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THE OPINION PAGE

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OUR VIEW

Home rule a logical step to fix problem

Herald editorial board

If asked to decide today, would Grand Forks voters approve a home rule charter for the county? In the past, such proposals haven't fared well, failing in 1992 and again in 2008.

But discussions on home rule have begun anew as the Grand Forks County Commission considers how it will pay for expansion and upgrades at the county jail and for a new juvenile detention center.

At the Grand Forks County Correctional Center, the functional capacity is 180 inmates, but recent years have seen averages of 200 or more. And Bret Burkholder, the facility's administrator, makes a good point about the wear and tear that occurs there: Since it's used 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, things deteriorate faster there than at, say, a county office building that is only used eight or 10 hours a day, five days per week.

And at the current juvenile detention center – built in 1978 – a host of modern upgrades are needed.

All told, the price tag could come in somewhere around \$30 million.

How to pay for it all? County leaders are proposing instituting a sales tax that would spread the burden throughout the county and beyond. To do it, though, the county must move from its current governmental format – one that falls within a defined set of rules dictated by the state – to a home rule format, which would allow for unique modifications to things like local taxation.

It's possible a vote on home rule could happen this year – perhaps in June or November.

Even if home rule is approved, it doesn't mean the sales tax increase is a sure thing, since a second vote would be required to actually increase the tax.

It's not a new idea. Other counties in North Dakota have adopted home rule charters, including Walsh, Richland, Cass, Stutsman, Ward, Steele, Williams, Hettinger, Burleigh, Morton, Sargent and Towner. Dozens of North Dakota cities also have adopted home rule charters, including Grand Forks.

Advantages include flexibility in budgeting and revenue sources, as well as flexibility in government organization. For instance, the county could create or reorganize departments and agencies to better serve local needs. However, home rule would not eliminate elections to determine the state's attorney or the sheriff.

Home rule allows taxing entities – in this case, the county – to more broadly spread a tax burden. Residents would have the right to initiate measures or refer actions taken by the County Commission.

Further, it provides more opportunity for local control, without state interference.

County Administrator Tom Ford said a myth that surrounds home rule is that it allows local governments to enact new taxes without consent from residents. He said that's not true – home rule, he stressed, simply allows the county to propose new taxes to pay for essentials. Residents then ultimately decide via elections.

As the County Commission begins the process and lays out its case for adopting a home rule charter, it seems to be a logical step to fix a funding conundrum that exists in the county.

And, as Ford said in a recent Herald report, the upgrades at the jail and juvenile center need to be done and "it can be paid for through property taxes, or it can be paid through sales taxes."

We prefer the latter, and it will take a home rule charter to accomplish it.

Address immigration to beat labor crisis

By Christopher Richardson

For the Chicago Tribune

At a recent news conference, when pressed about America's labor shortage, President Joe Biden dismissed criticism of his economic policies as "malarkey" and suggested our nation's labor shortage is merely a sign of our booming economy. To many, the causes of the labor shortage are either low wages from corporations or generous unemployment benefits that allegedly discourage people from working.

Resolve one or the other, the thinking goes, and everyone will go back to work, right? Wrong.

Even with the end of the government paying extended unemployment benefits and corporations rapidly raising wages at the fastest rate in 20 years, the labor shortage continues unabated. The only answer is bold, expansive and daily leadership akin to Franklin Roosevelt's and involves the strongest arrow in the president's quiver: legal immigration. Without such action, our country will forever be dealing with supply chain shortages, slower service and meager economic growth.

At the heart of our labor crisis is a confluence of events over the past five years. In 2018, there were more than 52 million adults age 65 or older, and by 2060 that number will grow to 95 million. While some will

work longer, the vast majority will retire. This trend, though bad, was manageable, but baby boomers began retiring at the same time of the most anti-immigrant administration in history and a once-in-a-century pandemic. These events served as an accelerant.

The Trump administration, via its over 400 changes, decreased immigration to the United States by close to 50%. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has killed some 835,000 Americans, many of them working age, and it also has forced millions of baby boomers into early retirement. All the while, the birthrate in the United States has fallen to its lowest rate ever.

If Biden wants a template for how to lead on immigration, ironically his predecessor, Donald Trump, seems to offer the best. For all of Trump's failings, he and his people understood the levers of immigration better than any administration before. Stephen Miller, Steve Bannon and Trump worked hourly and aggressively on a daily basis to keep legal immigrants out. The breadth and scope of our current labor crisis will require Biden to have the same energy in strengthening the legal immigration system. Biden will have to lead directly on this crisis, and he can start by looking at his own administration.

Right now, there are nearly 1.5 million pending worker permits

for immigrants who are already in America. The number of pending worker permit cases is growing despite the fact that Congress allocated millions to U.S. immigration officials during the pandemic specifically to avoid this issue. That represents more than a million immigrants already here who want to work, but they either cannot or are under threat of not being able to work due to government bureaucracy.

