

OUR VIEW

Lights got away,
but not spirit

The popular Bentleyville Tour of Lights was born in Carlton County in 2001 and is now the biggest Christmas season event in Duluth's Bayfront Park. We are proud of its Carlton County heritage and with how the display seems to get better and better every year.

Last year Covid kept visitors in their cars for a drive-through experience, but the high number of vaccinated people in Minnesota, along with the cold weather, has allowed the event to return to its stroll-through format, letting people linger as long as they want, mingle, and tour the displays as they see fit.

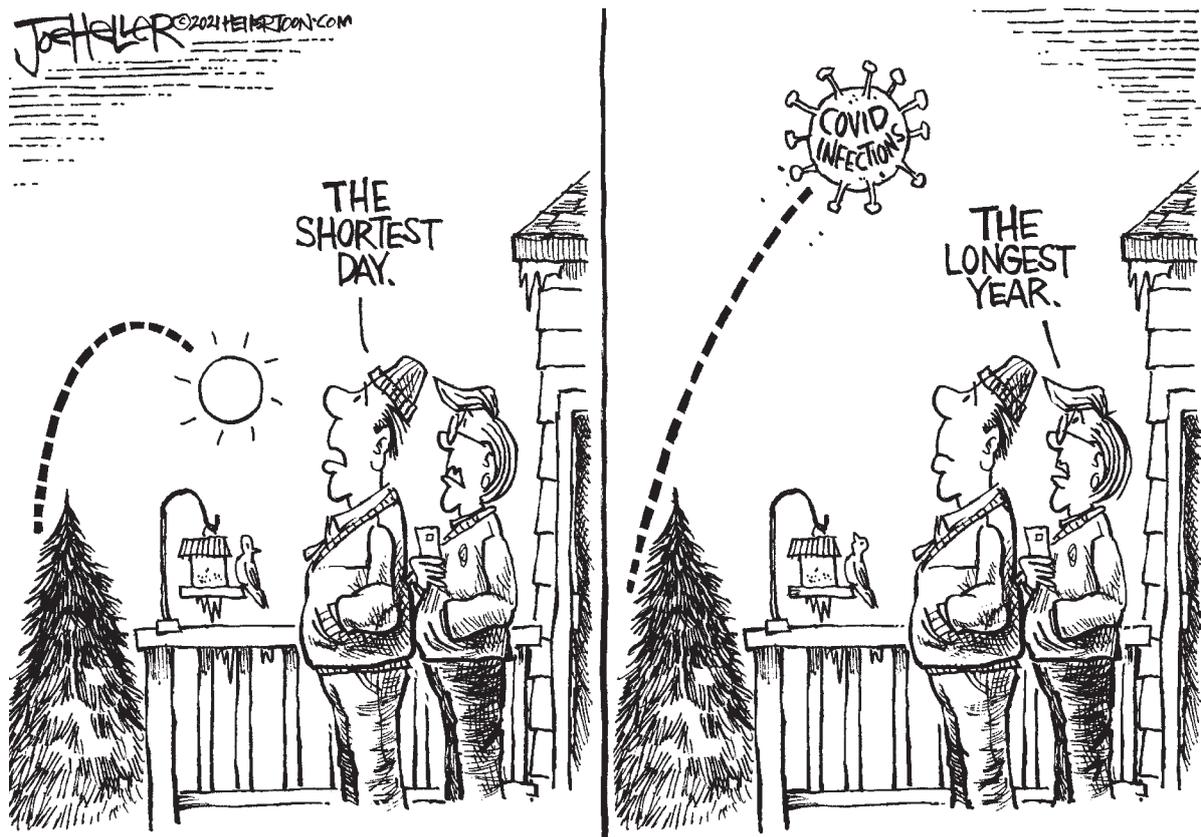
Santa is available for questioning, by children and grown-ups alike, and if you've been nice — and you're a child — he'll give you a Bentleyville stocking cap. There are Christmas cookies, cider and hot chocolate to enjoy as you stroll through the displays or warm yourselves by the fire pits. It's often crowded but never hurried, and bumping into others seems to bring smiles to everyone's faces.

