

Now is the time to act

As we move past the celebration of our Independence Day anniversary, we move into a time that most people complain about as much as anything else - campaign season.

It seems like no one, if you ask them, likes the lead-up to choosing our representatives, what with being inundated by negative campaign ads, or ones that really say nothing.

And I cannot blame anyone for tuning out, and basically voting 'none of the above' by not participating.

Our government is being choked by overwhelming partisanship, to the point that the real issues never get handled. Instead, it seems the opposing political party is 'unAmerican, trying to destroy this country.' They never really say how, but trust them, they know.

I don't see it letting up anytime soon. In fact, based on the campaign emails filling my computer, it is getting much worse, as more and more candidates find it very easy to lie about the causes of what is wrong right now in order to win an election.

The real problem when we cannot say what the cause of the problem is, there is no way we can find a solution.

This upcoming election is the most constructive one, as we face structural issues both nationally and in southwest Wisconsin that have no easy fix, and if we continue down this partisan path, where our elected officials only worry about the next election instead of making hard choices, southwest Wisconsin will see a great consolidation where only a handful of communities will survive in their current form.

Why the dire outlook? Many communities like Cassville, are having a tougher and tougher time finding enough volunteers to support their ambulances during a normal day.

We all know of this problem, and yet it remains an issue. Partisan games had legislators lie about the status of the bill to make the governor look bad, meanwhile their own party held the bill for a year so that nothing could actually be done.

That is how broken we are in representative government. That even in small cases where there can be some sort of agreement, nothing can be done because no one wants to give the other side a win.

So I ask you, as the elections come closer, really listen to what the candidates are saying. Are they just blaming the other side, or are they giving you ideas of how they plan on solving the problem?

Because problems, we got many. A big problem, especially when it comes to southwest Wisconsin, is we are seeing the crisis I can remember being warned about when I was a kid - the mass retirement of the Baby Boomers. The largest part of the population has finally decided to 'hang 'em up.'

Given a work ethic from their parents (who dealt with a depression and defeated the Nazis), Baby Boomers continued to work well past their retirement dates. A few years ago a number of stories indicated Millennials and Zoomers were complaining they couldn't advance because Boomers were still in the workforce.

Well, COVID made Boomers rethink their priorities. They decided, en masse, to step away so they can spend more time with their families, and do the things they want to do.

I see it with my own parents, who I think would be working today, in some way, if not for COVID. If you look around Grant County, you see a lot of familiar faces in our local stores who have pulled back, letting the next generation take over.

This creates so many problems, like inflation, for example. One of the two main causes for our recent bout of inflation are the fact that wages are climbing, as employers scramble for workers, as well as the fact that, in a global economy, we are being choked off from supplies made elsewhere because they have not been able to move on from COVID like we have.

There is no easy fix, because it's not like you can conjure up a bunch of people to take their places.

This leads to a number of other problems that that put southwest Wisconsin in a bigger bind than more urban areas. For one, housing. This generation of new retirees are sticking around, not moving to warmer climates. With only nominal residential construction going on, it means we do not have enough housing for the next generation to move into.

If you cannot find a home, how can you take a job? Everywhere, you can see how this lack of housing hurts. I have seen school teachers leave for jobs in nearby communities where

they had found homes.

And this extends to having affordable housing lots for people to build. In places like Lancaster, there are plenty of lots, but those are for people looking to build a home of at least \$350,000. That really eliminates a lot of people.

We can see, between the lots Potosi created, or the duplexes that went up in Lancaster, there is a significant demand for sub-\$200,000 homes, and people wanting to build.

When I started here 19 years ago, Lancaster quickly sold the last of the Kolar Estates lots, which allowed for the development of many moderate-priced homes.

If communities could create more lots at affordable prices, they would sell, even in this inflation era. Problem is there are limits to what communities can do. Unless they include them in a mixed-use tax incremental finance district, they simply do not have the budgets to buy and develop land, due to revenue limits placed on them by the state.

