

## EDITORIAL

# Outlasting omicron

The early days of the pandemic can seem impossibly distant today, so much has happened in the nearly two years since the word “coronavirus” made its unwelcome intrusion into the worldwide lexicon.

Vaccines and breakthrough cases.

The delta variant arrived last summer, then retreated through the fall, only to be supplanted by the currently dominant omicron variant.

But in one important sense, the situation that prevailed in the spring of 2020 remains utterly relevant now. The pool of people in the U.S. for whom COVID-19 presents a significant risk of severe illness or death is not particularly deep. And it’s even shallower now, in the era of omicron, than it was five months ago when delta was spreading rapidly.

Experts, including Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center and professor of pediatrics in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, emphasize that a growing body of evidence shows that omicron typically results in less serious symptoms, regardless of age. Most importantly, omicron is less likely to affect the lungs, leading to potentially fatal pneumonia.

Statistics reflect this lower level of virulence.

Although omicron, because it’s much more infectious than any previous variant, has led to record numbers of COVID-19 cases across the nation — including in Baker County — the numbers of people who have died or needed treatment in a hospital have not risen in proportion.

Even in the early stages of the pandemic, health officials recognized that the virus was vastly more lethal to the elderly and to people with compromised immune systems or other health issues such as obesity, diabetes or pulmonary problems.

Those groups remain the most vulnerable, although omicron is less dangerous to them than delta and earlier variants were.

Moreover, as Offit noted in a recent interview, people of all ages who are vaccinated — and in particular those who have had a booster dose — have strong protection from severe illness if they contract omicron. That variant is more likely to cause breakthrough cases in vaccinated people, to be sure, but people who have a breakthrough infection are unlikely to get seriously ill. Many likely will have few if any symptoms. As has been the case for more than a year, vaccination remains a potent weapon against the most serious effects of COVID-19. It’s unfortunate that Baker County has the fifth-lowest vaccination rate among Oregon’s 36 counties.

People who are infected, including those who are vaccinated, can potentially spread the virus to that small minority of people who are more vulnerable. And just as was the case during the onset of the pandemic, we can blunt the effects of COVID-19 by striving to minimize potential exposure to the virus in that population.

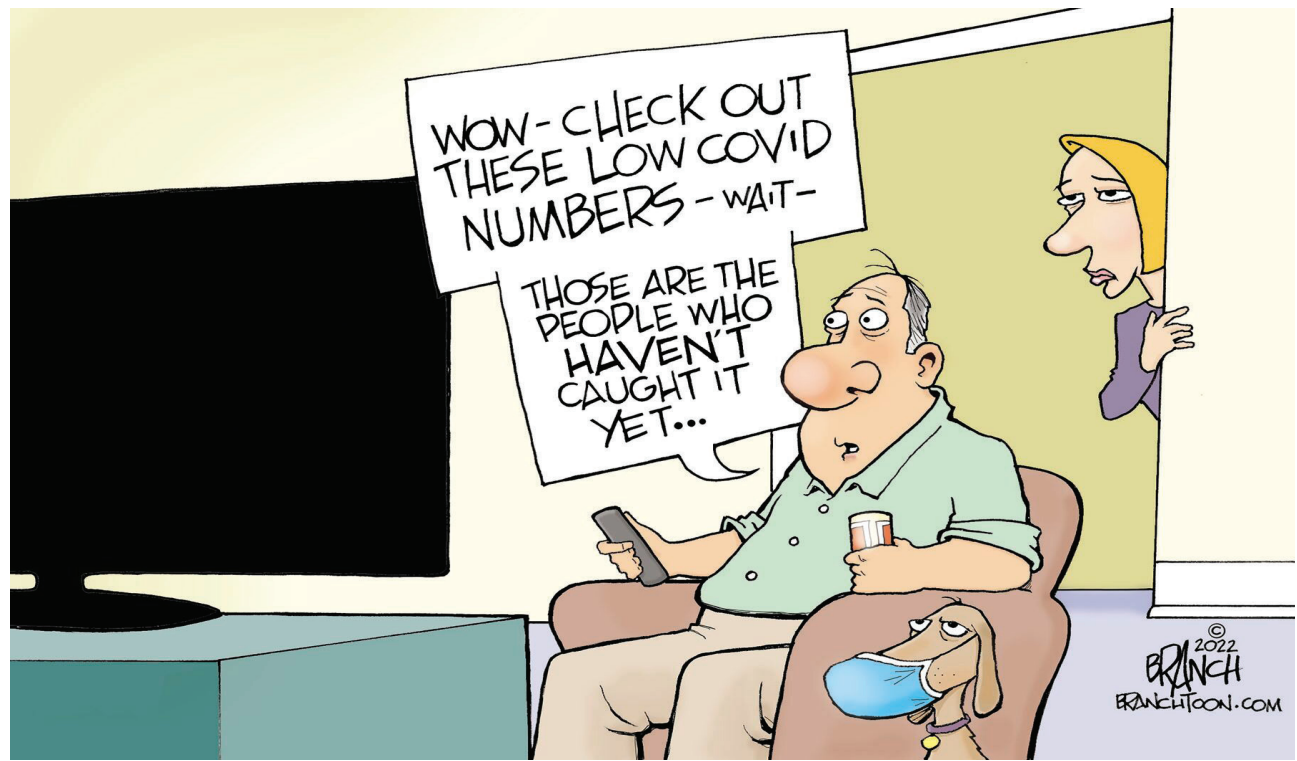
That means, among other things, that people who test positive need to be especially careful during the several days they’re potentially infectious, even though they probably will feel fine. This applies to children as well as adults. Children, who are even less vulnerable to severe illness from omicron than are healthy, vaccinated adults, are contributing greatly to the rapid rise in cases nationwide, with pediatric infections increasing by 78% the first week of January, according to American Academy of Pediatrics.

