

OUR VIEW

Governor hopefuls need to listen to rural Oregon

‘Tis the season not only for Christmas trees and year-end celebrations but for Oregon’s gubernatorial candidates to shift into high gear in anticipation of the 2022 election.

First off, we want to wish all of the candidates the best. At last count, 28 candidates were in the running for the Democratic or Republican nominations, and a handful of others were in the wings. Add the independents and third-party candidates, and Oregonians will have plenty to choose from in the November general election.

Running for governor is a grueling and sometimes demeaning undertaking in which candidates are often marketed like boxes of cereal. Armed with the latest polls and piles of donations, they ply their trade with one goal in mind — getting Oregonians to vote for them.

Many of them seem to be saying, “Be reasonable, and see it my way.”

Others seem to be quoting a character in the movie “Napoleon Dynamite,” who promised during a student council election, “Vote for me and all of your dreams will come true.”

But that’s all backwards. Candidates need to reflect Oregonians’ views, not the other way around.

Only then will the state’s voters get a governor worthy of their support.

We have a suggestion for the candidates. Instead of presenting voters will pre-packaged platforms, why not go where Oregonians live? And listen, really listen.

Those of us who live in rural parts of the state — the vast majority of Oregon’s 98,466 square miles — know what it’s like to be ignored or, almost as bad, patronized.

A candidate from Portland — whose area is a puny 145 square miles — or some other city will often do a drive-by “appearance” in rural Oregon aimed at getting some attention in the press and then head for the next stop.

But in the process what do they learn about rural Oregon? Do they understand the stress and hardship laws written for urban areas can have on the rural residents and their economy? If they do, what have they done about it?

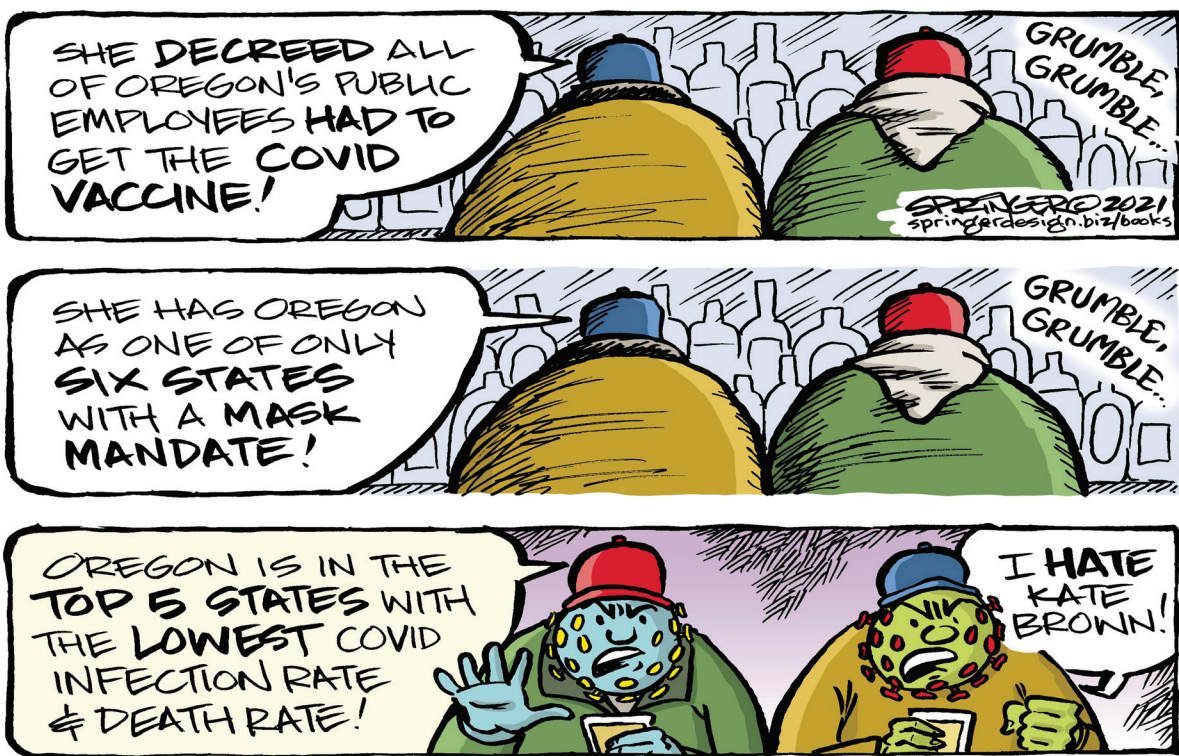
Do they know the difference between throwing money at a problem and solving it?