And the private sector cannot make any money on such lots. Even before this time, about five years ago I remember covering a report being given by SW WI Regional Planning Commission, and for these affordable lots and homes, a developer cannot break even on costs and what they can sell them for. I am sure many builders would jump on this problem, but they have to feed their families as well.

This pushes me to another big issue we need to be concerned about in southwest Wisconsin - childcare. You are not going to attract or retain young families to your community without having a safe place for their children to go before they reach school age.

While this is a real issue, it's not being addressed in public settings. When I opened the packet for this week's Lancaster Community School meeting, inside is a list of priorities for the district, and no where is there anything about childcare. They talk about wages and benefits to attract and retain teachers, but there is nothing on the deficiency of available childcare in the community.

It's ironic that the school district just three decades earlier worked with its young teaching staff to create a space to have a daycare for their children and their neighbors, is now silent about the childcare cliff this community is on the verge of falling off.

I am very concerned about the availability of childcare in the coming years. I am very concerned about the future of the community's largest daycare provider, which is being pushed out of the current space, and whether they will survive. If they do not, that will be a real crisis for this community.

Meanwhile, all around us, communities are dealing with the issue in proactive ways. In Potosi, Little Saints was created with Ss. Andrew-Thomas. In Cassville, the development group is working with St. Charles to create a daycare this fall.

We do not have colleges like Platteville or Fennimore to create daycare programs to help fill the need, so there is no outside source that will come in and fix the problem. Other communities, like Hazel Green, are showing a way to a solid daycare future.

If I was a business headhunter, I would try to recruit them away from here. There aren't enough workers, there aren't enough houses, and if they have children, there are not enough places to go for child care.

Looking at Cassville, if their daycare means that someone is available to work close to home, and also be able to answer an EMS call, that effort could very well be a community saver.

Everything is interconnected. If you don't have childcare, you cannot have workers. If you don't have homes, it doesn't matter how many jobs you have, because you cannot fill them.

These are just a couple of issues. I have many more that really do not have anything to do with whether you are a Democrat or Republican. We need to elect people who have real fixes to problems, and not simply those who say, 'get rid of the other side.'

DAVID TIMMERMAN - EDITOR

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Regardless of court decision, markets and innovation push change

MADISON – The U.S. Supreme Court ruling rejecting the federal Environmental Protection Agency's authority to reshape the nation's energy grid has been roundly criticized by groups that believe reining in the causes of climate change cannot wait for constitutional niceties such as congressional and state approval.

Whether they hate or love the high court's ruling, those who believe in the urgency of climate change action should now place more trust in three forces – innovation, incentives and market adoption – that can move the dial. Wisconsin can be a poster child for all.

In a 6-3 decision issued June 30, the court said the EPA lacks the power to impose a nationwide cap-and-trade climate policy based on an Obama-era plan to expand such enforcement through the Clean Air Act. In 2016, the court had stayed EPA's "Clean Power Plan," recognizing it might not pass constitutional muster.

While some politicians still deny human activity is altering the world's environment, many private companies and utilities are taking steps on their own within the framework of market-ready innovation, customer acceptance and government "carrot-and-stick" incentives.

Coal-fired plants are being retired in most places in the United States and very few, if any, new coal plants are on the horizon. Even the construction of natural gas plants for electricity generation may be peaking. Instead, alternatives such as solar and wind are on the rise.

That's not because energy company executives have suddenly become Green Party members, but



because they want to pursue long-term strategies to keep the lights on while reducing carbon emissions. It simply makes good business sense over time. Here are some examples:

Wisconsin is poised for more solar energy growth. Solar panel costs have declined over time, even if supply-chain issues persist. Wisconsin has solar energy incentives for users, there are many accredited installers, and many solar projects – large and small – are underway. The state Public Service Commission has a plan to boost Wisconsin's standing among the top solar states. Possible drawbacks over time: A continued dispute over "third-party" solar projects and whether they can tie in the grid, and local opposition to some large solar farms.

