

EDITORIAL

‘Mandate’ a mostly misused word

The word “mandate” was mentioned many times during the Baker County commissioners’ work session Wednesday afternoon, Jan. 12, at the Baker County Events Center.

The word was used in reference to the executive orders Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has issued requiring people to wear masks in indoor public spaces, and some people to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

But this gathering was a blatant example of how the “mandate” for masks is hardly mandatory. Few of the 40 or so people in the audience wore a mask, even though the county’s announcement for the event stated that masks were required and that “all individuals in attendance at meetings under the control of Baker County are expected to comply with this rule.” As for vaccinations, affected employees in many agencies, including Baker City and the Baker 5J School District, were allowed to avoid inoculation by claiming a religious or medical exemption.

The ostensible topic of the work session was a request by a local group,

Baker County United, for commissioners to adopt a resolution declaring a “constitutional county.” Several speakers contend that such a resolution would give the county clout in flouting Brown’s mandates. It’s certainly reasonable to emphasize the importance of elected officials to fulfill their oath to uphold both the state and federal constitutions. But as Commissioner Bruce Nichols, who participated in the work session remotely, pointed out, the governor’s executive orders, however onerous and ineffective they might be, have so far withstood legal challenges. To defy those orders, Nichols believes, is to violate his oath. “I too do not like mandates, forced vaccinations, and the ongoing never-ending rules,” Nichols wrote, a comment that was read aloud during the work session.

At the same time that work session was going on, hundreds of students in Baker schools, and their teachers, were in classrooms, wearing masks. Some people who addressed commissioners criticized the mask requirement for schools. But medical experts say that

masks, though far from perfect protection, can potentially help reduce the spread of the virus. Masks certainly don’t hurt. And one thing is indisputable — Baker students have been in their classrooms for the entire school year so far. Which is where they ought to be, regardless of the pandemic.

Yet the biggest threat to continuing in-person school, as well as sports and other extracurricular activities, isn’t a government mandate. It’s the omicron variant, which, though less virulent than previous strains, is more infectious. More than a dozen school employees missed work on Jan. 12, some of them due to COVID-19 infection or exposure.

There’s reason to be optimistic that the current surge in infections won’t last as long as previous trends. And statistics show that omicron is less likely to cause severe illness or death — especially in people who are vaccinated. In that respect, omicron is similar to the delta variant. Brown seems to understand that, despite record numbers of cases this month, the situation isn’t so

dire as raw numbers might suggest. The governor hasn’t issued any new, restrictive executive orders in response to omicron.

And as the Jan. 12 work session made clear, individuals are still deciding whether or not to wear masks, never mind the governor’s putative “mandates.” The government isn’t sanctioning people for their decision, either.

But wearing a mask, in situations where doing so might reduce the risk of transmitting this virus, isn’t capitulation to a draconian government edict. Baker students and school staff aren’t supplicants — they’re doing what they can to keep schools going and, potentially, spare themselves and others from illness.

If the county doesn’t intend to enforce the mask “mandate,” then it ought to cease implying that it will do so by posting signs or stating, in announcing public events, that it expects attendees to comply.

— Jayson Jacoby,
Baker City Herald editor

YOUR VIEWS

Preserving the sanctity of voting crucial to democracy

Voting is a fundamental constitutional right, and the very basis of a democracy. If you truly champion democracy and our constitution, I encourage you to call national legislators and encourage them to support voting rights and safeguards. Everyone with the right to vote deserves the kind of safe, open and accessible voting we enjoy here in Oregon.

All of us deserve to have our vote counted and respected. State legislators should not have the power to overturn the vote of the people — that is not democracy.

I have been following an organization called RepresentUs since its inception. RepresentUs (at www.represent.us) brings together conservatives, progressives, and everyone in between to pass powerful laws that end corruption and fix our broken political system. They support fixing our election systems, stopping political bribery, and ending secret money. If we want a country by and for the people, we need to start by taking multinational corporations, foreign powers, “dark” money, and millionaires out of our voting processes. The Freedom to

Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act are important starting points for securing our democracy. Kudos to our Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden for supporting this important legislation and, especially to Senator Merkley for championing fair and secure elections.

Barbara O’Neal
Baker City

Thank you to Cpl. Dennis Lefever for helping a stranger

What a heartwarming “good deed” story told by the traveling stranger, Steve McKibben, involving a Baker County Sheriff Officer, Cpl. Dennis Lefever! Thank you, Cpl. Lefever, for being a good man, showing caring for a total stranger in need of help; for showing concern to do the right thing, for showing compassion to do even more! Thank you!

