

EDITORIAL

Single-payer health plan's daunting price tag

Nothing may scare Oregonians away faster from the state moving to a single-payer health plan than big, fat new taxes.

And the state's Task Force on Universal Health Care is talking about ... big, fat new taxes.

Just how big and fat? Billions.

A new state income tax. A new payroll tax on businesses. And maybe even a new state sales tax.

The Legislature set up the task force to design a single-payer health care system. The government would create and run a system with promises of providing better care, coverage for all Oregonians and lower cost. Single payer means all the variety of benefits, policies and networks would go away and be replaced by government. Instead of paying health premiums or having an employer pay for coverage, taxes would be paid to the government.

People and employers are frustrated with rising health care costs. The new taxes may be less than what Oregonians effectively pay now. But there are no guarantees that single payer will be the cure everyone wanted. As imperfect as the health care system is, it is the devil Oregonians know. It is not some new devil with new taxes and change.

The state task force has a deadline of September to finalize its proposal. Then Oregonians will have something firmer they can covet or reject.

The task force needs to pick an assumption for how much the system will cost to run. The difference is in the billions. And the decision can lower or raise the proposed new taxes. A state consultant backed spending 6% on state administrative costs, so about \$3.5 billion in 2026 dollars. Some task force members believe the state can do it for less, perhaps 4%. But that 4% assumption is called "aspirational" in task force documents and is not supported by the state's actuarial analysis.

How should the new income tax on households work? Should there be a cap on the household contribution roughly in line with what the premium might be? Or should it be with no cap, so household contributions increase with income? With a cap, nobody would pay more than the projected cost of their coverage. Without a cap, it would work like a progressive tax and some households may pay several multiples of their projected coverage cost.

The task force needs to lay this out clearly for Oregonians. There is a good draft FAQ that answers many questions. There are many it doesn't, yet. Oregonians will need to know what they would pay in a new income tax. Oregonians will need to know what employers would be paying in a new payroll tax. And, is a new sales tax coming, too?

Give us the numbers. Justify them. Picking aspirational goals not supported by actuarial analysis may not help. Only with justified numbers can Oregonians decide it is good to essentially destroy private-sector health insurance jobs and increase government control for promises of better, cheaper care. Only then can Oregonians decide if they should leap from the devil they know and toward another who comes making promises.

You can tell the task force your thoughts by emailing jtfuhc.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov.

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"WE'RE CONSIDERING YOUR APPLICATION... WHY NOT BE PATIENT?"

OTHER VIEWS

Catastrophic cost of China's zero-COVID

BY JEREMY L. WALLACE

For two years, it seemed as though China's ruthless COVID-19 policy had paid off. After stumbling in its initial efforts to stem the pandemic, China's rulers fixed a simple numeric target — zero COVID cases — and made sure everyone knew they had to reach it. The results looked severe to Western eyes, but they stopped the virus's spread. They also gave China a propaganda victory, emboldening their claims that authoritarian governments could solve social problems better than liberal democracies, which in worrying too much about people's civil rights, ended up killing them instead.

Now, the costs of the China's rigidity are becoming apparent. New variants are much harder to control; more than half of China's largest cities have seen lockdowns. Weeks after its lockdown began, some in Shanghai remain trapped in their apartments indefinitely, with many growing increasingly angry and hungry. A slew of figures shows a cratering economy in April. China's refusal to change course demonstrates the weaknesses, not the strengths, of China's system. Once its leaders have settled on a number like zero, it's very hard for them to change.

Many Western observers rely on simplistic models of how China works. They imagine the Chinese government as a monolith, where leaders issue edicts that are flawlessly carried out by local agents. The reality is much messier. The Chinese state is a bewildering patchwork of bureaucratic fiefdoms, each run by petty tyrants trying to retain the favor of the party leadership, while pursuing their own self-interest.

China's leaders have managed their fractious underlings by giving them clear numeric targets. Central leaders set GDP growth targets for provincial officials, who then do the same for city leaders in their region, and so on with counties down the line. Promotions followed from strong performance on these metrics, demotions from failure.

For decades this limited quantified vision worked to produce strong GDP performance. But over time problems accumulated. The predictable result, as my research demonstrates, was that lower officials juked the stats. Some simply faked the numbers, and others used policies, such as boosting construction, that increased short-run GDP at the cost of mounting debts to fund vacant airports, little-used highways and empty buildings on the edge of shrinking cities. Such efforts to hit their targets happened because these officials had more reason to care about their superiors than the people their policies affected.

