

Opinion

NO BAD DAYS

Winthrop catches a brake

I suspect that I have the same question the mayor, Town Council members, staff, residents, business owners and pass-through motorists will ponder about Winthrop's pending new (that is, reduced) speed limits along two short portions of Highway 20 as it serpentine through town: will the new speed zones make any difference?

As explained (we hope) in a story to be found in this week's newspaper, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) — which has jurisdiction over the state highway — has authorized the town to reduce speed limits through the heart of downtown, and east of the Methow River bridge.



Don Nelson

Although I've never understood why anyone is in such a blasted hurry to traverse the Methow — you're going to get where you're going anyway, so why turn it into a breakneck race? — aggressive drivers have been a problem for years, especially in the narrow confines of Winthrop as everything funnels through the Riverside Avenue corridor. A few years ago, over an eight-day period in June WSDOT found that the average vehicle speed was 43 mph in the stretch of highway where the speed limit is 25 mph. A few motorists were driving as fast as 70 mph to 80 mph. The town has been asking for WSDOT assistance, which Winthrop has now been offered and adopted.

One change will drop the top speed from 25 mph to 20 mph starting from the Chewuch River bridge (at the four-way stop) and extending to the Spring Creek Bridge. That won't mean much to drivers who are moving barely above zero mph while backed up waiting to take their turn through the four-way stop during the height of tourism season. It's already the slowest part of town thanks to the concentration of all kinds of traffic — motorists, pedestrians, joggers, bicyclists and the occasional horseback rider. Even when the town is less crowded, as in shoulder seasons, there's not much point to edging above the existing 25 mph limit.

The other change proposed by WSDOT, basically between East 20 Pizza and the Abby Creek Inn, reduces the town's "entry point" limit of 35 mph to 25 mph more quickly, which is likely to have a greater impact on "incoming" (westbound) traffic if drivers are paying attention. They would, theoretically, be slowing down before encountering most of the businesses on that stretch of highway, and then rationally restrain themselves to 25 mph until, of course, they encounter new 20 mph limit at the Spring Creek Bridge.

From the other direction (eastbound into town), under the pending speed limit revisions nothing will change until you get to the Chewuch River Bridge — the limit now drops from 60 to 50 to 35 to 25 the closer you get to town. Basically, I just take my foot off the gas pedal and coast, which has earned me the annoyance of a tailgater or two who just can't wait to roar into town at speeds defying the concept of Westernization.

Some behaviors won't change. My personal policy is to obey the speed limits in both Winthrop and Twisp, not just as a law-abiding citizen but also as a neighbor who respects the valley's residents and rules. It's easier to do that in Winthrop, as motorists are forced to slow down by curves in the road and the preponderance of other traffic. In Twisp, however, too many people have no cognizance or care that the limit is, as in Winthrop, 25 mph on Highway 20 through town. It can be a scary speedway. The less-charitable part of me doesn't mind making people brake hard to achieve 25 mph through Twisp.

One hopes that the lower limits in Winthrop amount to more than an exercise in erecting a few signs and moving a few others. Yet history undermines our confidence that people can be persuaded to drive more slowly through the simple expedient of posting lower limits. Traffic engineers will tell you that drivers only meaningfully slow down when physically forced to by things like nasty speed bumps, uncomfortably narrow lanes or roundabouts (mostly out of confusion, I suppose). Meanwhile, Winthrop's small police force must balance the need to monitor and enforce, against the perception that Winthrop exists to punish your traffic transgressions.

Town leadership and staff should be applauded for not giving up on the speeding issue (which includes ongoing problems on some of Winthrop's internal streets, and on other approaches to town). They're working as fast as the bureaucracy allows at slowing things down. Like a nice drive in the country, that can take some time.

EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM. Letters must be fewer than 350 words and may be edited for libel, grammar and taste.

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Box 97: Letters to the editor

Let's do it better

Dear Editor:

Yes, we are on our way into 2022, another chance to do it better. May we all step back and take that look at ourselves and our choices and activities. May we make changes to add to the well-being and health of the world around us, rather than contribute to ongoing problems.

