

Bend's vote about downtown's future

These are the pandemic times and they have been tough. Downtown Bend is far from the only place that has suffered, but going downtown has been downright spooky over the past year.

All the things that made it a magnificent downtown are not back, yet. It's been coming back even with the latest COVID-19 restrictions.

Downtown could still decline. It takes investment to keep it appealing. Most of that comes from the businesses and property owners downtown and also from the Downtown Bend Business Association.

The Bend City Council this week is scheduled to make an important decision about downtown. It will vote on whether to take another formal step in approving an economic improvement district. There's basically been a downtown improvement district since 2006. It did briefly dissolve at one point because of a mistake in how it was adopted.

It's an unusual tax zone. Only property owners in downtown get to vote. It's essentially the property owners downtown deciding if they want to tax themselves to help improve the look of downtown.

It would be a three-year tax. The tax would be 25 cents per square foot in the first year and that would increase by 1 cent in each of the next two years. The estimate is it would

raise about \$269,000 in the first year. Almost all of the money — 95% — goes to the downtown business association. The city keeps the remaining 5% for administrative costs.

The money goes to ensuring downtown keeps looking good — tree lighting and other decorations, banners, graffiti removal and more basic upkeep. The DBBA is also a strong advocate for downtown businesses.

The odd thing about it is when the election is held it isn't really majority rule. If owners of more than one-third of the property in the district submit written objections to the district, it fails.

Business owners have been trying every idea imaginable to stay open during the pandemic. They can't do it alone. They need your help by shopping local.

We do think that the business owners downtown could benefit again from what the downtown business association does. The Downtown Bend Business Association gives people more reason to come downtown, which is good for property values, businesses, the city and the people of Bend.

COVID-19 transparency bill should be passed

Oregon state Sen. Mike Dembrow, D-Portland, has been noisy about the need for the Oregon Health Authority to be transparent about the COVID-19 data it releases.

His bill, Senate Bill 719, would ensure that transparency. And though the bill should have long since passed the Legislature, it would seem to be in good hands. It's in the committee Dembrow chairs, joint ways and means.

The central premise of Oregon's public records law is that the public has a right to know what its government is doing. Meetings are open to the public. Government documents and the data behind them should be open to the public if requested.

As good as Oregon's law is, it teems with exceptions. One is for public health investigations, Oregon Revised Statutes 433.008. It reads in part: "information obtained by the Oregon Health Authority or a local public health administrator in the course of an investigation of a reportable disease or disease outbreak

is confidential and is exempt from disclosure." So when journalists and others have requested information about testing rates by ZIP code for instance, the request was denied.

ORS 433.008 doesn't mean that the information must be denied to the public. It means it can be denied. And when government can deny the public information, it often does.

Dembrow's bill simply requires the Oregon Health Authority or local public health administrator to release aggregate information about reportable disease investigations that does not identify individual cases or sources of information after receiving a public records request. This would not only apply to COVID-19. It would also apply to salmonella and E. coli outbreaks.

State officials are trying to encourage Oregonians to get vaccinated and continue to obey COVID restrictions and guidelines. It would send the wrong signal for the Legislature to now tell Oregonians: "Let's keep the secrecy" and not pass this bill.



THEY SAY DELAYED REFUNDS, BUT I SAY THEY'RE HOLDING OUR MONEY HOSTAGE

Anne Ness for Deschutes library board

BY ANNE NESS

My name is Anne Ness, and I am a candidate for the library board in Zone 3 representing southern Deschutes County. I am running because I firmly believe in the value of building strong and supportive communities. Not only was I a teacher for over 30 years, but I have served on a school board, volunteered for various literacy organizations and am currently an advocate for children in foster care. It is through these experiences that I see first hand the critical role accessible local libraries play in growing and supporting our communities. People come to the library looking for information, but they find each other. The best place to make these important connections is at the local level.

The library raised over \$200 million dollars from the bond passed in November. The library's proposed expansion plan will spend 60% of those dollars to build one new library located in north Bend. At the same time the plan budgets just 1% for each of the branch libraries in our district to make renovations and upgrades. I am concerned that the emphasis on building the new library, both in terms of dollars and programming, overshadows the need

to grow and support our community branch libraries.

In talking with neighbors and community members I hear many of these same concerns. I find that many people did not vote in support of the bond, not because they don't value libraries, but because they value and

use the library in their community and want to see their tax dollars put to use at the local level.

In looking at the November election data I found that of the 11 precincts in Zone 3, only four voted in support of the library bond — seven precincts did not. I think this is saying residents in the south county are looking at libraries from a local community perspective. For people living in the Sunriver and La Pine areas it would be a 50- to 60-mile round trip to use the new central library. I wonder how often people would be willing and able to do so.

Libraries, being the center of our communities, are great equalizers. They have the ability to lessen the growing divide between the fortunate and those with different life circumstance. Libraries bridge this gap by providing needed technology, inter-



Ness

net and resources for all community members — especially our children, older adults, the disabled and disadvantaged. In order to bridge this divide, libraries need to be easily accessible and well equipped.

