

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Saving money by closing state offices

With statewide COVID-19 restrictions ending June 30, much of the private sector quickly reacted. Restaurants no longer had to leave tables empty. Churches returned to regular in-person worship services. Independence Day parades and other celebrations happened as usual.

But the Oregon state government, in common with many other massive objects, is comparatively sluggish in its movements. Many state offices remain closed, and officials don't expect to reopen those until September.

In the meantime there have been plenty of meetings, with more scheduled this summer. Gov. Kate Brown created a Reopening Advisory Team to write a report about how the state will about this process.

(Apparently it's more complicated than turning keys and flipping light switches.)

The Reopening Advisory Team invited state employees to fill out a survey on the subject. Almost 20,000 employees — a nearly 50% response rate of executive branch workers — did so. Of the respondents, 80% are now working remotely (meaning at home, in most cases) either full-time or part-time. This has been the situation for more than a year.

Based on the survey results, the shift to working from home has not been a burden on state employees. Quite the opposite, actually.

When asked how many days per week they would like to work remotely, even after state offices reopen, the most popular choice was every day (five days per week). Almost 44% of respondents chose that option. And 80% preferred working remotely either three, four or five days per week. Just 9% of employees said they want to work remotely either one day per week, or not at all.

Lest you wonder, as a taxpayer, whether you've been getting a good deal on your investment in state government while most offices are closed, 59% of respondents said they have been "extremely efficient" while working remotely. Just 7% said they have been "somewhat less efficient" or "extremely less efficient" while working remotely.

Although the state employee survey is not binding — it is intended to give the Reopening Advisory Team data to use in writing its report — state officials acknowledge that the changes wrought by the pandemic are likely to linger.

The Reopening Advisory Team's website poses this question: "Will all employees return to the office?"

The answer: "Probably not. The pandemic has provided the state opportunity to see that remote work can be an option for employees. The Advisory team is basing the report on the assumption that the state will embrace the hybrid workplace model (wherever possible), and offer suggestions for agencies to reopen based on business need and ability for remote work."

A one-page overview on the website includes a key sentence: "We now have the opportunity to be thoughtful in our approach of re-entry giving careful consideration to our employee experience and safety, delivery of service, and identifying cost savings."

Ideally, the order in which those factors are listed doesn't reflect their importance. State officials should give higher priority to maintaining a level of service and to saving tax dollars than to "employee experience and safety." Safety seems a bit of an exaggeration; there's no reason to think state employees who return to an office are at greater danger than the tens of thousands of private sector workers who didn't have the option of working at home during the pandemic.

Ultimately, if a significant number of state employees continue to work remotely, Oregon taxpayers have good reason to expect that the state will no longer need its current amount of office space, and that this shift will yield cost savings in the state budget.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Juneteenth holiday helps America learn from its past

I differ with Mr. Rienks on his take of Juneteenth (Baker City Herald, 6/29/2021). Juneteenth, commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States, is a long overdue public recognition of an ugly part of our history that is vital to learn — history that still impacts today. I am glad it precedes July 4th. Both holidays commemorate independence from tyranny. However, Juneteenth makes clear the lack of reality behind the July 4th holiday. Only some benefited from independence from England. Most (women, enslaved people, indigenous people, men of all skin tones, the land, fish and wildlife) remained subjugated with little to no rights. Even now we have a great distance to travel before the phrase "liberty and justice for all" becomes a reality and not just a slogan.

"One Nation" — that the phrase were true but it is not. This country has many subsets, a few subsets benefit greatly, while most do not, including subsets with lots of white people. Only by learning our complete history, not some sanitized version can we make the changes needed for "One Nation" to be real. We are fortunate that there are many excellent

resources out there to help on this challenging journey.

As to concerns about "life in the rural West" — while some mindsets may be threatened by Juneteenth, it poses no threat to rural life. And there is no one "rural" mindset. One has only to read letters to the editor, see how people vote (or don't), look at yard signs, flags flown to know this.

This is my county. Our history is complex. I am deeply pained by how we continue to willfully miss the mark on "liberty and justice for all" and "One Nation." I am angered at the sanitized version of history I got as a kid and some still hold to. Continued hiding from our nation's past serves only a very few. If we want our nation to live up to its potential we must learn its history — the good, the bad, and the very ugly. Juneteenth helps us do just that.