Susan Crampton
Twisp

Newhouse misrepresents

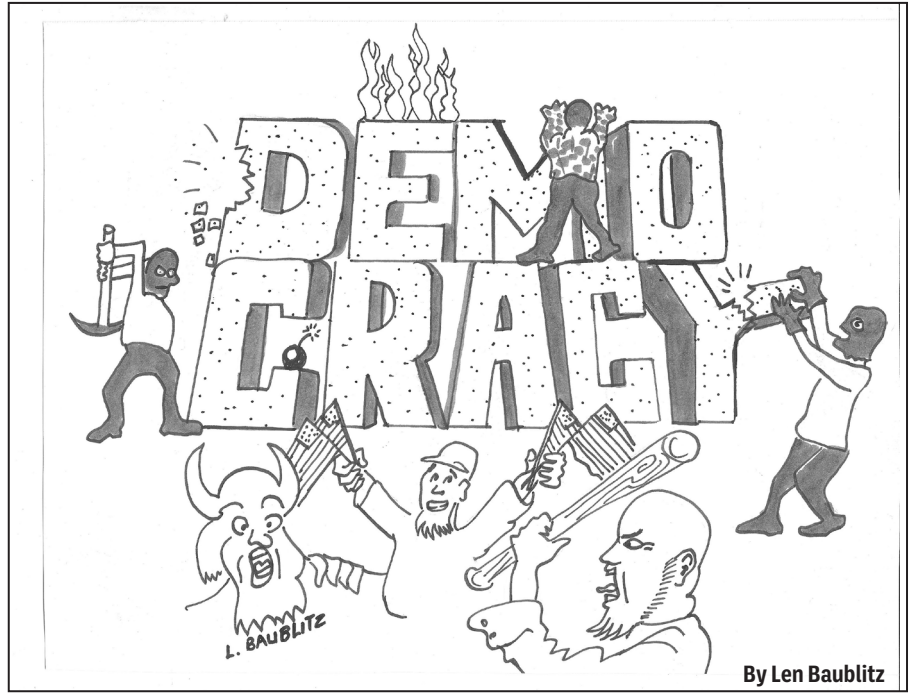
Dear Editor:

Did Rep. Dan Newhouse listen to President Biden state the obvious this week, that there can be no productive political discourse when lies are used as weapons? Unfortunately, Newhouse was willing to depart from the truth in his Dec. 23 newsletter wherein he seriously misrepresented this year's Washington House Bill 1310. The law was motivated by incidents of police violence against people who were not committing a crime or who were killed while in behavioral crisis. The law emphasizes de-escalation in situations of crisis, rather than confrontation, and sets out training standards, but does not prevent the lawful use of force when necessary.

However, Newhouse, claims that under this law: "our law enforcement officers can no longer detain suspects when there is reasonable suspicion that a crime has occurred. That means if there's a drive-by shooting and an officer sees a car speeding out of the neighborhood, they can't stop it."

Those statements are absolutely false and dangerously inflammatory. HB 1310 says nothing about when an officer may stop and/or detain a criminal suspect and has not changed the "stop" standards. The use of force standards reflect what court decisions have long held to be the permissible use of force. The law requires the use of reasonable care under "the totality of the circumstances."

I hope Newhouse's motivation for his serious misstatement is not to simply criticize our state Legislature, but one is hard-pressed to imagine what else it would be, knowing that most of his readers would take him at his



By Len Baublitz

word. Partisanship is one thing, but dishonest partisanship is quite another. If there are legitimate concerns about the new law, let's discuss them honestly, and not make up false scenarios.

Perhaps Newhouse did not purposefully lie, but was taken in by some police claims that if they think they can't use illegal force they won't try to intervene in a request for assistance for a person in crisis. If so, that is all the more evidence that the training specified in HB 1310 is necessary. Please, Mr. Newhouse, do your research, and deal us the facts honestly.

Kathleen Learned
Twisp

How it was done

Dear Editor:

My Aunt Sue was born in 1899 and when the Spanish Flu made it to central Washington she was a young bride living with her husband on a large, working cattle ranch outside of Ellensburg. A total of 15 to 20 people lived on the ranch.

Sue was friends with the local doctor and his family, one of which was another young woman of her age. As the epidemic descended on the community she sought the advice of the physician's family. On their advice and with the support of her husband, they quickly installed some changes and strict protocols on the ranch.

The bunkhouses were stripped and refitted for more room and something in the way

of partitions between beds. Accommodating for more room, some horse stalls were fitted for two-person rooms, again with partitions. Some of the partitions consisted of stacks of straw bales. Anything to provide a barrier.

Eating was no longer at a long indoor table with everyone serving themselves family style. Sue put up a buffet line on a semi-enclosed porch for serving and the crew could either eat at tables on the open porch or in their rooms. A change was made requiring that all dishes be washed and splashed over with boiling water after each meal. Hand washing was also required and doing laundry occasionally was encouraged. There were no indoor tables, no game tables, no indoor gathering space.

