemic.

We don't have that kind of downtown area where I live and I hope everyone there realizes how special it is and pulls together to make sure it's not lost.

Charlie Carpenter
Springdale, Arkansas

Stuck in a snowbound cabin with the flies

For the first time in my relatively uneventful life I was truly entertained by the chance to smash a fly with a rolled up magazine.

I have in the past felt a certain smug satisfaction after dispatching a bug that had been dive-bombing my eyes for 10 minutes.

And I have on occasion been frustrated by my failure to deliver a conclusive whack to an unusually nimble insect.

But I had not previously watched a fly, banging repeatedly against a window pane in the mindless manner typical of the species, and felt relieved of the burden of boredom.

I am ashamed to admit this.

Not because I'm leery about confessing to insecticide.

I'm embarrassed because the source of my excitement about the appearance of that single fly was the absence of the digital entertainment to which I am accustomed.

No internet.

No television.

My cellphone was as useful as a two-wheel drive pickup in a mud bog.

This ought not have bothered me.

Or at least not to the point that I leaped with glee from my chair when I noticed the fly.

We had rented this rustic cabin in the woods fully cognizant that



JAYSON JACOBY

it was as thoroughly analog as the one-barrel carburetor in a lawnmower.

The prospect was in fact enticing.

We would spend a winter night in the Malheur National Forest's Sunshine Guard Station, along the Middle Fork of the John Day River about 15 miles from the nearest gas pump and beer cooler.

We wouldn't suffer unduly, to be sure.

Most notably, the wooden structure has electricity.

And although the guard station lacks running water, as frequent campers we're used to the minor deprivation of an outhouse.

I thought of our weekend as an adventure, but one rather more comfortable than a backpacking trip or even a couple of nights in our toilet-less pop up trailer.

No tent poles to fumble with, for one thing.

Also, comfortable seats and reliable heating (although I would have preferred to burn tamarack rather than kilowatts; alas, the guard station has electric heaters

in place of a woodstove or fireplace).

We brought our snowshoes and planned to explore the area during daylight.

I had one book in progress, and a second ready in case I made it through the first.

As the weekend approached — my wife, Lisa, reserved the guard station about a month earlier — I daydreamed occasionally. I conceived the classic scene of the city-dweller, imagined myself sitting in a comfortable chair, watching snowflakes swirl outside, a mug of hot cocoa within easy reach.

This wasn't a fantasy.

Not completely, anyway.

Late on Saturday afternoon, after we had hiked the road behind the guard station and snowshoed for a piece on another road up the river some miles, I was indeed sitting in a chair.

But rather than feeling cozy and satisfied, as I watched the light leak out of the day and smelled the potato soup simmering on the stove, I was a trifle bored.

Perhaps more than a trifle.

I would read a few pages but instead of settling into the book, as I usually do at home, sometimes for the better part of an hour, my attention would waver.

Except it was the absence of outside stimulation that kept distract-

ing me, not its presence.

I found this passing strange, and not a little exasperating.

With no television blaring, no promise of a basketball game to watch or favorite movie to revisit, no website or weather forecast to peruse on my phone, I should have smoothly lost myself in the story I was reading, only to realize later, as I looked at the dark windows, that the sun had set.

And a fine story it was — "Burning Fence," the compelling nonfiction book by renowned Oregon novelist Craig Lesley.

Yet I couldn't get comfortable.

With hindsight I suspect the problem was the pressure that a person sometimes feels when a long-anticipated event finally arrives. It is much the same with a vacation — you feel compelled to make the experience not merely memorable but transcendent, having toiled so long to make it possible.

Yet the burden, almost always, is too great, the expectations unreasonable.

That perfect Currier and Ives tableau I had created in my mind, for instance, surpassed the reality, as I suppose I knew it would.

There were no snowflakes, for one thing.

Also, the guard station, lacking a

woodstove to perfume the air with pine, actually smelled more like a place that has been indifferently maintained and is rarely aired out. The potato soup couldn't quite overcome this slightly unpleasant scent.

Still and all, as the evening went on and I began to feel sleepy, there were moments when the real experience seemed familiar, resembling the idyllic scene I had envisioned over the past month.

In particular I reveled in the silence.

I don't mean that the cabin was quiet.

With a 9-year-old boy and his 13-year-old sister around, true silence was as improbable as my learning even the basics of calculus.

Besides which, the fans from the electric heaters purred constantly.

What I noticed, and appreciated, was the complete absence of city sounds. No obnoxious burbling from a passing car with an exhaust system held together by rust and optimism. No slamming doors. No blaring train whistles.

Just the great silence of the deep woods.

And an occasional buzzing fly to get me out of my chair.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.