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THE OPINION PAGE

In the Mail: letters@gfherald.com; Box 6008, Grand Forks, N.D. 58206

OUR VIEW

Chilling wind from Bismarck

Minn. counties won't secede, but what if?

Herald editorial board
A proposal put before the Minnesota Legislature, introduced by Republican Rep. Jeremy Munson, outlines the growing divide that exists between metro, or eastern, Minnesota and rural outstate counties.

Munson introduced legislation that would allow counties to decide whether to stay in Minnesota or join Republican-dominated states like North Dakota and South Dakota.

Actually, Munson's proposal tends to point more toward a move to South Dakota, potentially creating a massive L-shaped state that would include South Dakota as well as a segment of Minnesota that runs west of a north-south line east of Baudette, Minn., and through St. Cloud and Mankato.

Munson, of Lake Crystal, Minn., started a petition on his website; shortly after he announced the proposal, he had gathered nearly 6,500 signatures.

It's never going to happen, but since it's in the political sphere, it's worth discussion. The proposal, HF 2423, would allow counties to "disassociate with Minnesota and join neighboring states," Munson said in a letter to the Mankato Free Press. "It's a long process that requires four steps, much discussion and both a statewide ballot initiative and congressional approval."

Munson said he drafted the legislation after talks with many people over the past two years. In Minnesota, most rural counties lean right; the metro counties lean left. Meanwhile, metro counties have vastly different legislative priorities than their rural counterparts.

Via Twitter, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem recently said – apparently in reference to Munson's proposal – that "in South Dakota, we roll out the red carpet for people who love personal responsibility and freedom."

South Dakota and North Dakota both supported former President Trump with more than 60% of the vote in the past two presidential elections, as did most of rural Minnesota. So, if a secession is allowed and counties begin an exodus from rural Minnesota, those dark red counties would find a political haven in the Dakotas.

David H. Montgomery, who has vast news experience in Minnesota and South Dakota, penned an interesting analysis article on Munson's proposal for Minnesota Public Radio.

A few of Montgomery's points:
► The roughly 300,000 Democrats who reside in the (hypothetically) seceding Minnesota counties wouldn't be pleased. Nor would the roughly 900,000 Republicans who would be stranded in eastern Minnesota.

► South Dakota politicians would face great challenges. For example, can't-lose Republican Sen. John Thune would, no doubt, have serious competition in a Republican primary.

► Residents in Bemidji or Willmar likely wouldn't be pleased with a state Capitol in rural Pierre, S.D. Moving the center of government from Pierre would infuriate South Dakotans.

► And while Noem might have open arms on this proposal, would other South Dakotans? After all, if Munson's plan ever became reality, South Dakota could see a million new residents – easily outnumbering the state's current population. While they might agree in principle on conservative issues, how would those ex-Minnesotans vote on, say, mining and ranching issues in the region South Dakotans simply call "West River"?

In the end, it doesn't matter. Nothing will come of this, except publicity for Munson. And we agree with the Mankato Free Press that this is a waste of legislative time and, potentially, taxpayer money.

Here's a riddle for you: What does a stiff north wind have in common with the North Dakota Legislature?

Answer: They both have a chilling effect.

That's been evident for quite a while. Several weeks ago, I used the word "reactionary" to describe this session, though I made clear that I didn't mean it pejoratively.

But the last fortnight has brought even more restrictive legislation. Today, the appropriate adjectives are regressive, unnecessary and expensive.

The measure gaining the most attention is Senate Bill 2030, which prohibits state colleges from signing contracts for research that performs abortions. The bill as amended threatens arrest, fines and potential jail time for any faculty or staff who sign such a contract.

This is aimed at NDSU, which has an ongoing contract with Planned Parenthood to "provide evidence-based sex education for at-risk youth in the state." The quote is from a correction in Sunday's Herald. An earlier story had said the grant trained teachers to teach sex education.

