

OPINION

TOM O'MARA | 58TH DISTRICT

Taxes? Fees? More taxes and fees?



Tom O'mara

What better time than the dog days of August for New York government to roll out an online vote for New Yorkers to choose the state's next license plate design.

Yes, you read that right. As a New Yorker, you have been granted an opportunity to "Vote for Your Favorite New York State License Plate."

Governor Andrew Cuomo proclaimed, "License plates are a symbol of who we are as a state and New Yorkers should have a voice and a vote in its final design... I encourage all residents to take part in choosing this piece of our state's history."

State Motor Vehicles Commissioner Mark Schroeder reasoned, "The time has come for New York to have a new license plate, which is why we worked hard to create design options that not only capture the heart of the Empire State, but also that our customers will be proud to put on their vehicles. I hope everyone across the state will take a few minutes to view the options and vote for their top pick."

Of course, what's really going on is that the state is launching a 10-year

license plate replacement program that will require, starting next April, millions of motorists to begin ponying up \$25 for new license plates. Want to keep your current plate number? That'll cost you an additional \$20.

As Rochester political commentator Bob Lonsberry recently wrote, "Would you prefer to be stabbed by a red knife, a blue knife, or a green knife?"

It's expected to generate at least another \$75 million or so for the state's coffers. According to the governor's announcement, "Beginning April 2020, through the plate replacement program, as customers renew their vehicle registrations over the next two years, those with license plates that are 10-years-old or older will be issued new plates. The current \$25 license plate replacement fee will be added to the cost of the vehicle owner's registration renewal. Customers may also keep their current license plate number for an additional \$20 fee."

In other words, the just-launched online voting "opportunity" is, plain and simple, Albany speak for, "We're giving you a chance to tell us what tax hike looks best."

On it goes in New York.

Back in April, my reaction to the new state budget was that Governor Cuomo and the Legislature's new Democratic, all-down-state, extreme-liberal

majorities welcomed back tax-and-spend government that's bad news for taxpayers, job creators, and workers. The 2019-20 budget relies on more than \$1 billion in new taxes and fees to support significant new short- and long-term state spending, including a new sales tax on internet purchases.

Keep in mind that the budget also set in motion new state spending commitments that will become increasingly expensive, including a system of public campaign financing, electoral reforms like early voting, a Green New Deal, college tuition assistance for illegal immigrants, and others.

Combine new state spending commitments and fiscal storm clouds on the horizon, and you get the need for more state revenue. You get a license plate replacement program, for example. Brilliant.

What's next? I have no doubt that New York State's current team of New York City, extreme-liberal leaders will be tempted, as always, to turn where they've always turned to deal with fiscal trouble: higher state taxes and fees. New York's Democrat leaders always prove that when the going gets tough, they go looking for a new tax.

Mandating new license plates highlights just the beginning, I'm afraid, of the tax-and-fee madness to come.

But don't forget to vote.

BILL THOMPSON | GUEST VIEWPOINT

Snopes needs to lighten up

In 2009 PolitiFact arguably changed journalism forever.

The fact-checking operation of the now-Tampa Bay Times won the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting with its 2008 election coverage. PolitiFact wasn't the first of its kind, yet its methodology and presentation, especially its renowned Truth-O-Meter, set it apart and quickly elevated it to the top of the genre. The Pulitzer also validated fact-checking as a legit form of news reporting.

A decade later — although exceptions emerge from time to time — many conservatives believe the self-proclaimed truth squads exist only to enforce liberal dogma found in the content of heavy hitters in the mainstream media. Reinforcing that view is online sniping between Snopes.com and the Babylon Bee, a conservative, Christian satire website that has emerged as the right's counter to The Onion, long the gold standard for internet satire.

Some recent headlines offer a sense of the world according to the Bee: "Proud Parents of 28-year-old Millennial Post Annual Back-to-Basement Picture"; "Bernie Sanders Arrives In Hong Kong To Lecture Protesters On How Good They Have It Under Communism"; "Shooter Walks Free as Police Tackle, Arrest AR-15"; "As School Starts Again, Nation's Parents Chant, 'Send Them Back!'"; "Woke Polar Bear Apologizes for Being White."

Yet of late the Bee is drawing attention for its skirmish with Snopes, which launched a quarter-century ago, long before the internet was really a thing, and certainly long before "fact-checking" was cool, and receiving Pulitzers.

For years conservatives, like liberals, found Snopes useful in dispelling too-good-to-be-true rumors and goofy claims in chain emails. Writing at National Review Online in 2004, for instance, California journalist Catherine Seipp called Snopes "indispensable," and "an invaluable resource for

sifting through political and media facts and fallacies."

It's unclear when the Bee appeared on Snopes's radar, but one of its earliest reviews of Bee content came in July 2016. The Bee "reported" abortion doctor Kermit Gosnell, imprisoned for a murder conviction related to his practice, was a surprise speaker at the Democratic National Convention. Since then, Snopes has evaluated Bee articles like the "Elevation Church" installing "a water slide to speed up baptisms"; the Southern Baptist Convention buying Chick-fil-A; police assuaging Millennial protesters by presenting them "participation trophies"; California requiring Christians to register Bibles as assault weapons.