And, it's all free. Not one of the more than 300,000 annual visitors is charged admission. Sure, a donation is appreciated and there are collection areas for food and toys to be given to the Salvation Army, but there's no pressure. There are sometimes long lines of cars vying for the parking spots (the city charges \$10 per car), especially around dinnertime, when the display seems most popular. It's open at 5 p.m. daily through Dec. 27. It's even open on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

We appreciate the spirit of this event, just as we appreciate the Wood City Music Festival, aka the Wood City Worship Festival, which operates on a similar business model. Both rely on many volunteers to carry out everything from setup to cleanup, and neither expects anything in return from its attendees. As a result, we've seen the goodwill each event generates spread throughout our community.

The Bentleyville display is located between Interstate 35 and the Duluth waterfront, and it's a spectacle even while just driving by. But it's better to stop by and visit in person. The magic of making memories with your family and friends has become an annual event for those who visit, volunteer, donate and assist.

We're a little wistful that we let this terrific display leave Carlton County, but we surely appreciate the genius of Nathan Bentley, his family, and all the volunteers they've assembled to make this a great holiday tradition.

Protest, sure, but be
constructive as well

The loud, disruptive protest at a recent Cloquet School Board meeting by a local resident of the school district was a shameful display of chutzpah, ignorance and entitlement.

People seem to think that government officials work for them. They don't. Cops work for the police department; highway maintenance crews work for the county, and teachers work for the school district. The school district is led by members of the school board, who are elected to the job. They don't work for you.

It's a common misconception. Cops hear it all the time: "You work for me!" says an angry citizen, pulled over for speeding or some such thing. "My taxes pay your salary!" It's an easy slogan and it's condescending and inaccurate. Just because we all chip in, through our taxes, to pay such people to do their jobs doesn't make them our employees. The ice arena was paid for with taxpayer money: you don't think you have the right to go use it anytime you want and make demands on its employees, do you? I hope not.

Besides, if the cops worked for me, I say they get a raise and have Saturdays off.

So a guy disrupting a school board meeting demanding answers and insulting the members is simply unacceptable conduct.

This local resident seems proud that he disrupted the meeting and caused a scene. But nothing got done, unless his goal was to increase security at future school board meetings (the school is now hiring the liaison police officer to attend school board meetings as a result of the incident). If this guy intended to

get increased security at school board meetings, he could have just expressed his concern and suggested they needed cops there. He didn't have to demonstrate why it would be necessary. Somehow, I don't think that was his goal.

He also started demanding answers, but didn't even stop to listen to the board's responses. Expecting elected officials to answer all your questions is naive. They are not "your" school board; they don't represent "you." They represent the people of the school district. You are just one of many: in the case of the school district, you are just one of more than 14,000 people the board members represent. They don't owe each and every person individual answers. That's ludicrous.

And the insults: how often has insulting someone gotten what you wanted? Never? This protester accused the board members of being "paid off." I'm not sure why a person would believe it's so easy to pay off a school board member to vote a certain way on student health issues. I have never met a school board member who is in it for the money. They campaign for the seat — often spending their own money on campaign materials — get elected and attend many board and committee meetings, respond to constituent contact; all for a paltry honorarium. And if they accept a bribe, they are charged with a felony in Minnesota, no matter how small the bribe is. His accusation was slanderous.

The school board, like many public government bodies, allows citizen input at their meetings. It's a terrific idea, and it allows the

board to get a sense of what parents (and others) are concerned about. But it's not a referendum, and it's not a public vote. Becoming belligerent and "shaking things up" at a school board meeting is not an acceptable way to exercise your free speech rights. There are things you just shouldn't do. For example, you don't show up at a funeral to collect a debt from the deceased. It's classless.

Too many people feel they have the right to express themselves however they want. They don't. I feel the same way about highway protesters. I can understand that people want to make an impact on issues dear to them. And I understand their frustration when others don't feel as strongly as they do. But closing down a bridge or freeway to show dedication to your cause is counterproductive. You get no respect from the decision makers, and all you get from the people you made late is contempt.

There are better ways to stage your protests than disrupting meetings and closing down roads. Making civilized statements at the public portion of a meeting is how you do it. Getting a permit to close down a street for your organization's protest is how you do it.

I'm not advocating for any new laws or policies about this. I just wish people had a little more respect for each other. I think that would go a long way to solving our society's problems.

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