

City of Bend makes changes to policies on homeless camp

The City of Bend made two changes last week in its policy toward people who are homeless.

One is immediate. The Bend City Council gave staff authorization to remove large homeless camps without coming to councilors for approval first. A large camp in the city's definition is eight or more campers.

Don't expect the city to now sweep in and clear camps. There must be triggers before that happens because of laws, court rulings and city policy. Some of the factors considered when the city makes that call are: safety, such as tents too close to the road; increasing calls and increasing severity of calls for service; environmental impact from burning or human waste; and increasing amounts of trash.

No single violation would necessarily trigger a removal. It's still a judgment call. It just would not require council approval first.

The second change is that the city is going to, in 2022, develop a city code for camping and trash. That will, at least, provide greater clarity. The question is: Will the city have

the staff and a budget to implement it? The city doesn't really now. It won't matter what the policy is if it is not monitored and enforced.

When homeless camps in Bend are removed, it may feel like victory. It's hollow. It breaks up a camp. It doesn't break homelessness. It's not like there are good other places for people to go. Shelters are full. People just must move and go someplace else. Service providers can lose track of them because of the disruption. And that doesn't help get people where they can transition into a better situation.

It's like what Bend city councilor Megan Perkins said last week: If you don't like what you see with the homeless camps in Bend, do something about it. The city, the county and nonprofits are working to find solutions. They don't have the resources to solve the problem by themselves. They need help locating shelter space and with money, volunteers and time.

An Oregon Department of Transportation crew removes a campsite from a homeless in Bend in October.

Dean Guernsey/
Bulletin file



Bend considers tax breaks for certain construction

Build more housing in Bend and prices, and demand likely won't really go down. But any solution must focus on supply. That's why the city's new look at property tax exemptions is interesting.

Bend is considering handing out tax breaks to certain kinds of development. The city could use more multiunit housing. It could use more middle-income housing. Some in Bend would like to see nonprofits play more of a role in providing housing. And some in Bend want more vertical development, multi-story buildings, rather than sprawling ever outward.

The city could create property tax exemptions to give one or all of those a boost. Bend city councilors have given staff the go-ahead to look at all four options.

A problem with any tax exemption is determining if the incentive given is worth the loss in taxes. Property taxes in Bend do go to varying degrees to help the city provide its services whether they be streets, public safety or clean water. So if the city does go ahead with any exemptions, there is a cost for the benefit. How big a cost? It's too early

to tell. It may be relatively insignificant. Bend, though, already relies on a separate levy to help support its fire department. It has had to ask voters to support bonds to keep up with the explosive growth in transportation needs.

One of the many other challenges with tax exemptions is evaluating what they achieve. Would the same development have happened anyway? It's hard to know without a convenient alternative universe to do testing. City staff — as resourceful as they are — do not have that at their disposal.

And there is always the question of who benefits. Will the big benefit of any tax break really go to developers and builders or will people who need housing truly feel it?

Staff and councilors discussed putting in place some sort of sunset or limitation on any tax exemption to ensure it was working as intended. That's especially important. Although the public does generally get to vote when their taxes are increased, they don't get a vote when the City Council starts handing out tax breaks to certain sectors of the economy.

TIM CAMPBELL
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MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL OF MY READERS
AND EVERYONE WHO CELEBRATES FREE SPEECH AND A FREE PRESS

Sen. Jeff Merkley seeking to address opioid crisis with alternative meds

BY JEFF MERKLEY AND DAVID RUSSO

The terrible pain caused by the opioid crisis has reached every community in our country. So many of us have heard from Oregonians whose loved one died from an opioid overdose after struggling with addiction — all because they filled an opioid prescription. And our nation's overdose death rate soared to record highs during the coronavirus public health emergency. Preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released in August show that drug overdose deaths in 2020 rose nearly 30%, to a record-setting 93,331. Opioids, including prescription pain medication, caused a staggering three-quarters of those deaths — a record 69,710 lives lost. Sadly, Oregon has been hit hard with a nearly 44% increase in overdose deaths over the past two years.

Putting a stop to this opioid crisis requires a multifaceted response with economic and social dimensions. It also requires us to look at the underlying policy and commercial factors that drove the epidemic to reach such staggering heights of tragedy and despair.

Health care providers have taken steps to try to reduce the contribution of prescription drugs to the opioid epidemic.

According to the American Medical Association, physicians and other health care professionals' use of state Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs increased 64.4% and opioid prescriptions decreased by 37.1% from 2014 to 2019. Yet, opioid overdoses continue to be a problem, largely driven by illicit forms of opioids.

Health care providers need access to a variety of options to manage their patients' pain, but often administrative and financial barriers get in the way of comprehensive, multidisciplinary pain care and rehabilitation programs.



