BAKER CITY Herald

Opinion

WRITE A LETTER
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EDITORIAL

Preserving farmland must be a priority

Mark Twain is credited with telling readers to buy land because, he warned, they aren't making more of it. Unfortunately, farmland sold too often is put to other uses and is lost forever.

A new report from the American Farmland Trust warns that the Pacific Northwest stands to lose more than half a million acres of farmland to urban sprawl by 2040 unless cities make smarter development choices.

Between 2000 and 2016 alone, roughly 11 million acres of farmland has been lost or fragmented by development.

Across the Northwest, as many as 527,185 acres of additional farmland may be lost to urban and low-density residential development by 2040 — particularly in rapidly growing metro areas around Puget Sound, Portland, Spokane and Boise.

Washington would be the hardest-hit state, losing 238,614 acres of farmland under the worst-case scenario. That is an area roughly 4½ times the size of Seattle.

Oregon would lose up to 142,267 acres of farmland, while Idaho would lose up to 146,304 acres.

Our own reporting has shown that when urban development moves into rural spaces more than farmland can be lost. As areas fall to other uses, the overall viability of the local ag infrastructure comes into jeopardy.

As fields give way to housing developments, conflicts between homeowners and farms increase. New residents don't like the dust and smells associated with farm production, and complain about farm machinery on the roads and trucks during harvest time.

And, as developments break up the landscape, farmers find it ever more difficult to move equipment from field to field.

We can't fault farm families for getting the highest value for their property. Where there are buyers, there will be sellers.

As an alternative to development, we favor easement programs that allow owners to sell their development rights and realize the market value of their land while preserving it for farming.

We encourage state legislatures to fund those types of programs while taking steps to rein in urban sprawl.

Preserving farmland must be a priority.

When developers look at farm and range land, they see "empty" spaces with nothing on it. They see parcels for subdivisions, apartment buildings, shopping malls and restaurants.

Farmland is far from empty. It provides the food that sustains us and the fiber that clothes us. It is a vital strategic resource. It is, as Thomas Jefferson said, the wealth of the nation.

Farmland is more than just a patch of ground with stuff planted on it. Once paved over and developed, it cannot be replaced.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.

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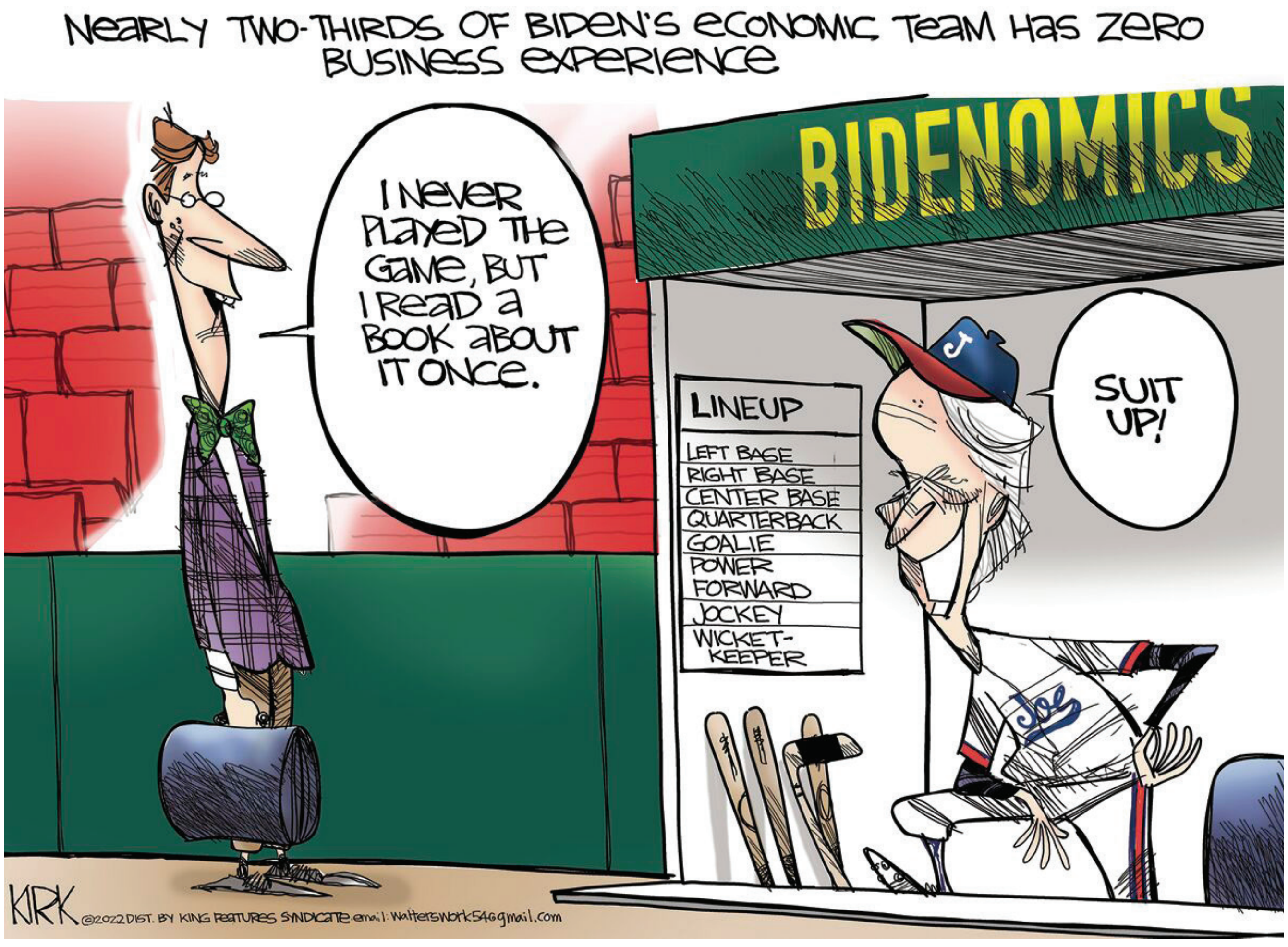