And in this era of COVID, what, specifically, would they have done differently if they were governor? Should tiny Burns be subjected to the same regulations as Portland?

The answers to those and other questions should not come from bullet points from a canned speech but from serious discussions of the issues with working rural Oregonians.

We’re not just talking about meeting with the local big-wigs. We’re talking about the folks who farm and ranch, who work at dairies and nurseries or who punch a time clock at a factory or processing plant.

The squeaky wheels in Portland and the rest of urban Oregon get plenty of attention. It’s time for the politicians to listen to the drive wheels that make this state’s economy go.



OFF THE BEATEN PATH

How to carve a coconut

Thwack! The early morning thump awakens me in my Tongan fale (cottage). I tie my lava lava (skirt) around my waist, slip into sandals and head outside.

A muscular youth with a fearsome-looking machete reduces a pile of coconuts to coconut halves. He strips off the brown outer fibers, gives the coconut a chop and the shell cracks open as easily as though he peeled a banana.

I offer to help. Communication consists of pantomime.

I reach for his machete wanting to try a couple whacks — it looks simple yet impressive.

With actions and words thick with vowels, I’m given to understand he will not be responsible for me hacking off my limbs.

Using a sharp tool attached to a stool, he shreds the coconut.

I spot the machete on the ground thinking I could snatch it, get in a couple trial chops on a coconut before he intervenes. He sees me eyeing the machete and plants his foot on the blade.

When the coconut overflows a pan, he throws a few scraps to wandering chickens. He picks up a pile of the brown fibers that surround the coconuts, fans the fibers across his hand, piles shredded coconut in the middle and wrings out the fibercovered coconut as if it were a dishrag. The creamy white liquid he collects in a pitcher and drops the dry flakes into another pan. He hands me a golf ball-sized hunk



Jean Ann Moultrie

of coconut and I savor the treat as he works.

When the pitcher and pan are filled, he knocks at the back door of a restaurant and hands the shredded coconut and coconut cream to the cook.

At another Tongan island, I’m served delicious chicken breasts stuffed with papaya chunks and rolled in a crusty coating of toasted coconut.

Days later in Fiji, while sitting on a mat in a village home, the home-maker instructs me in the proper way to toast coconut: heat a stone in the outdoor fire pit, place the hot stone in a basket of coconut flakes, and toss until the coconut turns a pale brown.

My last night in the South Pacific and I’m sitting on the patio of a B&B in American Samoa. A fish soup simmers on the stove. While waiting for dinner, we congregate as the B&B owner discusses the rain-forest around us.

The attraction for the evening: bats, as in fruit bats.

The owner points out the first fruit bat sighting that evening that looks to me like a soaring raptor. Bats the size of cats and kittens swirl on wind currents. Slack-jawed, I watch them lift off from branches and dip past tree trunks. The B&B owner ambles inside to check the soup and returns with —

what else — a machete. He hefts a coconut, gives it a smack and the coconut splits open.

“The trick is to locate the crucial spot to hit,” says the B&B owner.

Sounds simpler than the hammer, screwdriver and hacksaw I employ at home to open a store-purchased coconut.

With forks, houseguests take turns prying out hunks of coconut. What ranks as more spectacular, increasingly rare fruit bat sightings or the rich flavor of fresh coconut?

The answer remains under dispute.

When I return home, an Oregon morning turns brisk and cold. I scout a grocery store for coconut and pay for purchases.

From a grocery sack, I pull out packages of flaked coconut. With a plastic knife, I saw open a bag and toss coconut across grilled chicken. I sprinkle coconut across the top of a frosted cake, stir coconut into coconut cream pie filling and garnish with oven-toasted coconut. I add shaved coconut to homemade granola. Foods family-rated as “mighty fine eating.”

Coconut-laced meals, yes, but not quite quintessential coconut freshly forked from a shell served with fruit bat entertainment. I wished for a pile of fresh coconuts and my own machete.

Jean Ann Moultrie is a Grant County writer. She anticipated a gift of a machete but instead received a fishing pole and pocket knife.

