

EDITORIAL

Perils of
police work

We understand, even though most of us have the luxury of not having to often think about it, that police officers put themselves in dangerous situations we probably will never have to face.

But just recently in Baker County, a couple of episodes have starkly illustrated the hazards that officers from each local agency — Baker City Police, Oregon State Police and the Baker County Sheriff's Office — are occasionally exposed to.

On March 12, Oregon State Police Sr. Trooper Andrew McClay responded to reports of a driver speeding the wrong way on Interstate 84 near Durkee. When McClay saw the 2011 Toyota Camry, driven by a Washington man, approaching him "at a very high rate of speed," as McClay wrote in a report, he didn't merely try to persuade the driver to stop by way of flashing lights and a siren.

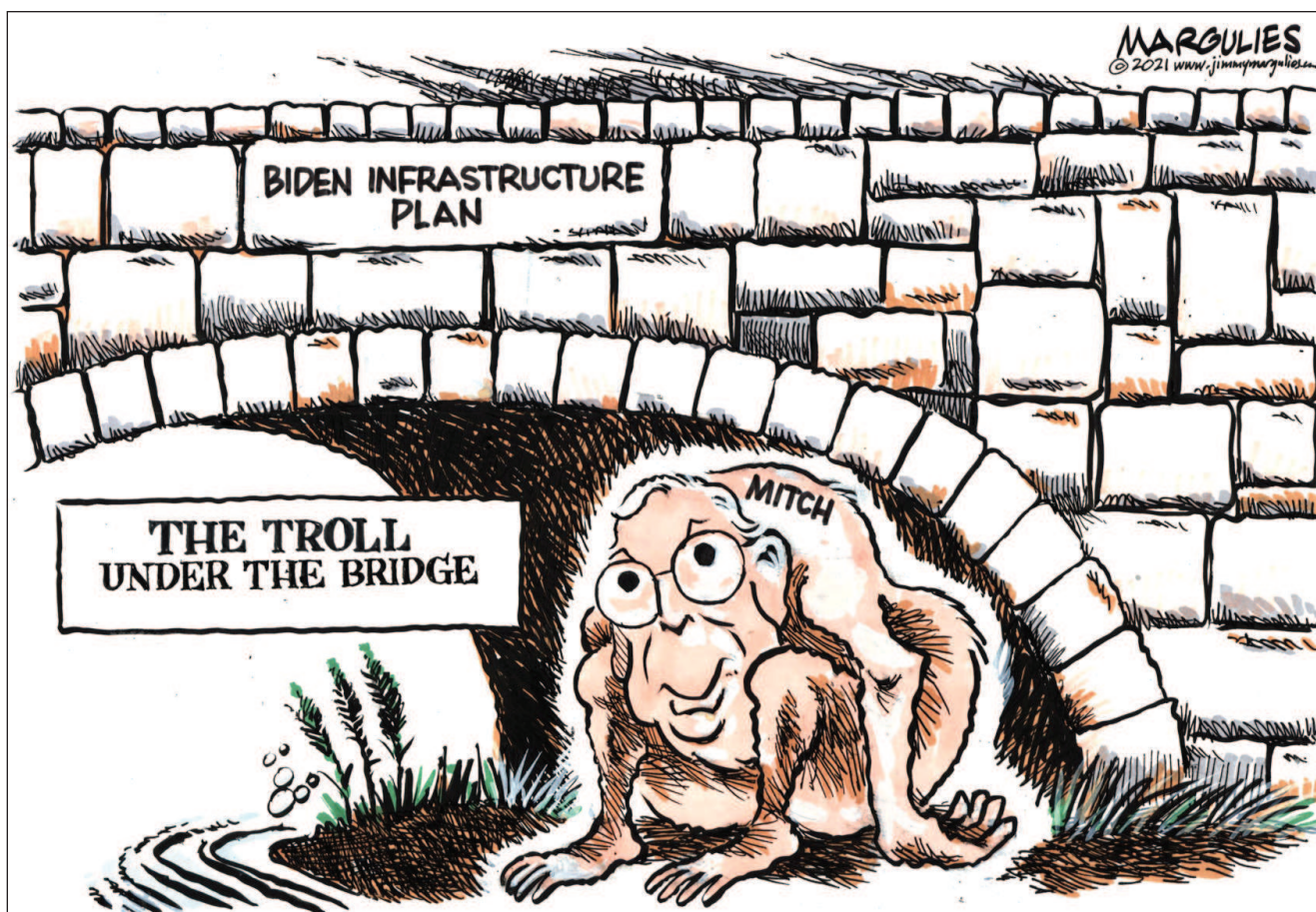
McClay, as he wrote in his report, "rammed the vehicle to get it off the roadway."