COLUMN

Inflating the health of the labor market

BY RACHEL GRESZLER

Between out-of-control inflation, ongoing supply-chain struggles, the crisis at the southern border, foreign policy concerns, exploding energy prices, rising crime and a high likelihood that the country is either already or soon will be experiencing stagflation (an inflationary recession), it's no wonder that Democrats and the Biden administration are talking up the strong labor market.

A recent tweet on the Democrats' official Twitter page stated, "Under @JoeBiden, the private sector has recovered all of the jobs lost during the pandemic — and added jobs on top of that."

For starters, that statement is only half true, at best.

According to the official jobs numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, private-sector jobs are up by about 140,000 since the low in April 2020, but only four in 10 of those job gains occurred on the Biden administration's watch, while six in 10 were recovered during the Trump administration.

But that's just private-sector jobs. There are 755,000 fewer people employed today than at the start of the pandemic, despite a 4.2 million increase in the population of people ages 16 and older.

If the employment-to-population ratio were the same as it was prior to the pandemic, in February 2020, 3.3 million more people would be working today. Moreover, economists estimate that a decline in the desired hours of work has roughly doubled the magnitude of the labor force decline.

While the labor market appears to be going well by some metrics, that's not the whole story.

The unprecedented labor shortage has caused huge struggles for employers, and all sorts of problems for ordinary Americans, including canceled flights, unopened community pools, delayed deliveries, overcrowded emergency rooms and reduced public safety.

Metrics like a nearly half-century low unemployment rate, high nominal wage gains and 11.3 million job openings that equal two jobs available for every unemployed person didn't arise naturally. Rather, they were artificially induced through bad government policies that have included a lot of unintended consequences.

Most significantly, 18 months' worth of bonus unemployment benefits that paid most people more to stay on the sidelines than to work caused millions of people to leave the labor market. Meanwhile, Washington stimulated consumer and business demand for goods and services by flooding the economy with trillions of dollars in so-called COVID-19 relief — about half of which was money printed by the Federal Reserve.

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Too few workers is also adding to the inflationary cycle.

When employers have to compete for workers, they have to increase their compensation. According to the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) survey, 48 percent of owners reported increasing compensation in June and 28 percent said they plan to increase compensation over the next three months.