While delayed a year or more over fears of brownouts, some major coal plants are still scheduled for retirement by 2024-25. Alliant Energy and WEC Energy Group recently delayed plant retirement plans by about a year after the regional grid – called the Midcontinent Independent System Operator – announced it faces capacity shortfalls this summer and next in its northern and central regions. Grid operators noted it "will be increasingly reliant on emergency or non-firm resources" to ensure service reliability in those regions. Still, Wisconsin's heavy reliance on coal will diminish sooner than later.

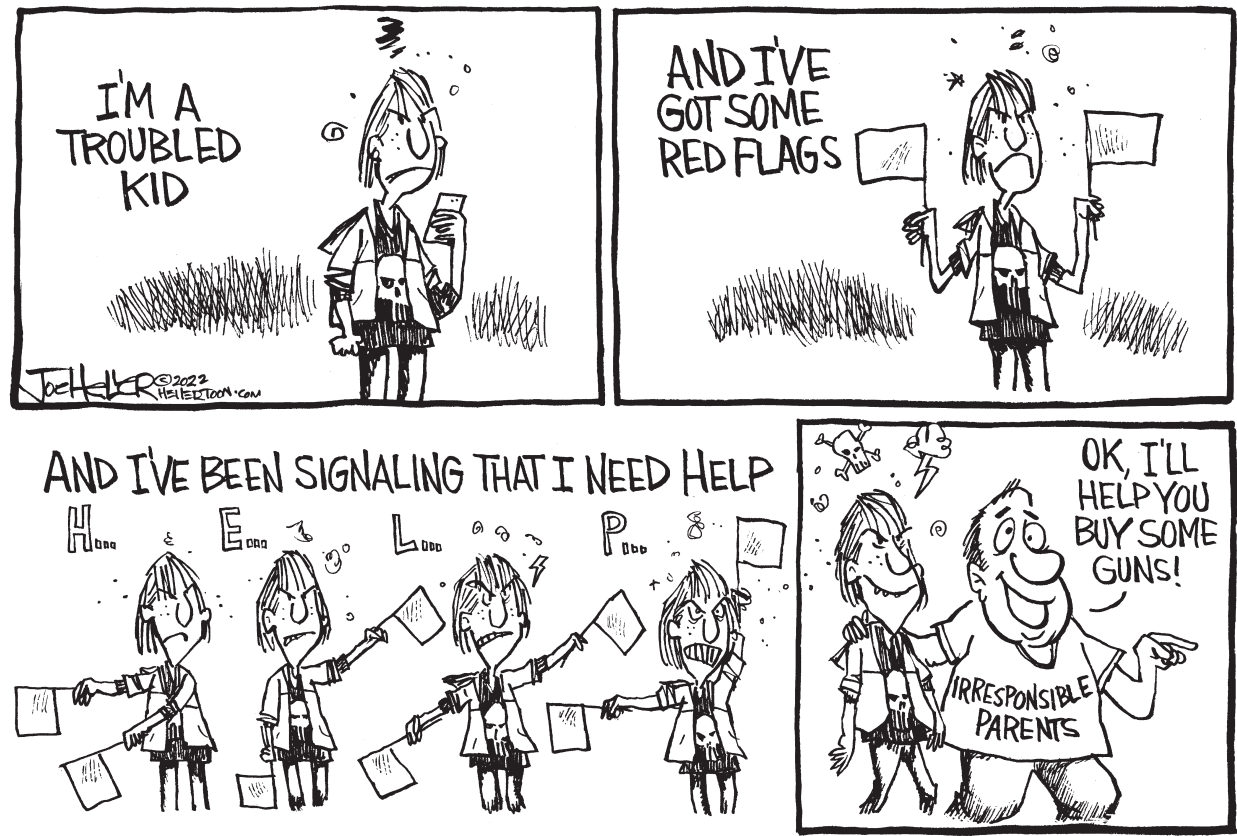
Nuclear power is also getting a fresh look as "next-generation" plants are being proposed. One such proposal involves Dairyland Power Cooperative in La Crosse.

