

## EDITORIAL

## Should the state make a road user fee mandatory?

Oregon was the first state with a gas tax to pay for roads. It was 1 cent a gallon in 1919.

And now the Oregon Department of Transportation wants Oregon to be one of the first states to move to a road-user fee to pay for roads. You would pay for how many miles you drive.

Gas tax revenue is dropping as cars and trucks are becoming more fuel efficient and many are electric. Kris Strickler, ODOT's director, told The Bulletin's editorial board recently that by 2029 money to maintain roads and to staff DMV offices is predicted to fall off a financial cliff. ODOT could face a shortfall in the hundreds of millions.

Strickler says there will be a bill in the 2023 legislative session to make the road-user fee program mandatory. The start date might be put off to build public awareness and allow the state to ramp up its program.

This issue has come up in recent legislative sessions with bills that would have made the program mandatory for vehicles that average more than 30 miles per gallon.

ODOT's argument is that they do the same amount of wear and tear on the roads as other similar vehicles.

ODOT has an existing voluntary program called OReGO.

Participants pay 1.9 cents per mile that they drive on Oregon roads. One big concern has been privacy.

A vehicle's "location information is never disclosed to anyone but you," ODOT says.

It is only used to determine the number of miles driven on public Oregon roads.

And participants get a fuel tax credit for fuel taxes they pay.

More details about the program are available here, myorego.org.

Tell your legislator what you think about this possible change.

■ 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.



## YOUR VIEWS

## Alderson would bring fresh perspective to the county

We support Shane Alderson for the County Commissioner position. We've had several meetings with Shane over the past two months. He is honest about what he doesn't know, eager to seek advice from various sources, does not carry a tired agenda from the past and is sincerely concerned about the best interests of Baker County. His time on the City Council has seasoned him and shown the public that he is willing to go against the status quo when it's smart, necessary, and in the best interests of those he represents. I've thoroughly vetted him on agriculture, public lands and water issues and I know that he will represent the local ranching, mining, and recreation communities strongly.

Don't throw away a vote for narrowly focused candidates carrying someone else's tired, old agenda. Give your vote to Shane Alderson and bring some fresh, honest, and independent solutions to Baker County.

John and Molly Wilson  
Baker City

## Alderson will work on behalf of all county residents

I'm writing in support of Shane Alderson for the position of county commissioner. I first met Shane more than 25 years ago when I was the Criminal Investigations Division Sergeant for the Oregon State Police here in Baker (now retired). One day a young man came in to our office wanting information about the State Police. Turns out it was Shane. He introduced himself and said he wanted to get more information about law enforcement in Eastern Oregon. Particularly city, county, state responsibilities related to jurisdictions. We had a great conversation and I was impressed with the fact that a young man had taken interest in an area that he admitted he was unfamiliar with. My recollection of our meeting at the time is that he just wanted to learn more about law enforcement in his community.

Fast forward to today. I recently took the opportunity, having not spoken with Shane for many years, to contact him and inquire about his running for the position of County Chair and what his goals were for that position. I was again impressed. His desire to serve the community and what he had staked out as important issues that benefited ALL the residents of our community was appreciated.

Especially gratifying was the fact that his primary goal, if elected, was to concentrate on soliciting information from all county residents to address everyone's concerns about the future of our community. He laid out a number of issues that he felt were important. He emphasized the

items identified to address are both immediate and long term. During our conversation he didn't engage in platitudes and pat answers for what he thought I wanted to hear but rather what he wanted to accomplish. He focused on the need for facts and evidence which can be acted upon at the county level. Not engaging in superfluous issues that can't be addressed under the authority of the County Commissioners. He spoke of the importance of developing and maintaining good relations with representatives from local, state and federal authorities operating within our community and the fact that those relationships are necessary and need to be strengthened for the benefit of our community.

Shane said his goals are to focus on issues that affect everyone within our county. He plans to encourage department heads to gather feedback from the community and forward that information to him so as to better be able to have a finger on the pulse of what the community feels about their government. Shane expressed his desire to solicit ideas and solutions from everyone in the county regardless of differences of opinion, political persuasion, or ideologies. He recognizes that the issues and ideologies that make local governing more difficult than is necessary can be mitigated or avoided by solicitation of the variety of viewpoints and a collaborative effort to address those problems.

Now, more than any time that I can remember, the need for clear thinking and collaborative solutions to the myriad problems facing local governments is an absolute necessity. Shane's thoughtfulness and his dedication to Baker County citizens and the issues we face now and in the future is an example we should all support. Please join me in casting your vote for Shane Alderson for County Commissioner.

Randy Crutcher  
Baker City

## Hypocrisy in attitude toward federal government

After reading the Opinion column in the Oct. 22 edition and the item on the front page, I came away with a couple of thoughts. Is it a little hypocritical to voice so much discontent against the federal government for meddling in county business, even going so far as to agree to discuss forming a Constitutional County. Then be overjoyed to receive a gift from Uncle Sam of over 6 million dollars to aid with recovery from COVID-19, which by the way was even described as a hoax by some. The grant allowed the county to use the funds for nearly any reason. I suggest there are so many better ways to use this money than to bail the county out of land purchases. So many businesses had to

take out loans to stay in business, schools need to make so many improvements for air quality and lunchrooms, and clean water, I could go on and on, but you get the idea.

Secondly, I would like to extend a shout out to Mr. Rick Meis from Halfway, who has reminded us all that we should look at the abilities of the candidate, not his party affiliation when we cast a vote for those we choose to represent us.

