

OUR VIEW

Change of heart about VA plan is good news

Good news from Congress is often hard to come by but the recent announcement from U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden's office that a plan to modify the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla into an outpatient clinic is no longer an option was a bright spot among the usual fare of depressing information that leaks from the nation's capital.

Wyden said in a press release earlier this month that he "welcomed the news" that a group of bipartisan senators will block the plan originally configured by the veterans Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission. That plan would have shut down the 31-bed residential rehabilitation and treatment program and moved it to Spokane.

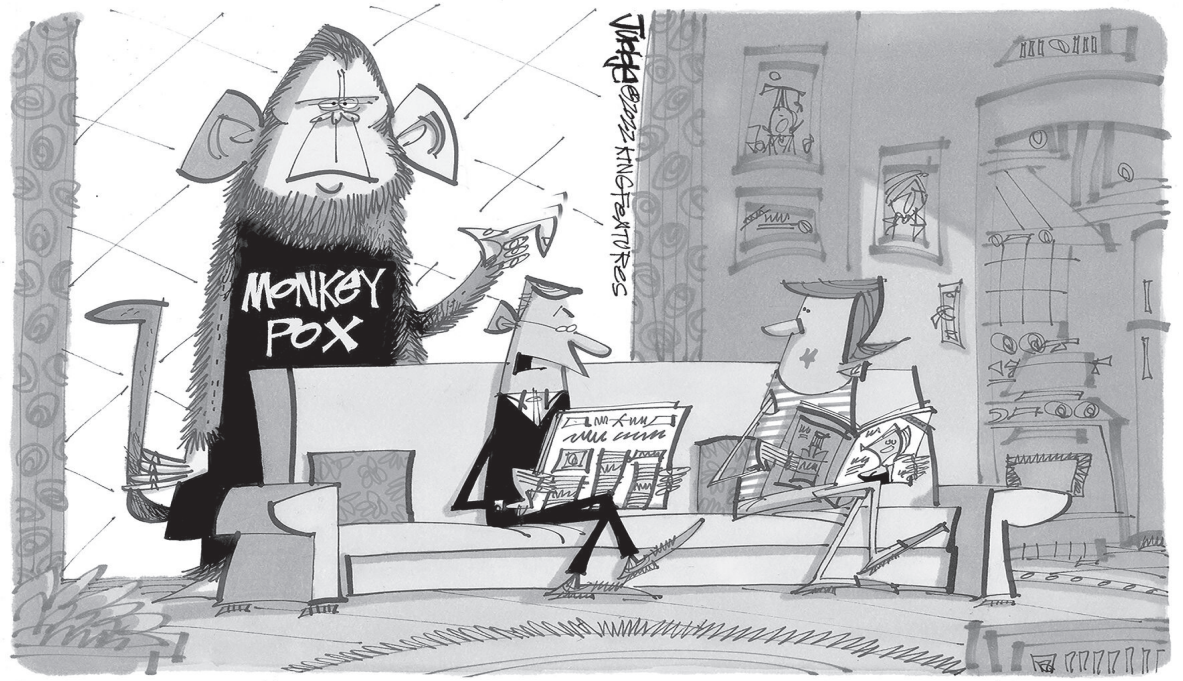
Wyden, in a recent town hall meeting, reported he'd heard from veterans about how the plan to turn the facility into an outpatient clinic would make a negative impact.

All the gratitude for the decision can't rest with Wyden, of course, as a number of other prominent senators also chimed in to stop the plan from becoming a reality. Yet, Wyden's influence was surely a factor and we thank the senator for that assistance.

The fact is the concept was a bankrupt one from the very beginning. Why the federal government would want to short-change our veterans on any issue is not only a mystery but grossly unfair. Surely money had a lot to do with the decision. It is no secret the costs of the Veterans Administration continue to climb at an unprecedented rate. Taxpayers are ultimately billed for those costs, just like taxpayers end up footing the bill for any conflict the nation finds itself in.

Caring for our veterans is one of those unseen and often not talked about aspects of our foreign policy. When the call erupts across the nation to let slip the dogs of war, the upfront costs are always high. Yet when a conflict is over, those costs continue as the men and women who shouldered the burden need long-term, costly care.

We owe our veterans a great deal, including excellent health care. The fact the plan to turn the Walla Walla clinic into an outpatient center has been abandoned is good news.



"MASS SHOOTINGS, CLIMATE CHANGE, INFLATION, THE SUPREME COURT GONE NUTS, COVID, RUSSIAN INVASIONS, HOMOPHOBIA, RACISM ... I JUST CAN'T IMAGINE HOW THINGS COULD POSSIBLY GET WORSE!"

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Memories of bicycle jaunts

I spotted the black, inanimate objects near a store in town. One man stood guard while the rest of the riders shopped for food.