In any case, no abortions are involved. Planned Parenthood does provide abortions, but not in North Dakota. Nevertheless, NDSU has become a target, and so, potentially,

have other colleges and universities in the state. This is alarming enough that a petition opposing the bill gained more than 1,000 signatures in two days.

While the bill has a superficial link to North Dakota, it makes more sense to understand the move as part of a larger strategy that's national in scope. Arkansas' transgender legislation was in the news last week.

Other legislation that's emerged in North Dakota this session only strengthens that point of view. Another bill attempts to regulate participation by transgender youth in school athletics, for example. Then there's the bill, already passed, that permits displaying the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. And the repeal of the Equal Rights Amendment.

All of these are linked to State Sen. Janne Myrdal of Edinburg, who's been described as the Legislature's "most ardent opponent of abortion" in the state's newspapers. This is not her first rodeo. In 2014, Myrdal presented an initiated constitution amendment "relating to the inalienable rights to life of every human being at every stage of development." The quote here is the amendment's ballot title.

Voters turned it down 64% to 36%.

It's a little difficult to understand, then, how legislators have become fixated, yet again, with this issue – fixated enough to drag in a number of other issues that have no

pressing importance in North Dakota.

At least not yet, but it's not hard to imagine the consequences of legislation of this kind.

Higher education leaders spoke out against the Planned Parenthood bill. NDSU President Dean Bresciani called it a threat to academic freedom. Mark Hagerott, chancellor of the North Dakota University System, worried aloud about the impact on the state's 10 other public colleges and universities.

This sort of thing gets around, and it could be damaging to the institutions involved and to the higher education system and to the state. It could have a chilling effect on recruitment of students and retention of faculty.

The chill comes just as the university system has reached a level of stability that it hasn't known in a quarter century. A series of constitutional amendments aimed at restructuring governance of higher education were defeated, indicating a strong level of support for the higher education system – which has been the usual result of attacks ever since the current Board of Higher Education was established in 1939.

Recent developments suggest that the two research institutions, UND and NDSU, are poised to cooperate with one another and to enlarge the state's research capacity. The university system contracts with private organizations to fund research. Many of them are involved in controversial undertakings. This is commonplace

on college campuses, including UND, which get millions from oil and oil companies, and NDSU, which gets millions from ag chemical companies.

These are hardly the only impacts. Others may be as serious, both by reducing enrollment, which means a hit on college budgets, and discouraging academic talent from applying here for fear of gross interference on the state's campuses.

That's not quite all, as Tyler Axness, a former state senator, pointed out last week. On his blog called ND xPlains. He asked, "How much money have these extreme lawmakers cost North Dakota?" Note: He's talking cash, not credibility.

His answer: "We can baseline the cost at \$2.8 million just for NDSU alone, just because of a vendetta." That's the lost Planned Parenthood contract. The impacts of the loss to at-risk young people isn't included here. It can't be calculated.

There are other potential monetary losses, among them, defending lawsuits that might challenge the Ten Commandments bill. More seriously, tourism promoters in the state's major cities worried aloud about losing sports and entertainment events if the bill regulating transgender athletes becomes law. These events bring big money.

