

Bentz says 'get vaccinated'

2nd District rep also talks infrastructure at in-person town hall

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

In the span of an hour Monday, Aug. 9, at the Pendleton Convention Center, U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment, energy and the economy during an in-person town hall meeting.

The Ontario Republican didn't have too much more time beyond the hour: He was in the process of an 11-county tour of his district, which encompasses the entire state east of the Cascades plus a significant chunk of southern Oregon. Elected to replace longtime Rep. Greg Walden in 2020, Bentz said he plans to hold at least one town hall in each county in his district per year.

Right off the bat, Bentz was asked what he would do to promote the vaccine in Umatilla County. A recent surge in COVID-19 cases has pushed Umatilla County beyond 10,000 total cases, and during the first week of August, Umatilla County had the highest test positivity rate of any county in the state. While the share of county residents who have received at least one dose of the vaccination has risen to about 45%, Umatilla County remains one of the least vaccinated counties in the state.

Bentz said one of his close, personal friends was battling COVID-19 from the hospital before mentioning state Sen. Bill Hansell, who was in the audience, adding he recently recovered from the virus despite getting vaccinated.

"I will say it clearly: I recommend you get vaccinated," he said, crediting former President Donald Trump for Operation Warp Speed, a White House effort to accelerate the development of the COVID-19 vaccine. "I've said it over and over again. I recommend it, I don't demand it. Don't mandate it, but I suggest you do it."

Bentz took a more guarded stance on infrastructure, as the Senate is on the verge of passing a bipartisan \$1.1 trillion infrastructure bill. The bill's future is complicated by Speaker Nancy Pelosi insisting the Senate also pass a complimentary \$3.5 trillion infrastructure bill before the House holds a vote. Bentz said he would need to hold more conversations with his caucus before supporting the bipartisan bill, but he would not be able to support the passage of both, adding the increase in federal spending could result in inflation that would hurt constituents' pocketbooks.

"No one's going to count that as the cost that each of you are going to pay, which you're already paying 5% off each one of your dollars in savings," he said.

Bentz said he shared concern with one town hall attendee about the national debt and would try to eliminate pork barrel spending, the practice of tying local projects to federal legislation to get a bill passed, but cutting bigger programs, such as Medicare and Social Security, were harder to do.

"You want to go to a bunch of doctors and say guess what, we're going to cut what you're getting paid for Medicare?" he said. "Better be close to the door, because they're going to try to hurt you."

With the exception of a stint as a member of the Ontario School Board, Bentz said he's been in the

minority during his entire political career, dating back to his time in the Oregon Legislature.

"I found it very easy to throw rocks," he said. "When you're in the minority, by the way, that's what you do most of the time."

But Bentz said he still wanted to find solutions to the country's problems and wanted to work on water issues, should Republi-

cans retake the House in 2022. A water attorney by trade, Bentz pointed to the drought in the Klamath Basin, which is heightening tensions between irrigators, the government and local American Indian tribes. But he also said other areas in his district are facing dire circumstances, including the Deschutes Basin and the Owyhee Basin, which he said was going to dry out in the imminent future.



Nick Clemens/Contributed Photo
U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, speaks to a crowd of more than 30 at a town hall meeting Monday, Aug. 9, 2021, at the Pendleton Convention Center.



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