

OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.



Derek Larson
Special to St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Minnesota's outdoor assets are tailor-made for next phase of pandemic

On April 27, the Centers for Disease Control released new COVID-19 safety guidelines including expanded outdoor options for small groups. Once fully vaccinated, adults can now gather outdoors unmasked, travel within the U.S. without quarantining or testing, and join limited numbers of other vaccinated people indoors without masks or distancing.

This is good news for the approaching summer as better weather will allow many to take advantage of recreational opportunities that were sorely missed last summer under necessarily tighter precautions.

Nearby outdoor recreation is abundant. Here in St. Cloud the city's Parks and Recreation Department manages nearly 1,700 acres of parks, ranging from the massive Whitney Park complex and the showplace Munsinger and Clemens Gardens to modest neighborhood parks like Lions Park on the edge of Pantown. With almost 100 parks and two dozen trails, there is likely some city-owned green space within walking distance of most residents. Everything from playgrounds to formal gardens is available somewhere in the system and access is open to everyone.

Almost as close to home, Stearns County Parks manages over 2,650 acres of public land that includes lake and riverside parks, boat landings and canoe access points, historic areas like Quarry Park, and world-class resources like the Lake Wobegon Trail.

In 2018 Quarry Park alone drew visitors from 73 counties across Minnesota and from 38 states. There are modest charges for parking at Quarry Park and for shelter reservations and events at some other locations, but for the most part access to the county parks is also free of charge. Activities ranging from bird watching to fishing to bike riding and even a new archery range at Oak Township County Park near Melrose will be there as the weather warms.

A bit further afield the 66 Minnesota State Parks and other state Department of Natural Resources-managed sites offer bountiful outdoor opportunities that residents of other states might only dream about. The DNR manages over 250,000 acres of parks and trails, 59 state forests, 1,700 public water access points, 1.3 million acres of Wildlife Management Areas, and 192,000 acres of Scientific and Natural Areas.

Highlights include the deservedly famous Lake Itasca State Park, which is less than three hours from St. Cloud for a comfortable day trip. For canoers, the segment of the Mississippi River from

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OUR VIEW



The recently renovated Whitney Building is pictured Friday, April 16, 2021, in St. Cloud.
DAVE SCHWARZ/DSCHEWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

Historic tax credits make financial sense

Times Editorial Board

Minnesota's lawmakers are well aware of their power they hold in crafting state budgets, tax plans and policies.

Their decisions literally build the future Minnesota we will live in. This year, they will also wield considerable power over our past.

Minnesota's Historic Structure Rehabilitation State Tax Credit has for years provided a 20% tax credit to rehabilitate significant historic buildings across Minnesota and put them back to work for businesses. St. Cloud's Whitney Building along St. Germain Street is among the historic buildings to get new life through the program.

But the tax credit, created to help spur jobs and the economy after the Great Recession, is set to sunset on June 30, unless legislators take action. The House omnibus tax bill seeks to extend the program by eight years, the Senate by one.

Not everyone believes that preserving the past is worthy of state incentives. While history, nostalgia and community aesthetics are clearly desirable, they can logically be viewed as wants to be paid for privately, not needs to benefit from public support.

However, we think the program is smart financially as well as culturally, and we call on legislators should continue the program. Here's why:

- According to annual reports on performance of the program, which are required by law, the credits generally create about \$9 of economic activity for every \$1 spent in Minnesota.
- The program is well-controlled, with strict qual-

The Editorial Board

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ifications set by the state and federal government, starting with a requirement that the building be on the National Register of Historic Places and project approval from the State Historic Preservation Office. The credits are intended for and restricted to buildings with high intrinsic value, and those controls are in place to ensure that happens.

- The credits are only allowed for projects that will, after renovation, generate income.
- Reuse of existing buildings logically reduces waste by preventing wholesale demolition of properties worth saving.
- Historic buildings tend to be in the core of cities and towns. That means taxpayers avoid much of the cost that would otherwise be spent to extend utilities and streets or providing public services in new areas of urban sprawl.

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Vaccine hesitancy is understandable, but get your shot anyway



Barbara Banaian
Special to St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

I received my second COVID-19 shot last week. It wasn't without hesitation, but now I am glad to have had both shots. Hopefully I am doing my part to protect myself and community. I felt like I was part of something bigger than myself.

Vaccines seem to bring us closer together. There was a real sense of a shared experience in the facility I was in. People of all ages were around me, and it felt very positive. And I think everyone is looking forward to COVID-19 being eliminated, or at least receding to the level of concern we have for a winter cold.

But there are polls and news reports that tell us there is "vaccine hesitancy,"

and chances are you know some people who have it, as I do. Although enthusiasm seems to be growing, there is lingering hesitation, especially among the young.

I grew up having lots of vaccinations without consequence. But the COVID-19 vaccines are different: They are the first vaccine without using the virus itself. The process is new, and it is faster than we imagined a year ago, but its newness causes some to hesitate.

Another aspect of hesitancy could be the Tuskegee experiment. For some communities of color, public health has been used to very poor ends which have harmed people. Much later, in 1976, in response to a perceived outbreak of swine flu in New Jersey that killed a soldier in Fort Dix, a vaccine was put into national distribution rapidly. News stories told of side effects which were a very, very small share of the 45 million doses distributed.

I remember that vaccine, going with

my father to an armory and standing in line. My experience last week was more positive than that experience.

Another contributing factor could be how people are researching on their own, through the internet, and drawing their own conclusions.

Some wonder if herd immunity would ever apply to COVID-19. This would mean some could avoid the shot while being protected by the positive impact of others. The best answer we have right now is we don't know what constitutes herd immunity. What we know is that this vaccine, at least for some period of time, keeps us healthy and reduces spread of a virus that is quite infectious. If one can become re-infected with COVID-19 — and again, we don't know the answer to this — it is important to get the shot.

The more people who are vaccinated, the less opportunity COVID-19 has to mutate and create variants. We are witnessing India suffer from a variant that

has unleashed a deadly second wave. A million new cases have been reported in three days and their health system is overwhelmed. A new variant in a densely populated country is very dangerous.

I understand the hesitancy, and I do not think all who hesitate are irrational. Public health has made mistakes in history. That is why transparency, completeness and compassion are all needed in helping people work through their hesitancy. I had to work through mine.

I am grateful to the researchers and scientists for making the vaccine, and for the early volunteers. If you are eligible and haven't gotten the vaccine, please consider it, as it will protect you and others.

— *This is the opinion of Times Writers Group member Barbara Banaian, a professional pianist who lives in the St. Cloud area. Her column is published the first Sunday of the month.*