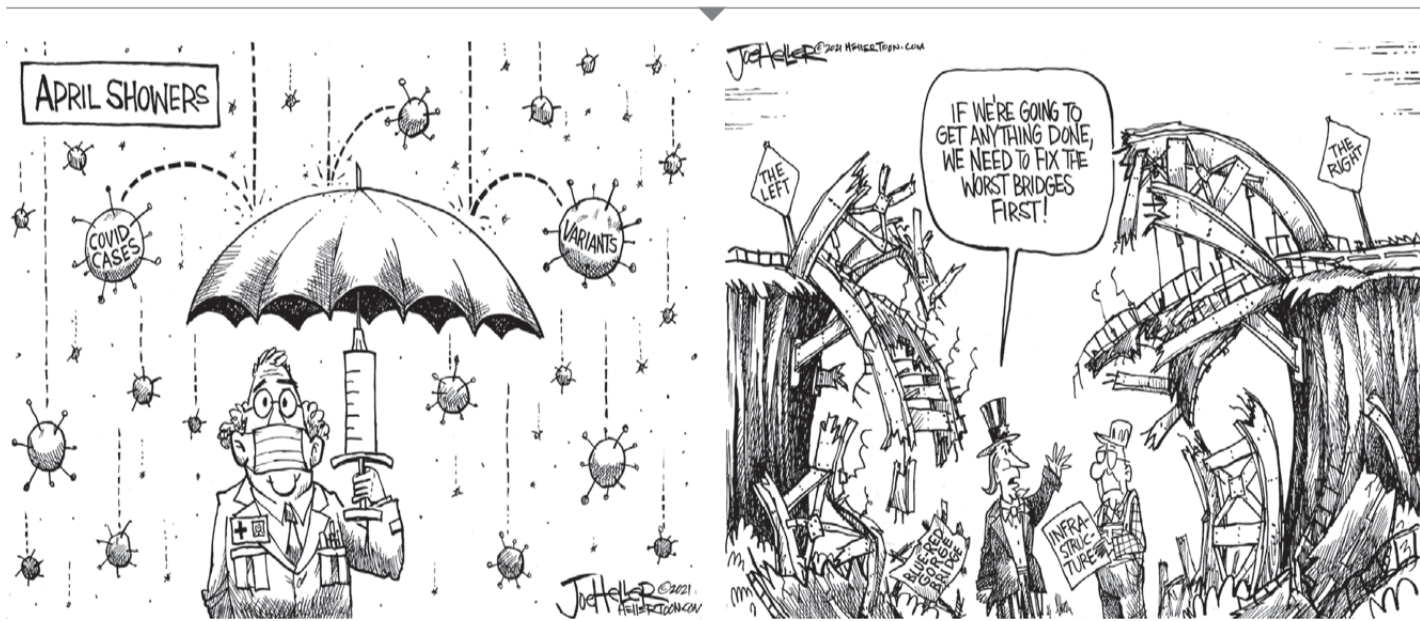
So, the chilling effect of the mean wind blowing out of Bismarck is a threat to the state's cash, too.

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



MIKE JACOBS

DOUBLE PLAY



IN THE MAIL

Here's why you should get vaccine

To the editor,
For those reluctant to get COVID vaccinations, important points:
1. Certain ill people cannot get the vaccine. Other illnesses render the vaccine less effective. Unfortunately, these people also are at greatest risk of death from COVID. Let's call them the No. 1's.
2. Why not get the vaccine? Is it inconvenience, fear of needles, sore arm or brief achy symptoms? If yes: You can help save No. 1's by getting vaccinated. The sooner "herd immunity" happens, the sooner the

COVID threat goes away. What's herd immunity? Herd immunity means so many people are immune, the virus stops circulating. It allows No. 1's to buy groceries and gas, visit loved ones and go to doctors just like you do, without fear of death.
3. Is it because of mixed messages, media reports? If yes, I sympathize! Consult your family doctor, ask questions.
4. If you don't get vaccinated, you are a threat to No. 1's. With herd immunity, No. 1's can go out in public or have caregivers and loved ones around them without fear of COVID (and certain death). Smallpox, a highly fatal illness, complete-

ly disappeared decades ago due to vaccination herd immunity.
The unvaccinated should please reconsider. I was vaccinated for three reasons:
► I care very much about the welfare of No. 1's; my conscience made me.
► COVID cannot make me severely ill, if at all.
► Things like businesses and activities will get back to normal sooner.
P.S. I had a mildly sore arm, that's it.
Mary Koponen
Grand Forks
Koponen is a retired medical technologist.

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Grand Forks, ND 58203-3707
www.grandforksherald.com

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Korrie Wenzel, publisher/editor 780-1103, kwenzel@gfherald.com
Staci Lord, advertising director 780-1156, slord@gfherald.com
Beth Bohlman, circulation director 780-1218, bbohlman@gfherald.com

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