

# THE OPINION PAGE

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OUR OPINION

## Burgum works a political power play

Something unusual is happening in North Dakota politics, something that may be portentous even if it's not unprecedented. There aren't words enough in this column to deal with the precedents; instead let's concentrate on the portents.



MIKE JACOBS  
Grand Forks Herald

The governor has taken an interest in legislative campaigns. No! That's understating what's true.

Gov. Doug Burgum has staked money on legislative campaigns — and on one campaign especially. This is the campaign for the state House of Representatives in District 8, a big swathe of territory generally north of Bismarck. Although the district is largely rural, you can see the state capitol building from the southern edge, even on a cloudy day.

Location isn't everything in politics. Power is everything in politics, and this is a power struggle. Burgum is taking on one of the most powerful members of the Legislature, Jeff Delzer, who chairs the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives. Burgum has had early success. Republicans in the district failed to endorse Delzer, a 30-year veteran of the House. Unbowed, Delzer entered the primary election challenging the candidates endorsed by the district convention.

The result has been a quite expensive face-off between Delzer and other candidates in the district. A flurry of advertising has appeared in newspapers serving the district, including the Bismarck Tribune and

several weekly newspapers. The critical piece, however, is a flier mailed to voters. The disclaimer, required by law, says the advertisement in favor of endorsed candidates is paid for by the Dakota Leadership PAC. You'd have to be an insider to know the rest of the story. This political action committee is closely connected to Burgum's campaign. Former Burgum staffers, ambitious and savvy operatives, are behind the PAC.

Robbie Lauf, a Mayville, N.D., native, NDSU graduate and the committee's registered agent, was one of Gov. Burgum's first hires. He's just returned to North Dakota after two years at Harvard University. Lauf's not hiding anything. "We're totally transparent," he said in a telephone conversation on Monday. "We're not hiding. We're registered with the secretary of state," in accordance with state law.

As a disclaimer here, I know and like Lauf. He's smart, strategic and, maybe, representative of the new generation of political operatives. He thinks so anyway. In our conversation he conceded that a PAC might sit out a legislative primary contest, waiting until partisan voters select candidates in a contested primary. That strategy doesn't work so well in a state dominated by a

single party, however. The aim of his committee is to advance Burgum's agenda. The District 8 campaign is one part of that strategy. It's the only legislative race the PAC is involved with so far, Lauf said.

Burgum's interest in defeating Delzer hasn't been a secret. Nor, truthfully, has his motivation. Earlier this week, the rightward-leaning "Minuteman Blog" suggested that the Dakota Leadership PAC had put money into the campaign against Delzer because of his vote against the Theodore Roosevelt Library, one of Burgum's signature initiatives. Lauf is a member of the library's board of directors. It's true that Delzer voted against a state appropriation to build the library — really more of a museum — but that's not the basis of his involvement in the campaign against Delzer. The two simply don't see things in the same way.

Delzer is a "glass-half-empty" kind of guy. Burgum believes in budgeting from plenty — that is to say, let's fund what we can as opposed to Delzer's let's-guard-the-checkbook approach. Their disagreement became public during the organizational session of the Legislature after the 2018 elections. Burgum felt humiliated by a legislative dictum, delivered by Delzer, that executive budget bills wouldn't be considered; instead, the state budget would be built on legislative projections. Burgum's supporters have complained loudly about the consequences, which include — in their assessment —

a budgeting process that is harder to follow and creates opportunities to hide money that the state might otherwise be able to spend.

This isn't a trivial matter, of course, but it doesn't get to the beating heart of the dispute. The beating heart is the question of power.

And that, political junkies, is what is so fascinating about this dispute, because — your money is safe on this bet — Burgum's involvement in this race will have repercussions in the next legislative session. Of course, Burgum had problems enough with lawmakers throughout his first term in office, including standoffs, lawsuits and state Supreme Court judgments. There's likely no end of that, given developments last week.

Here, as a portent, is Chet Pollert, Republican majority leader in the state House, who supports Delzer (and tends to understate things): "If Jeff wins, great. But there will be some difficulties. If Jeff loses, there will be a lot more difficulties."

That's only the start, of course. If a governor can influence, or even control, legislative elections, what becomes of separation of powers? The state constitution gives the governor relatively little power compared to the Legislature, as last session's budget battle indicates. Money could change that equation, and Burgum has money.