Suzanne Fouty
Baker City

We must take bold action to combat global warming

After years of ruinous denial and failure to act, global warming is now at our doorstep. Drought, heat waves, and fire are clear warnings. It's obviously a gigantic threat that promises to get much worse. It deserves our

most skillful response.

Will we be able to join in a truly meaningful plan to save the planet?

One promising sign is the Save Our Future Act, just introduced by U.S. Senators Sheldon Whitehouse, Brian Shatz, and others, to shift consumer demand away from carbon fuels. It calls for a refundable carbon tax, which means that most of us could come out ahead by receiving government rebate checks paid quarterly from the tax revenue. At the same time, we would be making buying decisions which explicitly recognize the relatively high total cost of carbon fuels.

Top economists have called for just such a refundable carbon tax, saying this is by far the best way for the nation to address global warming.

Leading Republicans have joined them through the bi-partisan Climate Leadership Council (clccouncil.org).

I urge my fellow readers to learn about the Save Our Future Act, and then contact Senators Wyden and Merkley, asking them to support it.

We can no longer afford patchwork approaches and halfway measures. Now is the time to unite in bold, meaningful action.

Marshall McComb
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

Bipartisanship to the rescue in D.C.

Editorial from Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

President Joe Biden remembers when Congress worked differently. He's not alone. And now, thanks to some old-fashioned political bargaining, the nation stands to benefit with a long-needed federal infrastructure plan.

Getting to this point was far from a sure thing. The president held off months' of calls from his own party to give up his bipartisan pipe dream and ram through a deal with Democrats alone. Likewise, Republicans who sought to find common ground on the issue faced the potential wrath of partisans opposed to doing any deal with the Biden administration.

This, of course, is how the legislative process is designed to work. A little give, a little take. Some good-faith bargaining. All with an eye toward actually solving a problem for the constituents.

Not surprisingly, Sen. Rob Portman was front and center in this group. The two-term Republican from Ohio who will retire at the end of this year has long worked effectively on bipartisan problem solving, even as the din of partisan rancor and silly showmanship has distracted the nation's attention.

His is the style that used to domi-

nate the House and the Senate, of course. American government is meant to function by compromise with lawmakers looking for partners across the aisle to hammer out deals. At least that was how it used to work before cooperating with anyone from the other party to accomplish anything became poison in Washington.

For at least four years, the need for a federal infrastructure bill has seemed like an obvious, logical place to begin rebuilding a bipartisan way of doing business. With every deteriorating bridge that had to be closed down, every study on the dangers of ancient lead-lined water pipes, and every failing dam, it seemed that it should have been a cinch to sell a large-scale federal reinvestment in the nation's infrastructure regardless of whether that long-neglected infrastructure was in a blue state or a red state.

And yet, after Biden pitched his massive initial \$2 trillion plan, the prospect of working out a bipartisan compromise on the issue looked dim. He looked for partners among Republican senators and fended off complaints from those in his own party that doing so was nothing but a waste of time.

Into that frustrating chasm stepped an eight-senator group including Portman, Kyrsten Sinema (D-Arizona),

Bill Cassidy (R-Louisiana), Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Susan Collins (R-Maine), Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Jon Tester (D-Mont.), Mitt Romney (R-Utah), and Mark Warner (D-Virginia).

The deal they worked out with the White House — \$973 billion over five years or \$1.2 trillion over eight years — looks like a refreshing throwback to a more constructive era.

The proposal calls for spending \$109 billion on roads and highways, \$15 billion on electric vehicle infrastructure and transit systems and \$65 billion toward broadband, among other expenditures on airports, drinking water systems and resiliency efforts to tackle climate change.

The deal is far from sealed, of course. The progressive wing of the Democratic Party decries it as not ambitious enough while Republicans have threatened to balk if the deal is tied to a larger American Families Plan.

But the good news is that elected leaders seem to have had a wake-up call that reminded them how work should get done in Washington. The fringe elements of both parties need to see this for what it is — a win for everyone and potentially a foundation upon which to rebuild a functioning two-party governance that works.

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.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be

published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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