"I've never seen such beautiful bikes!" I said to the guy standing guard. Each bicycle a jumble of gears and chain, the frames sleek yet sturdy. "Where are you biking to?" "Not the whole Oregon route this time," said the man. "We started at Mitchell, rode to Long Creek. Coming to John Day we hit sun, torrential rain, and snow. We're heading to Dayville, then back to Mitchell."

When the rest of the group returned, the bikers, dressed in lean and lithe biking outfits, clustered around their transportation. I wondered what the bikes would look like if they were alive. Definitely black panthers, muscled and alert with paws clawing the ground, impatient to race onto the open road.

Knowing my own current bike, dusty and with two flat tires, reclined in a shed, I broke out in a case of reminiscence for my own bike Glory Days. My bicycle as a kid was a blue, one-speed, Schwinn beauty, heavy as a freight train locomotive.

We lived at the edge of town with fields and woods to explore. On gravel roads, we pushed our bikes up steep grades. Coasting down a gravel hill allowed opportunities to wipe out on corners, spreading gravel like



Jean Ann Moultrie

a road grader and leaving us bloody with a generous supply of scabs. Sometimes we skidded into a ditch and landed on softer objects: poison oak, thorny berry canes, rotted fir logs —

home to stinging ants. In a word, what did owning a bike give us? Freedom!

My younger brothers and I explored with the intensity of Lewis and Clark. What did we discover? Some of our finds: trees to climb, pond filled with tadpoles, the world's biggest mud puddle, perfect kite-flying hill, and fields with frolicking colts, calves, lambs and piglets.

What skills did we learn? We gained the ability to pedal like crazy with one leg, while holding the other leg on the bike handlebars to keep farm dogs, with their grizzly claws, and the personality of a Tasmanian devil, from divesting us from a pant leg and an ankle bone, as they raced after our bikes, snarling and slobbering in anticipation of fresh meat.

After we shared this dog-related information, others spread rumors that what we thought were raised with grizzlies were more along the

breeding line of cocker spaniels, probably inviting us in for cookies and milk.

One big discovery while out biking — finding the patch of blackberries in a gully off a gravel road. These weren't low-growing native blackberries but rather "Himalayan blackberries," considered an "introduced invasive pest." The huge purple berries have an intense blackberry flavor.

Drawbacks to Himalayan blackberries: lot of seeds, fragile fruit (puddle in a berry pail before you can reach home), vines a story or more tall and thicker than a man's thumb, thorns as persistent as barb wire and, as sometimes in life, the best berries dangled deep into the plants.

Not a problem for a kid with a bike. My brothers and I raced home. We biked back to the berry site wearing long-sleeved shirts and berry pails tied with rope at our waist. We returned home bloody, disheveled and triumphant. We handed Mom our berry harvest and our request.

Mom knew the challenge of picking Himalayan blackberries. My brothers and I enjoyed warm Himalayan blackberry pie on that summer afternoon. Not a bad haul for a day's bicycle jaunt.

Jean Ann Moultrie is a Grant County writer. For now, she's sticking to a county culinary jaunt in a car.



MIKE SMITH WALLA WALLA

OUR VIEW

Is there a thumb on the scale?

SySCO, a Texas-based company that distributes food to restaurants, hotels and other facilities, has filed a federal lawsuit alleging violations of antitrust laws by Cargill, JBS, Tyson and National Beef.

If the suit moves forward, this seems like another good opportunity to either prove or put to rest allegations that have roiled the livestock and processing industries for years.

At issue is whether four large companies are collectively using their place between producers and consumers and their market domination to manipulate supply and prices to their advantage both up and downstream.

According to the lawsuit, a former quality assurance officer at a JBS facility "has confirmed the existence of a conspiracy" among the beef packers, which is corroborated by statistics that show "industry-wide slaughter and capacity reductions."

The four meat packers collectively generate about 80% of the U.S. beef supply and control an even higher proportion of the domestic cattle market, as well as the associated "supply and distribution chain," the complaint said.

By exploiting their market power, the companies have "created surpluses in the cattle market and shortages in the wholesale beef market," artificially raising their profit margins higher

than they can achieve under competitive conditions, the complaint said.

"United by their conspiracy, Operating Defendants were confident that none of them would break ranks and disproportionately expand their beef production to satisfy unmet demand," the plaintiff claims. "Armed with this assurance, Operating Defendants improved their meat margins by achieving and sustaining an unprecedented gap between cattle and beef prices."

The defendants have not yet commented.

Another lawsuit — filed in 2020 by a group representing ranchers, food processors and consumers — alleges much the same thing, and is moving through a federal court in Minnesota.

At the behest of then-President Donald Trump, in 2020 the U.S. Department of Justice began an investigation of the industry. Leadership of the department has since changed to the Biden administration. The investigation is ongoing, and no update has been offered.

Whenever a large part of the market is controlled by a handful of companies, it raises suspicions.

We believe that, to have a free market, all sides must operate on a level playing field and with full price transparency. It would serve the public good to know whether or not there's a thumb on the scale.

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