Mike Jacobs is a former editor and publisher of the Herald.

VIEWPOINT

## Altru still here for care you need

By Steven Weiser

Over the past few months our country has been completely consumed by the COVID-19 crisis. Never before has the concern over the health of ourselves, our neighbors, and our healthcare workers taken priority as it has today. As a physician, experiencing the nationwide rally to combat this disease has been truly remarkable.

While this focus has certainly slowed the spread of COVID-19, it's also had an unintended serious impact on the overall health of our nation. Across the country, patients are postponing care. They are ignoring signs and symptoms. They are avoiding the ER. This has led to advancing disease and more emergent care needed for patients. We do not want this for our community.

I want to assure you that Altru is safe to visit. Over the past several weeks we've established new processes and protocols with the safety of our staff and patients in mind. While we had to adjust our operations as we developed these protocols, we now have several measures in place that allow us to expand our services. For example, all Altru staff, patients and visitors are required to wear appropriate masks. Our staff, patients and visitors are being screened before entry to our facilities. Most visitors are not allowed. We've segregated care into sick and well clinics. We've greatly expanded virtual care across our system. We have implemented a quarantine and screening process for



scheduled surgeries. We have enhanced testing capabilities on-site. These are just some of the tools that ensure safety while continuing to fulfill our mission of providing healthcare for all.

As an ER physician, I know firsthand what can happen when we ignore our health. While we should continue to focus on the safety precautions related to COVID-19, I urge you to address your other healthcare needs. Schedule your annual exam. See your primary provider (we can see you virtually if you'd rather). Refill your prescriptions.

Get your necessary lab work. Don't ignore the symptoms of a stroke or heart attack. We will work with you to deliver the care you need in a manner you are most comfortable.

Thank you for your continued commitment to combat the spread of COVID-19 in our community. Please also remember to take care of yourself. As always, the team at Altru is here for you when you need us and is committed to keeping you safe and healthy.

Dr. Steven Weiser, of Grand Forks, is president of Altru Health System.



Weiser

## For UND, an essential step forward

Herald editorial board chart published by the Chronicle of Higher Education shows the plans for universities across the nation as they consider reopening in the fall. Most of the institutions on that list are planning — or at least leaning toward — traditional in-person instruction, or some sort of an online/in-person hybrid, for 2020-21. This is the right path forward.

There are approximately 200 universities included on the list, including UND and the North Dakota University System's other 10 institutions. Last week, the NDUS, with Gov. Doug Burgum's support, said it also plans to have students on campus this fall.

It's important to plan now for some sort of normalcy later in the year. Yes, precautions must be taken to ensure the safety and health of students, staff and the community. And as inappropriate as it may be to put this in terms of dollars, there could be grave financial consequences locally if students do not return in some form for the next semester.

The campus cannot hope to sustain its workforce without a plan in place for students to return. The financial health of the city's chief economic driver must be an important part of the equation.

Naturally, the safety of workers and students is paramount as UND and other universities consider their future. But without strong plans in place to at least try to come back to normal education in the fall, possibly hundreds of jobs are at risk.

At present, approximately 400 UND employees have been affected by a "reduction in effort" plan at UND, which faces an estimated \$11 million revenue shortfall in the current quarter. Those 400 employees are seeing their hours reduced to, in some cases, zero. It's approximately a fourth of everyone who works at UND.

That reduction is an unfortunate yet important step taken by the university to maintain financial stability. And if there is to be hope of maintaining those workers, it will take the return of students, and all of the things required to accommodate them — food services, bookkeeping, janitors and the like.

The impacted employees can be called back to work at any time, if and when the workload necessitates their return. Without students or a plan for a fall return, though, it's unlikely they will be called back anytime soon.

At UND, a group has been put together to invent a "new normal." Members are looking at how UND can preserve physical distancing, considering how it can limit group sizes, and ensuring the campus has enough health and cleaning supplies.

It also is working on best practices to offer a combination of in-person education and online offerings. As incoming President Andrew Armacost says, the "campus needs to remain a vibrant place where curiosity is developed, where learning happens and discovery happens." He said that can't happen with online-only classes.

Students will demand more than just online classes if they're to pay full tuition. And without full tuition, UND and other universities will continue to lose money and workers.

A fall resumption of classes at UND is an essential step toward normalcy for the entire community.

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