

EDITORIAL

Governor too hasty on masks

The delta variant has temporarily interrupted what had been a relatively tranquil period in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The variant is more contagious than other strains, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And in the very rare instances when a vaccinated person is infected with the delta variant, that person is much more likely to be infectious.

These troubling properties of the variant are reflected in recent trends, both nationally, in Oregon and locally.

Baker County, which reported 15 new cases for the first half of July, had 55 in just four days — July 26 (3), July 27 (19), July 28 (11) and July 29 (22) — and 80 for the eight-day period ending Aug. 1.

Beyond the numbers, Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, said some of the county residents who were infected have become very ill, with some needing treatment in a hospital.

In response to the delta variant, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on Thursday, July 29 announced that all students and staff in schools, whether they're vaccinated or not, will have to wear face masks when classes start this fall.

The governor should have taken a more measured approach to the situation rather than imposing another mandate that served only to widen the already yawning divide in society over all aspects of the pandemic, and in particular the issue of masks.

Classes don't start for a month, after all.

And it's not as if parents need a lot of advance notice about whether students will need to wear masks. They wore them for the whole of last year, after all, and they're readily available.

Brown should have said that she will be monitoring the situation — as of course she will — and that she might require masks in schools depending on how the current delta-driven surge plays out in August.

Although the delta variant's effects are problematic, the governor ought to recognize that the situation in Oregon is quite different — and in a good way — than it was, say, six months ago, and that these differences mitigate to some extent the risks posed by the delta variant.

Most notably, more than 2.3 million Oregonians are vaccinated.

While it's true that vaccination rates are lower among students — those 12 and younger aren't even eligible yet — that age group is also substantially less likely to be infected or to have severe symptoms.

Ultimately, it's vastly more important that Baker students will be attending in-person classes on a full, regular schedule starting Aug. 30, than whether they have to don face masks before they walk through the doors.

But Brown overreacted by making that decision more than a month in advance. There is no excuse for failing to acknowledge how rapidly conditions have changed during the pandemic, or for acting as though the vaccination campaign that has been going on for more than half a year has yielded little in the way of benefits.

Brown did both.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Biden's chance to ditch Iran nuclear talks

By Eli Lake

Since taking office, President Joe Biden and his top advisers have made it clear that there is almost nothing Iran can do to get his administration to rescind its offer to negotiate a return to the 2015 nuclear deal that Biden's predecessor abandoned. Thankfully, that might finally be changing.

On Wednesday, July 28, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei trashed his government's past nuclear negotiations in front of the outgoing and incoming presidents. He told the new president he should learn from his predecessor's experience not to trust the West.

In a statement responding to those remarks, the State Department repeated that it was sincere in seeking a negotiated settlement to return to the deal — which would limit Iran's nuclear enrichment for another nine years and remove the most biting secondary sanctions on Iran's economy. That has been boilerplate for the Biden administration since January. This time though, it added a veiled threat: "That opportunity will not last forever."

It may well be that the change is motivated by a flawed understanding of Iranian politics. As Axios reported this week, the Biden administration is worried that Iran's new president, Ebrahim Raisi, a fanatic jurist responsible for sentencing thousands of political prisoners to the gallows in 1988, will take a hard line in nuclear talks. The outgoing administration of President

Hassan Rouhani negotiated the nuclear deal in 2015.

But there has never been a hard-line/moderate dichotomy. Khamenei has the real power in Iran, and he approved the deal, just as he now appears to be souring on the prospect of returning to it. Raisi was elevated to head the Justice Ministry in 2019, remember, as part of Rouhani's allegedly moderate government.

A better rationale for not returning to the Iran talks are the growing signs that Khamenei's regime is wobbly. It is failing to meet the basic needs of its people. Earlier this month, protests broke out in Khuzestan province over the failure to provide drinking water. This week, demonstrations spread to Tehran. Some videos of those protests showed Iranians calling for Khamenei to resign, just as the protests in 2018 and 2019 called for his ouster.

Some protesters are angry because Iran's electricity grid can't keep the power on. This round of demonstrations began because of water shortages. But in the last four years, other state failures have brought Iranians out to the street. In 2017 and 2018 it was failed banks, which wiped out the savings of average Iranians, that prompted national protests. In 2019, it was the fact that state security services shot unarmed demonstrators. In 2009, it was a stolen election.

It's tempting to posit that U.S. sanctions are what's keeping Iran's regime from providing basic services to its people. But this is too simplistic. The banking crisis of 2017 and 2018

occurred while Iran was enjoying the benefits of the 2015 nuclear deal. Sanctions didn't force the state security services to shoot peaceful protesters, nor did they force developers in Khuzestan to divert drinking water from the population to drill for more oil. These were the choices of a corrupt and cruel regime.

So Biden now has an opportunity. He should follow up on the State Department statement this week supporting Iranian protesters and offer U.S. technical support to help activists get around the country's Internet blackout and slowdown. He should rally European governments to join in his solidarity campaign for the Iranian people. He should consider creating a modest fund for the families of Iranian workers going on strike. He should build on the last administration's work to reach out to Iranians on social media.

The overriding goal of all this outreach, and the main objective of the president's Iran policy, should be to support the efforts of Iran's people to achieve a democratic transition. The alternative to this approach is to patiently cajole an ailing supreme leader to limit his nuclear program while his ailing country collapses around him.

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OTHER VIEWS

Sadly, face masks are back in fashion

Editorial from Baltimore Sun:

As effective as the COVID-19 vaccines have been, the pandemic has taken an unfortunate turn in recent weeks. New cases and hospitalizations are no longer in decline across the United States, they're on the upswing; the highly contagious delta variant accounts for most. Doses of the vaccines are plentiful, but the arms willing to accept them are not; vaccine hesitancy has become a serious obstacle to conquering the disease. And to top it off, it's become increasingly clear that those masks people were so delighted to take off just weeks ago are coming back into fashion. This week's guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that vaccinated people ought to wear masks indoors in areas of significant transmission proved a milestone — raising the hackles of right-wing politicians and the usual conspiracy theorists

while reminding average Americans that the fight against the virus isn't over yet.

The CDC has also advised that K-12 schools embrace universal masking among teachers, staff, visitors and students whether vaccinated or not, amid new data that show vaccinated people can still carry — and spread — large amounts of the virus. Kudos to systems like Baltimore County Public Schools for quickly adopting that standard for the fall, and Baltimore City Public School System for making the call before the CDC released its guidance. Given that children under age 12 aren't yet eligible for vaccination, this precaution seems prudent.

Americans can quibble about some of the fine print as much as they like. President Joe Biden's choice Thursday to mandate vaccination or regular testing, mask-wearing and social distancing for federal employees — a reversal of his

previous position that vaccination ought to be voluntary — makes a lot of sense under these changing circumstances. This won't be the first time that federal employees have been asked to model good behavior. Some private employers are following suit. We would encourage others to do so as well. The stakes are too high for Americans to be satisfied with a "you do you" approach to public health, anymore than we ought to accept traffic signals or speed limits as mere suggestions.

Yet resistance to mask wearing continues. At least nine states have banned local mask mandates. This is unconscionable. It's one thing to question the CDC about data regarding how often vaccinated individuals have tested positive for the delta variant, it's quite another to reject mask wearing out of hand as if the prospect of cloth or paper covering mouth and nose was an imposition beyond reason.