Energy innovation is a part of the research and development footprint at most of Wisconsin's major universities and colleges. The UW-Madison is a leader in fission and fusion research, with growing expertise around hydrogen energy. The Wisconsin Energy Institute and Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center on the Madison campus also work with industry. Similar programs exist at UW-Milwaukee, Marquette University and beyond. Sometimes, industry and academic research is not tied to energy generation but other ways to reduce carbon emissions. Examples include battery storage innovation, more efficient electric motors, better control systems and even production of low-carbon cement.

While many of the "best" wind sites in Wisconsin have been developed, the state still has potential for more than 114,000 kilowatts of wind power. Stacker.com also reported in 2021 that wind makes up nearly 3 percent of Wisconsin's grid.

With more electric vehicles on the way along with current demands, Wisconsin will need reliable electric power. It will also need cleaner ways to process it. Those solutions will more likely come from innovators and market forces than government fiat.

Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council. He is the former associate editor of the Wisconsin State Journal.



Eagle, owl centers worth a visit

BACK HOME BY CHRIS HARDIE

Growing up on our Jackson County farm in the 1970s, a bald eagle sighting was something to behold. There were not many eagles left.

In 1974 there were only 107 active nests in Wisconsin, which was only two years after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of the pesticide DDT, which thinned eggshells of eagles. Nationwide the low point for eagles was 1963 when there were only 417 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states.

Today there are more than 71,400 nesting pairs in the lower 48 and nearly 317,000 individual eagles, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So even though I see eagles often while driving around western Wisconsin, it still stirs my soul to see one in flight.

While I'm not aware of any nesting locations on our farm, we see them frequently. And we do have plenty of owls. The stillness of the early morning is when you can hear the choruses of "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all," which carried across the quiet morning. I've also spotted great-horned owls over the years.

I consider myself fortunate to be able to observe eagles and owls in nature. I'm also fortunate enough to

live within easy driving distance of two great wildlife centers where you can also see the birds close up.

The National Eagle Center in Wabasha, MN has just opened the first phase of a renovation and expansion project. Work began in November to expand the eagle care facilities and create new exhibit spaces, as well as creating a new program center where programs are held.

The center is beautifully situated on the banks of the Mississippi River and my wife Sherry and I recently visited to take in a program and see the eagles under the center's care. Those eagles suffered injuries that make them unlikely to survive in the wild but they could live up to 40 years in captivity.

Last year we drove to Houston, MN – located about an hour south of Wabasha – and visited the International Owl Center, a facility that was inspired by the National Eagle Center. We took in a very informative program and saw several owls, classified as Strigiformes in the avian order of nocturnal birds.

The Houston center is located in a downtown building, with plans underway to build a new facility next to the aviaries where the owls live. The World Owl Conference will be held in Onalaska, WI in October 2023.

Both places are ideal locations to take children, who will not be bored by the interactive presentations. It's fun for old guys like me too.

While the recovery of the bald eagle population has been a major conservation success, some species of owls have declining populations due to habitat loss, land use and climate change. Threatened species include the northern spotted owl, burrowing owls, pygmy owls and snowy owls.

The barn owl population has declined with the loss of drafty old barns and hay fields, meadows or pastures where meadow vole – their primary food – flourish. There are fewer old barns today and many farms grow just corn or soybeans, not vole habitat.

We learned our lesson with DDT – I suspect that dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane was used on our land back in the 1950s. My brother and I found a bag of DDT cleaning out an old shed years ago.

Thankfully the eagles came back. But we seem to be a little slower in addressing land use and climate change impacting owls and other animal species.

Mother Nature can be forgiving – if we give her time.

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