

# Opinion

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## EDITORIAL

# Mask mandate

Signs are prominently posted outside the Baker County Courthouse stating that face masks are required inside.

Yet on Wednesday morning, Dec. 15, of the 30 or so people gathered in a room in the Courthouse for a county commission meeting, just a couple were wearing masks.

The three commissioners — Bill Harvey, Mark Bennett and Bruce Nichols — were not.

A similar situation prevailed the night before at Baker City Hall, although the audience there was smaller and a few more people were wearing masks.

Neither Mayor Kerry McQuisten nor Councilors Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Heather Sells, Jason Spriet and Johnny Waggoner Sr. was wearing a mask.

The lack of compliance with the statewide mask mandate for indoor public spaces has been common throughout the fall in both of these venues and others. Mask compliance at the Baker High School gym has been spotty during basketball games.

Our elected officials should comply with the mask requirement, and ask that their audiences do the same, so long as those signs are posted.

To do otherwise is to imply that adherence to rules — any rule — is optional.

A dramatic contrast to the aforementioned examples is the Baker County Health Department, where staff and visitors — many of whom are, wisely, there to get a COVID-19 vaccine — wear masks.

That said, it is reasonable to ask whether the mask mandate, which Gov. Kate Brown imposed in August and which has been challenged but not legally overturned, is justified at this point in the pandemic.

Masks, and particularly the disposable type that most people wear, are hardly impermeable barriers. But they certainly don't hurt. And they can in some circumstances reduce the risk of transmitting the virus. Students and staff in Baker schools wear masks, and despite the somewhat confined conditions inside schools, there have been relatively few cases, and no evidence that the virus has spread in schools.

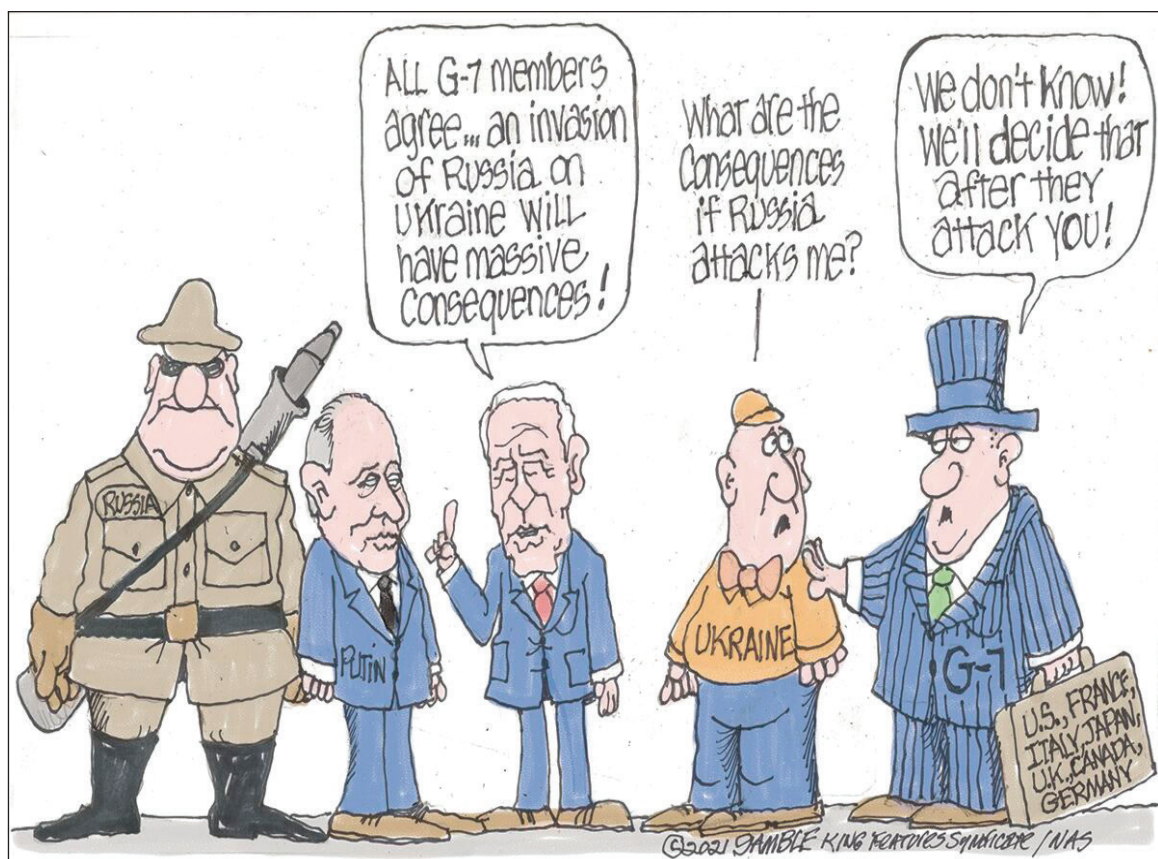
Yet even with the lackadaisical attitude toward mask wearing in some settings, there is no evidence, based on Oregon Health Authority data, that this has led to any outbreaks in Baker County. Case numbers in the county have been trending down since October.