Quarantining, although a responsible precaution, has unfortunate effects, certainly, and ones we’re seeing now, as schools and businesses struggle to stay open due to worker shortages. But it’s far better that people stay home for a week, with at worst mild symptoms, than to increase to risk of infecting the relatively few among us who are at greater risk.

The positive news, besides the lower virulence of omicron, is that its rapid surge is likely to crest soon. Offit said in a recent interview that he expects the situation will improve considerably in a month or so.

In the meantime, omicron likely will continue to result in high case totals. But we have the ability to protect people who are at great risk, and the more successful we are, the more those numbers will be just statistics.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## YOUR VIEWS

### Letter about snowplowing insulted public works department

Referring to the letter to the editor dated Jan. 13. There is a need to set the record straight ... the week of Jan. 3, 2022, Baker City crews plowed snow from streets and picked up snow berms beginning at midnight Monday night. The midnight plow crew plowed that Monday midnight shift and then it became necessary to plow the downtown priority 1 streets again Wednesday at midnight. The berm crew continued to work midnight to 8 a.m. Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night, Thursday night and Friday night picking up snow from downtown priority 1 streets. Day shift crews plowed snow on priority 2 and 3 streets Tuesday and Wednesday. Snow conditions necessitated that priority 4 (neighborhood streets) be plowed. Zone E and then Zone A were selected for plowing Thursday and Friday to avoid their garbage pick-up day. Continuing to plow snow through the weekend would cost the city street department overtime wages. Every dollar that is spent on snow removal is money that is not available to crack fill, patch, chip seal and overlay streets. Not every citizen agrees with every decision that is made regarding street maintenance, but to make the unfounded and untrue accusation that city employees’ streets receive special treatment is an insult to my integrity and the professionalism of the Department.

Tom Fisk  
Baker City

### County shouldn’t be devoting time to ‘constitutional county’ idea

Baker County United (BCU) is known for its highly advertised attempt last fall to get property owners to withhold their November property tax payments, in order to coerce Baker County into defying state masking and vaccination mandates. The attempt failed miserably. BCU could not even get its own members to withhold their property tax payments, let alone the general public.

What else does the public know about BCU? I’ve tried to find out by visiting its website BakerCountyUnited.com. There you’ll read that BCU purports to represent “We the People.” BCU has commandeered that phrase from the first three words of the U.S. Constitution, which however refers to persons living in 1787. It certainly does not refer to BCU’s membership or anyone else living today.

Yet at public meetings BCU supporters repeatedly recite their mantra “We the People” “We the People” “We the People.” They tell our Baker County Commissioners that “We the People” are the ultimate authority in Baker County, therefore the Commissioners must do what BCU wants. And right now they insist upon adoption of a BCU-proposed Resolution, which, if passed, requires Baker County declare itself a “Constitutional County” and, in addition, requires that the County join the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association.

We can all agree that Baker County voters elected our Baker County Commissioners to represent ALL Baker County citizens, not just BCU supporters. So let’s count the numbers.

My rough estimate, given how few supporters showed up for BCU’s rally on Nov. 4, 2021, and at the recent Commission hearings on Dec. 15 and Jan. 12, is that BCU has about 150 supporters at most. By comparison, registered Baker County voters total about 13,000. Do the math and you discover that BCU with about 150 supporters is barely over 1% of the 13,000 registered voters.

BCU’s demanding that Baker County Commissioners adopt BCU’s Resolution is akin to “the tail wagging the dog.”

Given that fact, why are the Commissioners spending such an inordinate amount of time paying attention to the tail?

Gary Dielman  
Baker City

### Two items of legislation that deserve to be scrapped

There are two items of proposed leg-

islation, one federal and one state, which are bad and should find their way to the nearest trash can, not into law.

First, the bad proposed federal item is the River Democracy Act, sadly initiated by our Oregon Senators Wyden and Merkley. Thankfully it is opposed by U.S. Representative Cliff Bentz and our state Senator Findley and Representative Owens. The Oregon Cattlemen’s Association also opposes it, along with industry groups and several Eastern Oregon county commissions. The proposed bill would add some 4,700 miles of streams for protection like those already under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and would change buffers from ¼ mile to ½ mile wide along each bank, i.e., total width of 1 mile. The process for adding this additional stream mileage was that anyone could recommend their favorite stream or part thereof. Some of these could be very small waterways with only seasonal or ephemeral flow or even dry gulches. With the buffers, some 3 million acres of land would be added for protection but what that protection level means is questionable. Agencies would be required to develop extensive management plans for the additional areas. This appears to be another means of land grab/control and I question where it will end. Will the next step be “taking” all watershed areas in the name of stream protection but really more related to water control? This is dangerous because all land surface is watershed. It appears this might be a control strategy similar to WOTUS.