Fifteen years ago, China's then-premier Wen Jiabao laid out his concerns about what this system produced, calling China's economy "unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable." But even with all of the political changes that Xi Jinping has wrought, moving away from GDP targeting has proved elusive.

Now, we are seeing the same dynamic unfold with the zero-COVID policy.

The policy's key strength was its clear numeric target, which China's leaders used to measure their subordinates' performance. But this success has proved increasingly catastrophic. It has led officials to produce ques-

tionable numbers (the official death rate is ... remarkably low), to separate parents from their children, to withhold medical care from those with other ailments, and to confine citizens — with a food system near the breaking point — to try to achieve an increasingly impossible goal.

China's regime is trapped by its previous success. It has centered much of its propaganda on the superiority of zero-COVID and the Chinese system of rule. Altering the policy might be taken as an implicit admission that the Chinese model is not so successful after all. Hence the current situation, where China's local and national leaders probably realize that continuing the zero-COVID policy is a mistake, but no one feels secure enough to take the risk of fixing it.

One key lesson is that complex authoritarian systems such as China are less nimble than they seem at first sight. Numeric targets allow the central leadership to influence their underlings — but at the expense of giving them tunnel vision and the incentive to fudge the figures when they can. And sometimes, when the targets do succeed for a while, they become traps, tempting the regime to identify too closely with a measure that then leads it to adopt increasingly irrational policies even when reality demands change.

It's hard for China's leaders to relax the zero-COVID policy, even if they can see its destructive consequences.

■ *Jeremy L. Wallace, an associate professor of government at Cornell University, is the author of the forthcoming "Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Information, Ideology, and Authoritarianism in China."*

YOUR VIEWS

If we want to be heard, our votes can speak loudly

Bob is not a big talker, ask anyone that knows me. This has bugged me for a while so here goes: You hear it all the time "Salem does not listen to us, they ignore the rural east side of the state." "We should become part of Idaho." Why does Salem ignore us?"

Well, because we don't use our voice, using our voice doesn't mean writing our local paper, or having a local meeting with 60 friends, or grousing to our friends and neighbors.

Politicians hear votes, but Baker County is too lazy to bother to vote, in this last election 41.6% voted, that means out of every 10 people, five did not even return a ballot. That is terrible, we have a chance to tell Salem what we want and we can't be bothered, statewide only 31.8% voted.

I came from a state where you had to go downtown to register and to vote, you had to take time off work and stand in line at a polling place sometimes for hours and I voted every chance I got. I have lived in Baker County for 1/4 of my life and wish it had been longer. Here in Oregon if you go to the DMV you get sent a voter registration, all you have to choose is a party. We get a voter pamphlet mailed to us and have mail-in ballots, how much easier could it be? I vote every time I get a chance; for

the electric co-op board, even when the 5J school district has a survey I use my voice.

I congratulate our mayor for running for governor, and going after what she believes in. I have to say, 1,395 is a good number but more people voting surely would have increased that number. Now she can get back to helping our City Council run Baker City.

My wife and I moved to Oregon because I have always loved this state and want to finish my days here in Oregon.

Bob Ward
Baker City

America is foundering without its Christian foundation

It seems some people can't understand why this country is under such unrest. Let me give you a hint. For over 200 years the historical record is clear — America was built on Christian principles. What did the Founding Fathers believe that's lost today? They believed that a widespread faith in God was the true source of America's greatness. They would see today's war against Christianity by our government, our educational institutions, the media and throughout our popular culture as a grave threat to our America's survival as a free nation!

A few think to about, and there's much more. From David Josiah Brewer, associate justice, U.S. Supreme Court, 1892. "Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teaching of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise, and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian."

From George Washington. "It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and to humbly implore His protection and favor."

From Thomas Jefferson. "God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed the only firm basis, a conviction in the mind of the people that all these liberties are a gift of God? That they are not to be forgot or violated but with His wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever."

There is much more to say in defense of the truth, but out of room. In closing I want to let you who read this know the Founding Fathers must be turning over in their graves over what we the people and the churches have let this great and wonderful country come to.

Richard Fox
Baker City

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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