The pandemic is not over, to be sure. Three more county residents have died this month after testing positive. Vaccination remains the best way to protect yourself — and, potentially, others — both from infection and, even more so, from severe sickness. And although 307 people received a booster dose during a three-day drive-thru clinic earlier this week in Baker City, the county's overall vaccination remains poor, lower than all but four of Oregon's 35 other counties.

Brown needs to carefully review the data, including taking into consideration the low mask compliance in places such as Baker County and the absence of a causal link to outbreaks in those places. The statistics might well show that continuing the mask mandate is no longer justified as a measure to thwart the virus.

But for now, the blatant contradiction between what the signs outside buildings state, and what's actually going on inside some of those buildings, is insulting to people who believe that one trait of a responsible citizen is to comply with regulations that are not onerous and have not been legally invalidated.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## OTHER VIEWS

# Assessing the true debt cost of 'Build Back Better'

### Editorial from The Detroit News:

The true cost of President Joe Biden's "Build Back Better" plan is emerging, and it isn't pretty. Nor is it fully paid for, as the president and Democrats contend.

The Congressional Budget Office last month issued a scoring on the plan that concluded it would add \$367 billion to the federal budget deficit over 10 years.

While certainly a lot of money, it wasn't horrible for a roughly \$2 trillion spending package.

But then Republicans asked for a redo. They wanted the CBO to score the bill under the assumption the myriad social spending programs it contains will require funding for the full 10-year life of the package.

The original scoring accepted the Democratic gimmick of funding certain programs for only a few years, and then assuming they will sunset.

Republicans, using history as their guide, contend the likelihood of entitlement programs going away is quite slim — it almost never happens. So they wanted the cost estimate to as-

sume the reality that taxpayers will have to cover the costs for at least a decade, and likely forever.

Using that more realistic assessment, the CBO pegged the amount of deficit spending over 10 years at \$3 trillion, and the true cost of Build Back Better at more than \$5 trillion.

That should make the bill a non-starter with any Democrat who purports to be a fiscal moderate.

Build Back Better would destroy the budget, greatly expand the national debt and, given its newly defined size, fuel an already soaring inflation rate.

The White House quickly dubbed the revised scoring as "fake." It contends the CBO did not factor in revenue the administration hopes to raise by expanding the size and power of the Internal Revenue Service so it can crack down on fraud.

The CBO doesn't include tax enforcement schemes in its scorings for good reason. They rarely deliver the promised revenue.

Still, Biden says if the CBO's estimated shortfall materializes, he'll find ways to cover it. But without specifying exactly where

that money will come from, the bill becomes too reckless to pass. It's almost absurd to think the administration can come up with an acceptable scheme to squeeze another \$3 trillion from the wealthy and corporations after pinching them for \$2 trillion to cover the original tab. If not, the only revenue avenue would then become the middle class.

House Democrats enthusiastically approved Build Back Better on a straight party-line vote before seeing the revised deficit numbers. The new information should be cause for a re-vote that puts Democrats on record of where they stand on approving \$3 trillion in unfunded spending.