Second, the bad proposed state item is Initiative Petition (IP)-13, Abuse, Neglect, and Assault Exception Modification and Improvement Act. It’s basically a vegan measure to put stock growers (ranchers and farmers) out of business and end hunting, fishing, and similar activities that are significant in our Eastern Oregon lifestyles and livelihoods. Under this measure a person could only kill an animal in self-defense. An animal could only be butchered and used for food if it died of old age. Wouldn’t that make for a nice, tender steak? Animals could not be used in rodeos or similar exhibitions. Control of vermin and pests would not be allowed. This Initiative Petition failed to get on the ballot in 2021 from lack of petition signatures but no one thinks it will go away and it is not unique to Oregon. Colorado faced a similar measure in 2021. One would think this proposal is so crazy it would never be on the ballot or passed but we need to be on our guard.

These proposed measures are available online and I strongly encourage everyone to become knowledgeable of their details, oppose them, and tell our elected politicians to oppose them.

Jim Carnahan  
Baker City

### Snow berms can block gutters and lead to flooding

On the warmer days this time of year the street gutters should be running like rivers carrying snowmelt out of the neighborhoods and towards the Powder River. The engineers who first laid out the streets of Baker City did so with water drainage in mind. A good example of the city’s drainage system exists in the area of Spring Garden Avenue, East Street, Clark Street, and Auburn Avenue. All snowmelt on these streets drains down the gutters to Auburn Avenue and then west down Auburn Avenue toward the river. The deep ruts at Clark Street and Auburn Avenue are there as part of the drainage system.

The drainage system works perfectly unless snow is piled in the gutters. This year, the city snowplows came through and pushed two feet of snow and ice into the gutters, then it all melted a little then refroze. That is why we are already seeing a large amount of water at the Auburn Avenue/Clark Street intersection. The large snow berms create ice dams preventing drainage of the melting snow.

As long as there is snow and ice in the gutters the melt water goes nowhere except, eventually, the basements of residents.

It doesn’t look like the city is going to come through and solve the problem

by removing the snow berms created by city snowplows. Residents along these flooded streets are going to have to solve the problem themselves by clearing the snow and ice from the gutters in front of their houses. Get that water moving or expect it in your basements soon.

Brian Addison  
Baker City

### Constitution has served our nation well for more than 230 years

The County Commission is being asked to adopt a “Constitutional County” declaration. I’m a big fan of the U.S. Constitution, so I think it’s great to affirm our commitment to it. It has helped the United States to prosper and become a model for other democracies around the world. However, I don’t think that is what this proposal is all about.

In 1787, the Constitution was established in order to address the chaos that existed under the Articles of Confederation, which allowed each state to make up its own rules without a coordinated federal government. Under the Constitution each state, both the original ones and those joining later, has its own constitution in accordance with the federal document. The U.S. Constitution is the “supreme law of the land” and guides the relationships between national and state governments and the people they serve.

In short, our county and our state are already bound by the U.S. Constitution. In fact, federal, state and local officials take an oath to abide by the Constitution and the laws that flow from it. So the Constitutional County concept and a related Constitutional Sheriff proposal are, at best, redundant.

The specifics of this proposal present much greater problems. Propponents seem to want County Commissioners to take over judicial authority of interpreting and applying the Constitution and laws in order to address their specific concerns. That is, of course, not the Commission’s job.

We have over 230 years of history in developing and adapting our government to meet our needs in a changing world. Our founding fathers couldn’t foresee the ramifications of modern technology, scientific understanding, and social change, but they allowed for representative government, amendments, and independent courts to set our course.

Having counties take over the executive, legislative and judicial roles set out in state and federal constitutions can only lead to chaos, especially if elected leaders try to satisfy the demands of local or regional interest groups. Some people believe income taxes are unconstitutional or that people have the right to say anything they want in any setting. Others believe they have a right to enter state and federal buildings any time they want. Some believe federal or state vaccine mandates are needed, while other see them as unconstitutional. The list of contentious issues goes on and on. That’s why we need the Constitution. It allows elected representatives to make our laws and independent courts, selected by our elected representatives, to interpret them.

Changing laws, and especially the Constitution, can be a long and difficult process, as we’ve seen throughout our nation’s history. But, whether you or I agree with a particular position, there are ways to proceed in accordance with the Constitution and established law. We can’t just pick which laws we want to follow under our own interpretation. That approach didn’t work in 1776, and it won’t work now.

If proponents of a “constitutional county” are truly supportive of the Constitution, they need to respect and follow the path it lays out. They should not try to put local officials in a position beyond the scope of their office. That’s not fair to our officials, nor to the people who elected them, and it will undermine the value of our Constitution.

Mark Bogart  
Baker City