But paying workers more to do the exact same thing requires hiking prices, and as the NFIB report states, "These rising labor costs will be passed on to consumers through higher selling prices, which are being raised at a record pace," with 69 percent of employers reporting increased prices in June.

Yet, despite a $3,100 increase in the average full-time worker's paycheck over the past year, inflation has eaten away $5,300 of value, leaving him $2,200 poorer.

And the future isn't looking good. Small business owners' expectations for better business conditions reached an all-time low in June, owing to "inflation and worker shortages," along with "policy talks that [have] shifted to tax increases and more regulations."

Government policies to spend more, tax more, regulate more and produce less will only make labor shortages and inflation worse.

If lawmakers want to be able to tout metrics like increased labor force participation and real rising wages, they should start by removing the government-imposed barriers they've created for work and productivity.

■ *Rachel Greszler is a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation's Grover M. Hermann Center for the Federal Budget.*

OTHER VIEWS

Virus, and indifference, are on the rise again

EDITORIAL FROM THE BALTIMORE SUN:

Given the latest surge in COVID-19 cases — thanks to omicron subvariant BA.5, deemed the most transmissible yet — and the relatively new threat posed by monkeypox, which has been spreading globally since May, one might expect the public health establishment to be asking for heightened precautions or at least vigilance.

One would be wrong.

Has it been judged too early for warnings? Is there a new wariness over causing too much alarm over too little infection? Is it an acknowledgment that pandemic fatigue has left the public highly skeptical? Whatever the reason, the usual suspects from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to Baltimore's own Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health aren't exactly clanging the alarm bells of late.

Is that the right call? Given the general public's current reluctance to stick to the basic precaution of wearing masks indoors as COVID continues, it feels suspiciously like a truce, if not a surrender. Where have you gone Anthony Fauci? When last we heard, President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser was telling reporters to take the monkeypox virus seriously and called for more testing of it, suspecting that the nearly 2,000 probable or confirmed cases in the United States were an "undercount." But an aggressive push to warn the public, at least beyond the gay community where most monkeypox cases have been traced to date? Not crickets exactly, but hardly the kind of warnings heard early in the COVID pandemic. While monkeypox is rarely lethal, the sores it causes are painful, and the virus is evolving fast.

Nobody is ever going to claim that the U.S. response to the pandemic has been perfect to date. Far from it. But we're not sure what's worse, a public health establishment that acts too aggressively in the face of one or more diseases, or one that prefers to sit on its hands.

Meanwhile, BA.5 remains on the upswing in Maryland and elsewhere. The CDC reports an average of more than 126,000 new COVID cases per day and more than 6,000 new hospital admissions, both of which are up significantly from one month earlier — and that's with substantially less testing than at the height of the pandemic. Yet how many people are still wearing their masks to the grocery store? Maybe one-third? One-quarter? Less? Even checkout clerks dealing with hundreds of customers each day are going without.

Indeed, how many politically conservative candidates for public office are at this exact moment running on a platform of promises to not return to COVID precautions? In Maryland, for example, the leading Republican candidates for governor went into the primary election on Tuesday with dueling ads promising that "lockdowns" would be a thing of the past under their administrations. Really? They can see into the future? What's next, a promise never to vaccinate? To never declare a public health emergency? To toss the mask supply just in case we're tempted?

Nobody is ever going to claim that the U.S. response to the pandemic has been perfect to date. Far from it. But we're not sure what's worse, a public health establishment that acts too aggressively in the face of one or more diseases, or one that prefers to sit on its hands. The former may get a lot of criticism for slowing the economy unnecessarily but the latter is likely to allow more Americans to become sick and possibly die (while new daily deaths average in the 300s, it was just a few months ago that they were numbering several thousand). That's a Hobson's choice. And illness is not without consequence, either. Aside from the risk of long COVID, quarantining and taking time off from work affects families, vacation plans and the economy.

Let's remove this from politics and judge the circumstances strictly on the science, which means it's not yet time to completely lower our defenses. This is not the moment to shun masks and join indoor crowds and generally throw caution to the wind. Get your shots (including boosters) and wear properly-fitted masks inside among crowds.

None of this seems too much to ask — if our public health leaders would please keep asking for it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters.
- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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