South county is growing and will continue to grow in the years to come. The bond gives the library the opportunity to make a real investment in all libraries and not in just one central location.

The focus of the library's expansion plans needs to change. I support revising the library's plan to ensure we do more for our branch libraries. This would include allocating sufficient funds to provide our libraries with the innovations, resources, technology and space required to equitably meet the needs of our growing county in the years to come.

I care about our communities. I want our community branch libraries to have the ability to provide the technology and resources needed to grow the communities in the south county. Your vote and support for a position on the library board will give me the opportunity to champion equitably growing our community branch libraries.

More information is available at www.anneness4library.com.

■ Anne Ness is a candidate for the Deschutes Public Library Board, representing Zone 3, which is southern Deschutes County.

Letters policy

We welcome your letters. Letters should be limited to one issue, contain no more than 250 words and include the writer's signature, phone number and address for verification. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject poetry, personal attacks, form letters, letters submitted elsewhere and those appropriate for other sections of The Bulletin. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

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Your submissions should be between 550 and 650 words; they must be signed; and they must include the writer's phone number and address for verification. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those submitted elsewhere. Locally submitted columns alternate with national columns and commentaries. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

How to submit

Please address your submission to either My Nickel's Worth or Guest Column and mail, fax or email it to The Bulletin. Email submissions are preferred.

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Businesses could sorely use guidance — so where is the CDC?

BY SHANTANU NUNDY AND MARTY MAKARY

Special to The Washington Post

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finally released guidance last week allowing vaccinated people to remove masks while outside, nearly five months after vaccines started to become available nationwide. This comes weeks after the CDC said vaccinated Americans can board an airplane. But noticeably absent from these piecemeal recommendations is any guidance on the big question facing businesses: When and how should they bring employees back to the office? It's a question with big implications for the livelihoods of many Americans and the economy.

In the absence of CDC leadership, companies are scrambling to figure it out on their own. It's the Wild West. Salesforce announced in mid-April a phased plan in which fully vaccinated employees can voluntarily return to the office subject to safety protocols, including twice weekly on-site coronavirus testing. JP Morgan also recently announced it will open its U.S. offices to all employees in May and apply a 50% occupancy cap. But why is every business being forced to invent the wheel on its own?

Large companies are hiring high-paid medical consultants, but companies without the resources to seek such advice are stuck trying to sense the direction of the wind. The hardest



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When should businesses bring workers back to the office? Why isn't the CDC providing guidance?

blows are to small businesses, especially minority- or woman-owned companies. These are also the businesses at greatest risk of bankruptcy if they get the timing wrong.

Public health officials should not only quickly address this need, but also tailor their guidance to the type of employee. Utility workers or groundskeepers should not have to wear a mask when working alone outside on a hot summer day even if they chose not to get vaccinated.

Having such a mask requirement is incompatible with science, ethically wrong and potentially harmful to the worker. Conversely, a non-immune office worker should wear a mask indoors until the local infection rate drops below a preset threshold. The country is looking to the CDC for guidance; its delay in providing it is slowing down America's economic engine.

Without medical answers, business leaders will be forced to use public opinion as their compass. But this approach makes businesses dependent on a distorted perception of infection risk that fluctuates based on media headlines about new strains of the virus and political rhetoric rather than best medical practices. In fact, business plans to bring back workers thus far sometimes resort to over-testing for those already immune, which is not grounded in data or clinical wisdom.

The lack of CDC guidance also transfers legal risk to businesses. Clear guidance would consider criteria such as the percent of residents vaccinated and local rates of infection and establish clear thresholds. It would also answer questions that employers ask us time and again: Should they return to in-person working in phases? Should phasing depend on immune status? How should daily symptom checks, temperature checks, contact tracing and measures change for employees who are immune?

The problem is not a lack of scientific evidence; it's a problem of timeliness. More than a month ago, a paper in NEJM Catalyst demonstrated the benefits of COVID-19 back-to-work programs. Partnering with a large manufacturing company, the authors demonstrated how a large multistate company can create a safe work environment with high employee engagement and a nearly 3-to-1 return on investment. Guidance such as this needs to be coming from the top.

Part of the challenge has been structural. The COVID-19 task force that President Biden launched during the transition did not include business leaders. The announcement by the administration of a new partnership with business leaders was a step in the right direction, but it has yet been unclear what its mandate is and whether and what new guidance will come from it.

America's businesses have long demonstrated remarkable ingenuity. But figuring out when and how to safely open their offices shouldn't be entirely on them. What they need is clear leadership from the CDC. Americans are ready to get back into the office. Let's help them do it safely and without unnecessary delays.

■ Shantanu Nundy is chief medical officer of Accolade. Marty Makary, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Bloomberg School of Public Health and Carey Business School, is chief medical adviser to Sesame Care.