Cheryl and Richard
Gushman
Baker City

Why we’re opposed to ‘constitutional county’ proposal

My husband and I had planned to appear in person at the Wednesday, Jan. 12 Baker

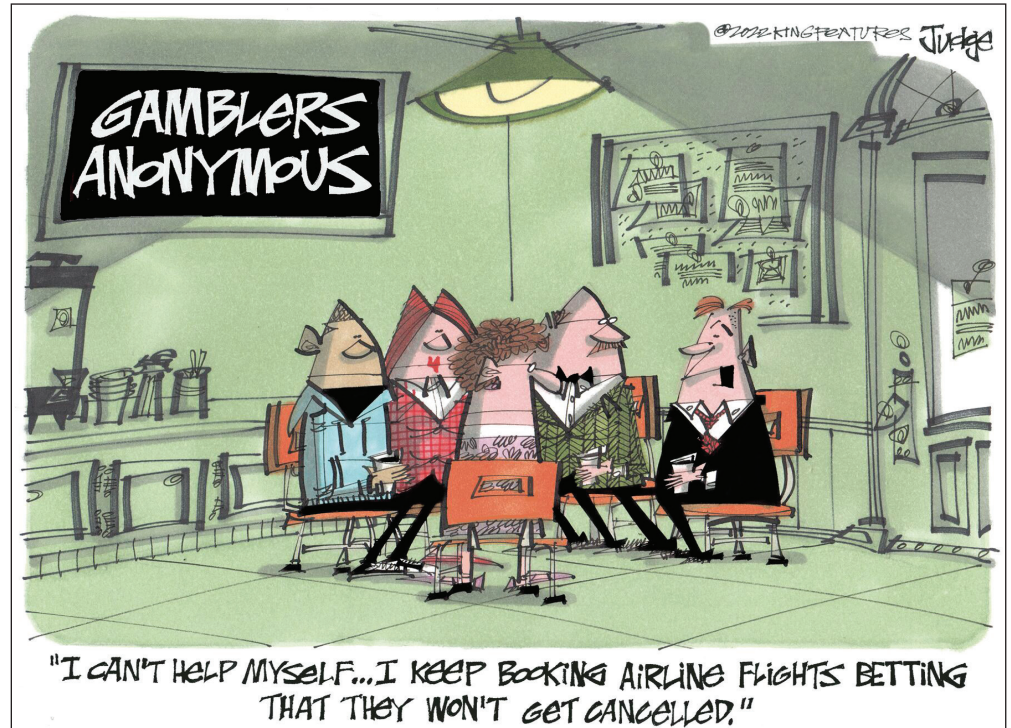
County Commissioners’ meeting where members of Baker County United (BCU) were to present a proposal to change Baker County into a “constitutional county.” None of the BCU members wore masks at the previous meeting so we sent our response by email. Here are our objections to changing Baker County into a “constitutional county”:

- We oppose the concept that “constitutional sheriffs” would have more power than our state and federal governments in determining laws affecting Baker County.

- The state and federal governments provide oversight that protects counties from being politically hijacked by a minority, fringe group with one view. BCU fits that profile.

- We are opposed to the following organizations: BCU; the County Sheriffs and Police Officers Association (CSPOA); and Oath Keepers. These groups are considered far right extremists with anti-government platforms by Southern Poverty Law Center. They believe state and federal governments are subordinate to the power of local “constitutional sheriffs.”

- We believe BCU should follow the required protocol



of obtaining signatures and creating a Charter before their proposal is allowed on the November ballot.

- Finally, we believe strongly in our state and federal Constitutions, the right for each person’s vote to count, the importance of opposing views, and, the necessity of the difficult process of compromise. In essence, we believe in our democracy.

Karen and David Andrus
New Bridge

Baker County needs to approve a constitutional county resolution

I was not able to attend the work session Jan. 12 because I had to work. But I want to make my voice heard to the Baker City Herald that I am absolutely behind the constitutional county resolution. We must have that resolution in place because the illegal and unconstitutional mandates, which I remind you are abso-

lutely not laws, are trampling on our rights in the guise of “it’s for your own good” rhetoric! If you are unfamiliar with history, I remind you that Hitler, Stalin, Mao and other dictators and murdering “leaders” did the same thing to control the people. Enough is enough! Landers County, Nevada, has already proven our cowardly commissioners wrong. We can and should follow their example!

Shannon Watt
Baker City

The simple pleasure of going to the movies

The epiphany arrived while I was lounging in a well-padded chair in the Eltrym Theater, watching Spider-Man soar around the Statue of Liberty, attached by gossamer threads.

Spider-Men, actually.

The latest film to feature the acrobatic arachnid-human hybrid superhero — “Spider-Man: No Way Home” — in fact boasts a trio, bringing together the three actors who have portrayed the character in the cinematic series — Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield and, most recently, Tom Holland.

I have seen only a few of the several films during their nearly two-decade run, but I’m familiar enough with the story to not feel especially befuddled as the plot progresses.