It certainly should bolster Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona in their reluctance to put Build Back Better over the top in the Senate.

Democrats attempted to deceive the American people into accepting this huge step toward socialism with the big lie that it's "free" because it wouldn't add to the deficit.

That was never true, and it's even less so now.

## CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

**President Joe Biden:** The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov.

**U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley:** D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World

Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

**U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden:** D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La

Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

**U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District):** D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; walden.house.gov.

# A snow-sculpted tree invokes Christmas spirit

I had been searching in vain for the Christmas spirit but my quest ended in the instant I saw the tree, glistening in the glow of a street-light in the last hour before dawn.

I think it's a maple.

But the species is of no matter.

What drew my eyes, and touched my heart, was the sight of the leafless branches, frosted with a sheen of snow.

Against the backdrop of black sky, the soft diffused light from the streetlamp transformed the tree into sculpture.

At that moment, on the morning of Dec. 14 during my one-mile "commute" to work, the impending holiday finally felt real.

That tree, festooned with the first real snow of the season, had accomplished what the preceding two weeks, despite Christmas carols on my car radio and egg nog enriching my morning coffee, couldn't quite manage.

Such is the power of snow.

I had been waiting, with no small amount of frustration, for its

arrival, hoping that it might invigorate the seasonal spirit.

A few days earlier, with computer models portending potential accumulation in town, I watched for several hours, with escalating annoyance, as the desultory flurries failed to coalesce into the sort of shower needed to begin gracing the ground with white.

Late in the afternoon I drove for a dozen miles to take a hike in the hills near Phillips Reservoir, where fat flakes were falling in profusion, coating the windward faces of the ponderosas with a fluffy two inches.

The wintry scene there in the woods was appropriate for Christmas, certainly.

But even as I trudged through the snow, the soft flakes tickling my eyelashes when they landed, I couldn't quite muster that emotion, that feeling unique to this special season.

One evening I thought it would happen, when Bruce Springsteen's incomparable live version of "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town" was



JAYSON JACOBY

finally played on the radio while I was driving home.

(I especially like the bells, and Clarence Clemons' sax solo, and Bruce's giggling toward the end.)

But then I glanced at the instrument panel and saw that the outside temperature was 45, the product of a balmy south wind.

I struggle to think of Christmas unless the air is cold enough to make me wince slightly when I step outside, surrendering the artificial climate of a car or a building.

There was an surfeit of spirit during the Harvest Christian Academy's Christmas program on Sunday, Dec. 12. I went to watch my grandson, Brysen Weitz, who is 4, sing with his preschool classmates. The school's older students also performed a variety of songs and skits, all delivered with the

enthusiasm peculiar to youth.

I had an equally fine time eight days earlier, during the Chamber of Commerce's Christmas parade and tree-lighting ceremony on the evening of Dec. 4. I was especially gratified to see people gather on Main Street to watch the illuminated floats roll past, so many smiles, so much laughter. The excitement, no doubt inspired by the return of this beloved event after its cancellation in 2020, seemed to me as palpable as the warmth from the Baker Lions Club's burn barrels.

Yet the toasty air surrounding those receptacles, the flames flickering brightly, also seemed superfluous on a mild night that felt more like Halloween than Christmas.

Even as I reveled in the lights and the joviality, I missed the familiar crunch of boots stomping on snow, regretted that I didn't need to don my stocking cap, or to pull the zipper on my coat to the top to keep drafts from slipping their icy

fingers around my neck and slinking down my spine.

I don't mean to suggest, rather Grinch-like, that Christmas ought not to come unless there's snow.

This most magical season is not defined by the presence of frozen precipitation, any more than it is by the cynical ministrations of the marketers.

Whether the ground is white or bare, the squeal of a child as she peels back the wrapping paper is the purest sort of delight.

And whether the air outside is frigid or temperate, the familiar strains of the great holy carols always stir the soul with their themes of peace and goodwill, of family and faith.

Yet I can't help but feel beholden to the Currier & Ives version of Christmas. For me, snow, which can transform ordinary sights into majestic ones, also lends to this season an extra dollop of joy.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.