Her husband, Uncle Steve and the ranch foreman were the only people who came and went from the ranch. They delivered beef and brought in supplies as rarely as possible and isolated in the hunting cabin for a bit when they returned. Any crew who left the ranch were not allowed to return. Most stayed.

This lasted almost two years including two winters. I remember Aunt Sue and Uncle Steve being asked about this at a family dinner and someone wondered how they got a ranch crew to accept the restrictions. Uncle Steve replied, "She was a good-looking young woman and she wouldn't shut up! And she was right!"

They had not one case of flu on the ranch.
Ronda Bradeen
Libby Creek

A new predator stalks the West

BY PEPPER TRAIL
WRITERS ON THE RANGE

The grizzly bear. The wolf. The cougar. These magnificent creatures, apex predators, how can we not admire them? People cross the world for the opportunity to see one in the wilds of Yellowstone or Alaska.

There, we view them from a distance, free to indulge our awe in safety. It has been a long time since Americans lived in fear of wild beasts.

But now that fear has returned. Fear felt not just in the woods, but also in cities and towns: Paradise, California; Talent, Oregon; and now in suburban Superior and Louisville in Colorado's Boulder County.

The dangerous predator we're facing these days is wildfire, charging even out of grasslands to destroy our very homes. And no one is safe.

As an ecologist, I know that predators are essential to the health of wildlife communities, keeping prey populations in check. They're also a driving force in evolution, favoring the faster or stronger or smarter animals able to escape their attacks. Of course, civilization long ago freed us from the evolutionary pressure exerted by predators. But that freedom has come at a cost.

When populations and ecosystems grow badly out of balance, there must come a correction. Humans and the environments we have created are not immune to this rule, and we must recognize that we have unleashed the fire-predator through our own choices.

What choices? On the global scale, we have released vast amounts of carbon dioxide and

other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This was done at first in ignorance, but for at least the past 30 years, it truly was a choice made in the face of increasingly desperate warnings.

The resulting greenhouse effect has raised temperatures and decreased rain and snowpack throughout the West, contributing to "fire weather" like the hurricane-force winds that shockingly bore down on the suburbs of Denver in the dead of winter.

We also made land-management choices that strengthened the threat of fire. First, we behaved as if we could banish fire from the landscape, suppressing all wildland fires everywhere, and ending the use of prescribed fire in forests as a management tool. This led to a huge build-up of flammable fuels.

Second, industrial-scale logging eliminated over 90% of fire-resistant old-growth forests and replaced them with highly flammable tree plantations. Finally, we vastly expanded our human footprint, building houses right where the fire-predator likes to roam, at the brink of forests and grasslands.

The long view

Reconciling ourselves to the depredations of wildfire requires that we take the long view — the really long view. The fuel-choked forests resulting from our (mis)management need to burn, and they will burn. The best we can do is to preserve the old forests that remain and manage younger forests to increase their resilience to moderate-intensity fire. It could be a century or more before a new forestland equilibrium is reached, one with lower

fuel loads, better adapted to the high fire-frequency climate we have created.

Meanwhile, what about us? Colorado's Marshall Fire proved that wildfire is the one predator we can't eliminate. Far from any forest, this was pushed through tinder-dry grasslands by howling winter winds and burned more than 1,000 suburban homes in a matter of hours. So, like any prey species, we must adapt as best we can. As individuals, we can create defensible space around our homes. We can get skilled at escaping wildfire by having evacuation plans ready.

As a society, we can adopt sensible policies to limit sprawling development in fire-prone areas. Recent events prove that these include not just remote forestlands, but even grasslands near suburbs. Faced with predators, animals try to get into the center of the herd. We need to do the same, avoiding exposure to the fire-predator at the vulnerable edge.

Finally, we can — we must — embark on an urgent global effort to end the burning of fossil fuels within the next few decades. If we do not, the West will face year-round fire weather, and a future at the mercy of fire.

Yet there is reason for hope: the uniquely human capacity for rapid social and cultural evolution. Let's harness that strength, and work toward the day when fire is a predator no more, but our powerful partner in the stewardship of the land.

Pepper Trail is a contributor to *Writers on the Range*, writersontherange.org, a non-profit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is an ecologist in Ashland, Oregon.

Harts Pass

By Erik Brooks