Sen. Jeff Merkley, seen here at a town hall in 2020, is a cosponsor of the Non-Opioids Prevent Addiction in the Nation Act.

Ryan Brennecke/
Bulletin file

In order to increase access to safe and effective non-opioids across America's health care landscape, we are pushing for passage of the bipartisan Non-Opioids Prevent Addiction in the Nation Act. This legislation would address the barriers within Medicare reimbursement policies that lead providers to prescribe opioids. By fixing the policy, providers could more easily offer non-opioid pain management alternatives to Medicare patients undergoing surgery.

Under the current system, Medicare does not allow adequate reimbursement for alternatives to opioids. Instead, the program shoehorns almost all non-opioid pain management treatments — drugs, devices, and biologics — used in outpatient surgery into payment "packages" that don't allow for separate reimbursement for individual treatments. As a result, providers can either take a financial hit to prescribe the alternative pain management treatments or be fully reimbursed when they prescribe opioids — even if alternatives would be more appropriate for the patient.

That's why it is critical to pass the NOPAIN Act. By directing Medicare to allocate separate reimbursement

for pain management alternatives approved by the Food and Drug Administration, we can ensure patients undergoing a surgical procedure have a choice when deciding which treatment is best for them.

Importantly, this legislation would not prohibit or stifle patient access to physician-prescribed opioids for chronic or acute pain in any way. Instead, the NOPAIN Act would create an equal playing field that gives doctors and their patients more autonomy when choosing between differing opioid or non-opioid treatments.

With so much pain and hardship wrought by the opioid epidemic, Congress must spearhead innovative policy remedies that help address the structural causes of the crisis. The NOPAIN Act is one such remedy. By fixing Medicare's reimbursement policy to ensure patients across the country have a choice between differing pain management treatments, we can help combat one of the major drivers of this addiction epidemic.

■ U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley is a cosponsor of the NOPAIN Act. Dr. David Russo is a physiatrist and pain management specialist at Columbia Pain Management, PC, in Hood River and a member of the Oregon Medical Association.

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Write: My Nickel's Worth/Guest Column
P.O. Box 6020
Bend, OR 97708

Fax: 541-385-5804

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We should honor promises to Afghans who helped U.S. troops

THE WASHINGTON POST EDITORIAL BOARD

President Joe Biden's decision to pull out of Afghanistan led to chaos and bloodshed in Kabul, as well as the fall of a U.S.-backed government; the Taliban, the Islamist movement that the United States had fought for two decades, now rules. Given this debacle, it is perhaps understandable that administration policy toward Afghanistan since the last troops left Aug. 30 has seemed to be: The less said, the better. On Thursday, however, the State Department provided a much-needed update, first reported by the Wall Street Journal, on a key piece of unfinished business: the status of more than 60,000 Afghans who are eligible for special immigrant visas because they had helped U.S. troops, often as interpreters, and their family members.

Some 33,000 Afghans have been vetted and are eligible to be taken out of the country immediately; because of logistical difficulties, though, they might not actually get out until "well into 2022," the Journal reported. Another 29,000 applicants remain to be processed and would not be eligible to leave until after that. That's a lot of friends the United States has left behind.

The Taliban has so far shown restraint; the systematic violence that many of these people feared has not materialized. That is cold comfort however, because — meanwhile — Taliban units have summarily executed or forcibly "disappeared" more than 100 former police and intelligence officers, according to a recent report by Human Rights Watch. The organization also reports that the Taliban has been seizing land in central Afghanistan to give to its fight-

ers. Those dispossessed are generally members of the country's long-persecuted Shiite Muslim minority.

And there is one clear and present danger facing all 40 million of Afghanistan's people: economic privation, bordering on starvation in many parts of the country. International donors have pledged more than \$1 billion in food aid, some \$64 million of which is new money from the United States. The Biden administration has also taken steps to make it easier for Afghans abroad and humanitarian groups to send resources without violating continuing U.S. economic sanctions. The problem of how to make sure that relief reaches people who need it, rather than the Taliban — still not recognized as the legitimate Afghan government by most of the world — remains a real one, and it affects the

flow of aid.

The Taliban is calling for the United States to release more than \$9 billion in the former government's reserves held in U.S. institutions, blaming the Biden administration's refusal to do so for the country's economic plight. U.S. diplomats are continuing to talk about that with the Taliban in Qatar. Also on the agenda are U.S. concerns such as cooperation against terrorism, safe passage out for our former allies and human rights, including the fact that the Taliban insists on limiting education for Afghan girls. The United States' goals should be to ease the Afghan people's critical near-term needs, while securing the Taliban's long-term commitments on human rights and terrorism. With tough but wise use of its leverage, the Biden administration could achieve both.