Team Biden needs to allocate whatever resources are necessary to get that backlog to zero. We need to get these legal immigrants who are here and ready to work off the sidelines and into U.S. businesses.

Second, Biden has recently increased the number of temporary workers permitted to enter the country by 20,000, but that is a drop in the bucket compared to the millions we need to sustain even meager economic growth, let alone the kind of growth we as a nation are accustomed to. Congress provides the president with the power to increase it by much more, and he should take advantage of that and do so immediately.

A dramatic increase in visa numbers alone will not be sufficient, and Biden should directly engage his team to come up with efficient but secure solutions to more quickly adjudicate the millions of pending and

backlogged visas from foreign nationals here and abroad. Our current visa adjudication system is antiquated and built for the last century. The president himself needs to lean on his government to come up with bold and expansive ideas such as eliminating paper-only filing systems, conducting any required in-person interviews remotely or waiving them outright for low-risk travelers given the emergency economic circumstances we face. If revenues are an issue, he can even seek increasing administrative fees for expediting visa processing.

Biden must realize that on immigration, waiting for Congress to do what it hasn't done in 20 years of attempts simply will not be enough for U.S. employers, nor will it save our country from the prospect of inflation, stagnated growth and decline.

We need look no further than our competitor nations to see the cost of inaction. Japan's economic miracle turned into a lost decade, in part, because of its restrictive immigration policies, and China is under threat of growing old before it grows rich due to its shrinking workforce and rapidly aging population.

For America to avoid a lost century, the president must act on legal immigration and act now.

Christopher Richardson is an immigration attorney and former U.S. diplomat. ©2022 Chicago Tribune. Visit at chicagotribune.com. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

IN THE MAIL

Stand together to defeat COVID

To the editor,
The Sunday, Dec. 26, column ("Big government COVID-19 lie") by syndicated columnist Ben Shapiro – where he derided masks, testing, vaccines and pretty much any type of disease mitigation – was full of misleading and occasionally false statements.

Shapiro asserted that Joe Biden's statement that "he wouldn't shut down the country, he'd shut down the virus" was a lie. First of all, Biden's statement is not a lie, it's a very worthy goal. Shapiro goes on to say that nobody can shut down the virus and that government does not have the power to end a disease. That is where the lie is.

Yes, we can, and have, ended disease. But it takes a group effort.

We've beaten many diseases with vaccines, including but not exclusive to smallpox, polio, measles, tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis, hepatitis B and A, mumps and chickenpox.

Also, the argument that mandates are unconstitu-

tional is false. Nowhere in the Constitution does it say mandates cannot be used; in fact mandates are as old as this country and have been used many times. In late 1776, George Washington mandated that all his troops be inoculated for smallpox. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, we had to show proof of vaccines to go to school. Nobody cried and complained about some nonexistent "rights." People had a sense of responsibility and it worked.

Nobody has the right to spread or prolong a disease. We are blessed with many rights in this country, but a person's personal rights end when their actions are adversely affecting others.

Almost all the people dying of Covid today in this country are unvaccinated. Hospitals are at a breaking point in many cities and have been greatly stressed for almost two years. But what's worse is people with other emergencies – heart attacks, car accidents, etc. – are dying because they can't get into a hospital in time due to a lack of available

ICU beds.

This has gone on far too long, and we need to get tough. We need to get this virus behind us, but we won't do that if we listen to the Ben Shapiros of the world or to the other science-deniers on the internet. However, we can beat COVID if we all take some responsibility, do our part, and stand together against it, united as Americans.

Joe Chyle
Pisek, N.D.

COVID: Tail is wagging the dog

To the editor,
I have been following the current surge in COVID infections both in North Dakota and Minnesota and here at our winter home in Phoenix, Arizona. They are all showing record hospitalizations, nearly all of which are people who are unvaccinated. The latest data I have seen shows that North Dakota, Minnesota and Arizona are seeing record surges in COVID cases and nearly all of those people have not been vaccinated. Hospital beds are full, leaving virtually no room for people

with medical emergencies, life threatening illnesses, accident victims or people with necessary but "elective" medical procedures. When it comes to medical care and treatment, these folks go to the end of the line. More importantly I have been hearing that, when these folks do have an opportunity to be hospitalized, many of them are becoming infected with COVID from the COVID patients in the hospital. The medical caregivers are at their wits end and exhausted.

All this needs to be revisited. If you make a conscious decision not to be vaccinated and come down with COVID and need to be hospitalized, you should not be allowed to go to the front of the line. People with other legitimate medical needs should be prioritized, and unvaccinated COVID patients should go to the back of the line. COVID is not going to go away anytime soon, but when it comes to medical care, the tail is wagging the dog.

Bill Brudvik
Hillsboro, N.D.

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