It was an entertaining movie that seemed to pass, as engrossing films do, much more rapidly than its running time of more than two and a half hours suggests.

My bladder, alas, which has considerably less patience than it did during its carefree youth, reminded me, with its customary urgency, about the soda I had guzzled even before the previews were finished.

(Ice-chilled and carbonated liquid being, of course, a necessary chaser when you’re gobbling the salty, slightly greasy popcorn without which no trip to the theater is complete.)

As I watched the three red-and-blue suited actors perform their

computer-aided heroics during the film’s predictably spectacular climax, it struck me, with a slightly jarring suddenness, that Baker City residents have been seeing similar rousing conclusions to big screen epics, in this very space, for the better part of a century.

The Eltrym opened on June 27, 1940, at the northwest corner of First Street and Valley Avenue.

Its unusual name, so unlike the Rios and Roxys and Rivaltos that littered smalltown American downtowns during the 20th century, honors Myrtle Buckmiller. With her husband, Frank, Myrtle planned the theater’s construction. Sadly, she didn’t see its grand opening. Myrtle — Eltrym is her name spelled backward — died on Jan. 3, 1940.

A building 81 years old is not, to be sure, especially ancient by the standards of Baker City, which dates to 1864.

Several venerable structures, including St. Francis de Sales Cathedral, the Geiser Grand Hotel, the Baker Tower, Baker City Hall and the Baker County Courthouse, are each older than the Eltrym — by several decades in some cases.

Like the Eltrym, all of those, with the exception of the Baker Tower (which I find difficult to refer to as anything but Hotel Baker), serve essentially the same functions today as when they were built.

Yet theaters, it seems to me, are different — unique even.



Jayson Jacoby

Movies are a shared experience — the residents of a remote city in Northeastern Oregon watch the same scenes as New Yorkers. The Baker City native might have precious little in common otherwise with the Manhattanite, but when they each settle into their respective seats, and the house lights dim, the 3,000 miles between them, and the perhaps even greater gulfs in their backgrounds and their futures, disappear in the glow of the images that appear on the screen.

It wasn’t this cultural bridge, though, that I was thinking of as I watched the Spider-Men defy gravity (and, indeed, logic, but of course the temporary suspension of reality is among the great attractions of the cinema).

Rather I was pondering all those years and decades that have passed since 1940, that purgatorial year between the start of the great cataclysm in Europe and America’s descent into the maelstrom.

I imagined, as I crumpled my popcorn bag, entombing the drift of unpopped kernels before my urge for one more savory mouthful left me with an aching molar, about how many thousands of people had sat where I was sitting. I thought about how many movies

they had watched, how many gasps of surprise at some plot twist, how many tears were shed during particularly poignant scenes, how many ounces of soda were expectorated during a comedic interlude.

(I have a distinct memory, while watching one of the “Austin Powers” movies at the Eltrym, of learning what it feels like to have 7-Up travel through the nasal passages. Cold. And tickly.)

The Eltrym’s history doesn’t quite extend back to the transition from silent films to “talkies,” but it’s close.

Most of the movies that are widely acclaimed as classics made their debut here, in the hinterlands of Oregon, just as they did in the great metropolises.

I imagine the marquee and all the titles that have appeared between its garishly colored lights, on warm summer nights and on winter evenings when the gleam struggled to penetrate the shifting flakes of a blizzard.

That one modest space, hanging over the sidewalk on the west side of First Street, marks the passage of time in its inimitable way, and welcomes us to come inside, where we know it will be dark and warm and smelling pleasantly of popcorn.

From “Citizen Kane,” which came out the year after the Eltrym opened, through “The Godfather” and “Star Wars” in the 1970s, “Harry Potter” a couple decades later, and so many

dozens of others, before and since.

(A movie scene which perfectly captures this concept is in “Field of Dreams,” when Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, is strolling the downtown of Chisholm, Minnesota, at night. The movie is set in 1988, but Kinsella realizes he has, as a person can do in the fictional world of film, gone back in time. First he sees a poster for Richard Nixon’s reelection campaign, and then the camera focuses on the theater marquee — the Plaza, alas, not nearly so interesting as the Eltrym — which is advertising “The Godfather.” Both place the scene indubitably in 1972.)

The small town theater is not so common today as it was in decades past, supplanted in some cases by anodyne suburban multiplexes that have all the architectural charm of an East German apartment complex, and in others by the inexorable changes in the economy.

Lucky we are that the Eltrym persists.

In this one building, generations have joined in a grand American tradition. And it’s a tradition which, unlike so much else which has been rendered obsolete by technology, in particular the digital sort, still bears its original name, so rich and so enticing in its possibilities.

Going to the movies.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the
Baker City Herald.