COMMENTARY

Mental health gets short shrift

During the first wave of the pandemic in April 2020, my boyfriend asked, not unkindly, if I’ve ever been diagnosed with anything besides generalized anxiety disorder.

I was relieved that somebody had finally asked about my mental health.

All spring and summer 2020, I kicked the ball of my fritzing brain down the field to some imaginary goal of “things” getting better in the world, or at least more stable. Plainly, that didn’t happen.

And so, like many others, I went back to therapy. Or tried to.

I’m on Medicaid, and while the insurance I receive through the program is accepted by many dentists and primary care physicians, finding a therapist or a psychiatrist who takes it has been, in my experience, impossible.

I used Psychology Today’s search tool and found just three therapists in my area who said they accepted Medicaid. Only one returned my email, but after a detailed intake interview, I never heard from her again.

Over the next eight months, more fruitless attempts to find care for my mental health took a real toll on my time, money, and well being.

I asked for help finding a therapist and a psychiatrist from my in-network primary care physician. A month later, she wrote to say that she knew no psychiatrists who accepted Medicaid, ending the message with a well-intentioned but

unhelpful “;-(-”.



Katie Prout

After combing the Internet, I found five other local psychiatrists who had “Medicaid” listed on their profiles. They never returned my emails or my calls. I cried.

It turns out I’m not alone. Americans are seeking mental health care in record numbers, and many are struggling to find it. Even before the pandemic, NPR reported that 77 percent of U.S. counties faced a severe shortage of psychiatrists. Meanwhile the number of practices accepting Medicaid has declined.

For people like me, our conditions can grow more disruptive and life-threatening with every passing week without care. Studies show that being poor is correlated to higher rates of mental illness. What is perhaps less widely understood is that poverty causes mental illness, too.

Anyone who has tried to get help knows that the process consigns whole days to the dump.

During my search, I was working as a freelance journalist. The time I spent chasing down care was time I couldn’t spend filing stories and earning income to live. For that matter, it was time I could’ve spent calling my mom, cleaning my fridge, applying for a job, running around the block — anything.

Eventually, I found a graduate student therapist for \$25 a session.

But a proper psychiatric evaluation remains elusive. One place said I’d have to switch my therapy over to them, but I wasn’t ready to do that. Another said I’d have to leave my current primary care physician.

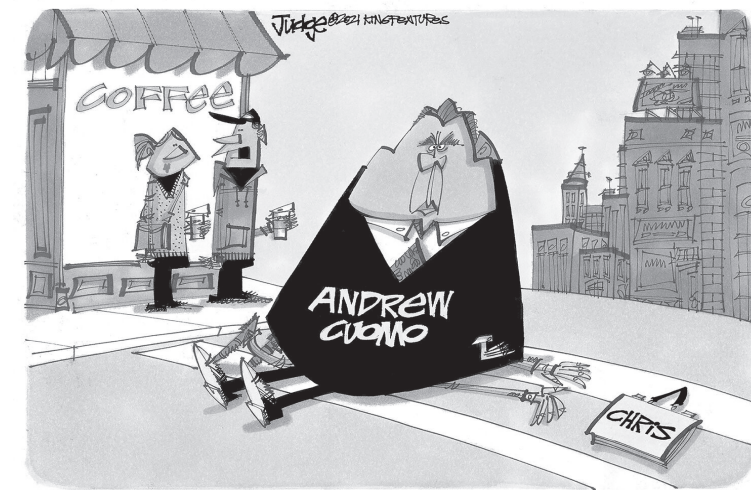
I said no. I didn’t want to disrupt what stable care I had in exchange for the uncertain promise of eventual help.

Medicaid has been good to my body — I got a dermatologist, a primary care physician, a gynecologist, and a gastroenterologist with relative ease — but it has abandoned my brain. I need timely, accessible, affordable care — just like millions of Americans. I want choice, not a fistful of deeply unhelpful options wrestled from the cruel system we make poor people navigate to access health care.

Some days I still can’t believe that more than a year and a half into a pandemic — with its massive layoffs, record unemployment, hundreds of thousands of deaths, and increase in mental illness — this country still ties “good” insurance to your employer.

We deserve so much more. For me, I want to be present in my existence, rather than getting lost in the endless twilight plains of my mind.

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Katie Prout is a staff writer at the Chicago Reader. This op-ed was developed by the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, adapted from a longer story at the Chicago Reader, and distributed by OtherWords.org.



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