By risking his own life, McClay might well have saved somebody else's. The wrong-way driver had already barely missed hitting at least one vehicle after driving west for about 15 miles in the freeway's eastbound lanes.

More recently, early on Tuesday morning, April 6, Baker City Police officer Mark Powell, along with Dalton Baker, a security officer at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City, were confronted with a violent man from Boise who refused to leave the hospital after being evaluated following an incident in which he allegedly backed his car into a gas pump. The man punched both Powell and Baker, and he continued to fight even after Powell deployed his Taser.

Both episodes ended without any serious injuries. This is a testament to both the skill and the bravery of the officers, acting on our behalf and with a goal of protecting us from the dangers they confront.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Appreciated Steve Culley's
letter about immigration

I want to congratulate Steve Culley on his letter to the editor on immigration. Well said, Steve.

Julie Miller
Baker City

Another chance to express
opposition to power line

On the 15th, our Public Utility (OPUC) commissioners will hold their final hearing on Idaho Power's 2019 energy plan, which includes the B2H transmission line. I've urged OPUC to acknowledge issues of environmental justice when considering approval for the B2H transmission line. I believe Idaho Power is not shouldering the true environmental cost of the proposed B2H line, that Idaho Power is instead passing the cost of impacts to economically disadvantaged rural communities. For instance, Idaho Power claims "no significant impact" for 150-foot transmission towers that would be built a few blocks from a beautiful mountain

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

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lake, the key feature of the cherished and historic City of La Grande Morgan Lake Park. If the B2H line impacted such a park in Portland I do not believe it would be going forward. Fire risks are another cost/hardship passed on to our fire vulnerable rural communities.

Rural citizens demand to be treated fairly and to have our environment considered and protected!

There are other options to building the B2H line, even if a transmission line is determined to be necessary. Concerned citizens with STOP B2H have outlined many such alternatives, see: www.stopb2h.org. I've asked the commission to pursue these options, taking into account environmental justice issues and the true cost of the B2H transmission lines to economically disadvantaged rural communities. Please consider doing the same before the 15th. Write: puc.publiccomments@state.or.us

Kathryn Andrew
La Grande

Thank you, Haines Fire
Department, neighbors

We would like to thank the Haines Fire Department as well as friends and neighbors for helping put out the field fire on Sunday, March 28.

The Brazofsky family

Seeking to pierce the veil of COVID-19 secrecy

You might scoff at the notion that you haven't heard enough about COVID-19.

Perhaps you would even utter a piquant epithet.

More than a year into the biggest viral pandemic in more than a century, you might indeed struggle to think of another topic that you'd be happier to banish to history, there to gradually accumulate the rusty and musty patina of an unloved artifact.

I sympathize with the mental fatigue.

For more than a dozen months now we've been inundated daily with data on tests and cases and — more recently but also happily — vaccinations.

I would be grateful to pass a full day without seeing or hearing the word "virus."

This would give me more time to ponder such vital topics as the newest flavor of Oreo, and to patrol my yard for spring weeds.

And yet, as tiresome as these incessant repetitions of the same statistics are, I don't think we know nearly as much as we ought to know about this pandemic.