Don Worley  
Baker City

## Why I'm voting no on Baker Rural Fire District tax levy

Vote no on the Baker Rural Fire increased tax levy.

I was a member of this Fire District for several years until the board pulled several stunts to the detriment of the department and District as a whole.

The present leadership and the majority of the board have practiced bad management to the extent that the vast majority of the firefighters have resigned. This department has not been able to respond to emergencies with qualified personnel for the last several years, and it's getting worse! It has reduced the probability of the city and other departments in the county's willingness to respond to emergencies within this district.

The board has mismanaged the budget by purchasing dilapidated equipment from acquaintances (tenders) and depleted the budget enough to now require these additional funds to operate rewarding mismanagement is not logical.

The new station that was just purchased is in a physical location that eliminated several properties up Salmon Creek to be covered by the insurance companies, the ISO (insurance services organization) requires a station within five miles of the property. This station does benefit the city fire department, and the district and is very nice, but do we really need it? And the additional cost? The newer Chief is now paid, and has obligated the Baker Rural department to all of sudden be required to pay state PERS.

The department has failed to follow state law and does not publish or post its budget for the taxpayers to read or comment on.

These factors along with other examples of bad management requires additional funds to keep to the same amateurish path during these inflationary times.

Please do not enable this department to increase the amount of taxes it misspends. It's time to stop this local government's negligent behavior!

Addison Johnson  
Baker City

## COLUMN

## Stoking unnecessary fear over COVID variants

BY LISA JARVIS

Some rather alarming headlines recently circulated about the newest members of the omicron family. "Nightmare COVID variant?" read one. "The most immune-evasive COVID variants yet?" Or, as one would-be pandemic influencer said in a tweet shared thousands of times: "MOTHER OF GOD... #COVID variants worse than CDC has been admitting."

Apparently, it's spooky season for COVID variants.

Or not. These fear-mongering headlines and viral all-caps tweets are counterproductive. They confuse and mislead the public about the dangers of the new omicron descendants. Worse, they potentially undermine a critical message: COVID vaccines still provide good protection against all of these variants.

Much of the recent hubbub arose because the Centers for Disease Control updated its estimates of circulating variants, noting that two — BQ.1 and BQ.1.1, both descendants of the by-now familiar BA.5 — combined now account for about 11% of infec-

tions in the U.S. That's up from less than 1% a month ago. Meanwhile, a variant called XBB has been making inroads in Asia.

The reason for the panicked headlines is that these new omicron family members are capable of "immune escape" — a phrase that sounds very scary when taken out of context. It makes it sound as if the virus has evolved past our currently available tools.

In reality, the virus has mutated in a way that allows it to get around some of the front lines of our immune defense system, our neutralizing antibodies. The world has paid a lot of attention to neutralizing antibodies over the past two years because they are easy to measure, and thus became a proxy for vaccine effectiveness.

But our immune response is far more nuanced than neutralizing antibodies alone, particularly given how much of the population has been both vaccinated and infected with some earlier form of omicron, says Jeremy Kamil, virologist and professor of microbiology and immunology at Louisiana State University Health

Shreveport. Vaccinated and previously infected people have other robust and still-intact lines of defense, such as memory T-cells and B-cells. People as previously infected also have additional immune cells that reside in the respiratory tract.

"I'm not a fan of that word 'escape.' I think a better word is 'erosion,'" says Katelyn Jetelina, author of the popular newsletter Your Local Epidemiologist. "This isn't a binary that the vaccines will work or not work. In reality, it's a spectrum of effectiveness."

In the end, all of this means that the new variants popping up might mean we see more virus transmission — and more infections. But the shots still do a good job keeping people safe from severe infections, hospitalizations and death.

That important message could get lost in the mix of panicked headlines about variants. That's particularly dangerous when enthusiasm for COVID shots is so low — as of early this month, only 14.8 million people in the US had received the updated bivalent shot. That's less than 7% of the more than 226 million Americans

who are eligible for the booster.

The other piece of the story that is too often overlooked is that these new omicron variants can still be combated with Pfizer's antiviral Paxlovid. The drug targets a part of the virus that has remained fairly steady even as the virus has changed, and is shown to be effective at preventing serious cases of the disease — particularly in unvaccinated and older populations.

However, there is one reason to be concerned about BQ.1, BQ.1.1 and XBB. These new variants threaten to disarm the last two effective monoclonal antibody therapies, AstraZeneca's Evusheld (used to prevent infection) and Lilly's bebtelovimab (used to treat infections). The drugs have been important tools to protect immunocompromised people and others at high risk of serious disease. Companies are working on updated antibodies and the Food and Drug Administration must continue to speed them through emergency use authorizations (and Congress could ensure companies continue to be incentivized to keep developing and manufacturing these drugs by allocating more

COVID funding).

So when do we worry? Those alarmist headlines might be justified if an entirely new branch in the SARS-CoV-2 family tree emerges — one that pairs the deadliness of delta or beta variants with the transmissibility of omicron. That's not nearly as likely as a scenario where more omicron-like variants continue to emerge, but given the twists and turns this virus has taken, "We have to remain humble," Jelina says.

And in the meantime, Kamil says that if you're someone who hasn't had either COVID or a booster shot in the past six months, now would be a good time to go get one. Based on what other countries are already seeing, a winter wave driven by one or several of these variants is likely to materialize. But that will only result in another wave of deaths if we stop trusting our still-good defenses.

■ Lisa Jarvis is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering biotech, health care and the pharmaceutical industry. Previously, she was executive editor of Chemical & Engineering News.