Just this year, Snopes has tackled Bee pieces about CNN hiring hoax perpetrator Jussie Smollett, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez appearing on "The Price is Right" and guessing "free" for every bid, and Sen. Sanders pledging to round up ISIS fighters so they could vote.

Snopes has dutifully identified such articles as satire. But the feud intensified last month after Snopes reviewed a Bee article about Georgia Democratic lawmaker Erica Thomas, who reported that a man of Cuban descent told her to "go back" where she came from during a dispute in a grocery store and later changed her story. Snopes ruled that the Bee's version so closely mirrored reality that readers were confused and accepted it as serious news.

That matters because the liberal news site BuzzFeed subsequently reported that the Bee's editors and their defenders in conservative media felt Snopes's efforts were actually attempts to persuade social media moguls to de-platform the Bee and lump it in with fringe, right-wing hate groups. BuzzFeed noted Facebook, which once used Snopes as a fact-checking service, had threatened last year to curtail the Bee's distribution because of

Snopes's judgment calls.

In recent days Snopes has defended itself by highlighting findings by Ohio State researchers who studied the effectiveness of online satire. The report noted in part the Bee's offerings "were among the most shared factually inaccurate content" it found.

Factually inaccurate? That paper also highlighted a long post on Aug. 15 by Snopes explaining why it "fact-checks" satire. Founder David Mikkelson maintains audience reaction and not "political leanings" drives what Snopes researchers, very diplomatically, also suggests Snopes does so because people are too stupid or too lazy to figure out the joke. "Helping people distinguish the true from the not-true and build up their media literacy skills benefits everyone," he wrote. "That's what we do here at Snopes.com."

Yet many conservatives would argue fact-checkers themselves are fueling that problem with misleading or politicized grades about what constitutes a "fact."

The Bee has parried these thrusts from Snopes over the past few weeks with headlines such as "Obnoxious Snopes Writer Keeps Fact-Checking People's Jokes at Parties"; "Snopes Rolls Out New Opinion Check Feature"; "Snopes Offers Pre-Approval of All Statements Made During Tonight's Democratic Debates"; "Under Mounting Pressure From Snopes, Babylon Bee Writers Forced To Admit They Are Not Real Journalists"; and "Concerning Survey Finds Too Many People Believe Snopes Is A Legitimate Fact-Checking Website."

Making fun of politics used to be a storied American pastime, and a pressure valve. Now, humorless trolls drain the life out of everything. Sad. Lighten up, Snopes. And long may the Babylon Bee sting. *Bill Thompson (bill.thompson@thelidger.com) is the editorial page editor of The Ledger in Lakeland, Florida.*

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ban weapons of mass killings now

To the Editor, The article in last Sunday's The Leader titled "Reed discusses gun control," Tom Reed was quoted during a conference call with the media saying, "At the end of the day, these types of restrictions that are proposed on assault weapon bans, magazines and other items, to me, infringe upon our second amendment rights."

Are you freakin' kidding me? I too believe in protecting our gun rights according to the 2nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution or the U.S. Bill of Rights. But your stance, the NRA's and the rest of the far-right gun advocates' stance on this matter is just plain wacked in this world of domestic gun violence happening at an alarming pace.

The exact wording of the 2nd Amendment states, "A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." In 1791, the 2nd Amendment was altered to read, "The people have the right to have weapons because a strong militia is needed to

protect a free country."

We are talking about the Militia here for heaven's sake.

How does the NRA and you get the idea or believe that AK-47 and AR-15 style weapons and the like fit into this 18th century Bill of Rights?

Do you really think our forefathers who signed the Declaration of Independence would have supported military style armaments (that is, if they knew of them) to be legally owned or used anywhere other than on a battlefield? For crying out loud, they shot muskets back then and our forefathers had no possible vision of such mass killing machines to be produced by Joe citizen today.

It is time for "all" lawmakers to step up to the plate to save help lives by doing the right thing - ban high capacity assault weapons.

Tom Doud, Corning

Steuben Fair: Who is correct?

To the Editor, I enjoyed the 200th Anniversary Fair this year, as I have most of my 66 years. (I actually was at the fair-grounds the Saturday before, setting up my exhibits, then Tuesday through Saturday, and the following Monday.)

However, I had discussions with several people regarding the 200th celebration of The Fair. While this indeed WAS the 200th Anniversary, articles in the Steuben Courier and the insert about The Fair in the paper noted that The Fair did not run for 200 consecutive years.

According to the articles, there was a gap of 17 years at one point, and another gap of 9 years. This means The Fair ran for a total of 174 years between 1819 and 2019.

It was pointed out to me that The Fair's website states that it ran 200 years consecutively. I'm pretty sure the person who wrote the articles did not make up the dates.

Who is correct? Maybe the website needs to be changed? (BTW—I loved "Oscar," and I hope he will return)

Darlene Stever, Bath
(Editor's Note: In all of the Fair stories produced by The Leader and Steuben Courier Advocate, we quoted Kirk House, of the Steuben County Historical Society, who said there were two periods of time when the fair was not held due to financial reasons - 1824-1841 and 1844-1853. House said the fair has run consecutively since 1853.)