Which is to say, we don't know many of the things we need to know to assess, in a cogent way, what this virus has done, and continues to do, to our communities.

The reason we don't know these things is because state officials, and in some cases their counterparts at the county level, have denied them to us.

Their justification for this secrecy is about as convincing as the banana flavor in Laffy Taffy.

(And with a similarly unpleasant aftertaste.)

One excuse is that state and federal health privacy laws prevent government officials from divulging



JAYSON
JACOBY

details about the pandemic.

This would be sensible if people were asking to poke around in somebody's medical files, the paperwork version of a colonoscopy, but without the need to insert tubes into orifices that generally fare well with minimal interference.

But it strikes me as illogical, and not a little infuriating, for government officials to refuse to reveal such anonymous statistics as the number of people, in a particular age range in Baker County, who have tested positive.

This would no more pierce anybody's individual veil of privacy than if this newspaper reported the number of county residents who own Ford F-150 pickup trucks as compared with Dodge Rams.

Some statewide demographic statistics about COVID-19 are available on the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) website. And although I understand the notion that the vastly larger numbers involved at the state level offer a theoretical cloak of privacy, compared with Baker County's relatively puny population, for practical purposes the difference seems to me negligible.

For instance, statewide, there are about 26,000 cases among Oregonians ages 40 to 49, roughly 15% of the state's total cases. This hardly makes it possible to identify any individual in that age range. The comparable number for that age range in Baker County, assuming a similar percentage of the total, would be around 118 people.

But I can only guess, because the county-level data aren't available. I don't know if 15% of the county's cases are people in their 40s, or if it's 5%, or 35%. But whatever the actual number is, it seems to me nonsensical to contend that if the public were privy to those numbers, we would then be able to easily identify every one of the people who tested positive.

According to recent reporting in The Oregonian, the tool of concealment favored by the OHA is not the federal health privacy law but rather a homegrown Oregon statute, 433.008.

(As an aside, I find it eternally disappointing to learn that our laws require three decimal places to keep things straight. This suggests a volume of legal strictures which hardly is necessary to govern a society comprising, in the main, responsible and law-abiding citizens.)

The gist of that state statute is that agencies needn't comply with Oregon's Public Records Law when the information in question was gathered as part of investigating a public health matter such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OHA has cited that statute many times in rejecting public records requests from journalists and others, according to The Oregonian.

(A second aside — the public records law, although frequently employed by journalists, is, as its name implies, designed to make government records available to "the public," which is all of us, whether we occasionally use a byline or not. Journalists might have a keener interest in obtaining certain records, but we have no greater legal right to them. Which is as it should be.)

The Society of Professional Journalists, not surprisingly, has

challenged the state's reliance on 433.008 to prevent the media from reporting more thoroughly, and thus informatively, about the pandemic.

So have non-journalists, in some cases.

Their efforts have yielded some successes. The OHA's online COVID-19 dashboards are richer sources of information now than they were early in the pandemic.

Yet the agency remains obstinate with regard to matters whose importance, and relevance, is so obvious that to deny the information to the public is an act of supreme bureaucratic arrogance.

Just recently OHA rejected The Oregonian's request, under the Public Records Law, for the number of Oregonians who have been infected with COVID-19 despite being fully vaccinated. The agency's excuse is that the cases are still under investigation. OHA did release general information about the 168 "breakthrough" cases on Thursday, April 8.

Annoyance among journalists and the public has the potential to at least weaken the figurative mortar in this baffling barrier the state has erected.

But more promisingly, some state lawmakers are also aggrieved by the inexplicable secrecy.

State Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, introduced Senate Bill 719. The legislation, as drafted, would require both the OHA and county health agencies to hand over public records, including those related to COVID-19, unless, according to The Oregonian, "there is a legitimate risk that an individual's identity could be compromised."

"We're talking about legitimate need to know for the public," Dembrow said at a legislative hearing for the bill March 24.

Jayson Jacoby is editor
of the Baker City Herald.