

OUR VIEW

Let the public health experts do their jobs

Last we checked, there aren't many, if any, epidemiologists or public health experts elected to any local county boards.

So why do so many county commissioners in the Grand Traverse region feel comfortable telling local health department leaders how to do their jobs? The trend toward local politicians taking swipes at the health departments for doing their jobs during a pandemic, for setting public health policy, has grown into a bit of an epidemic.

And it needs to stop.

We need look no further than the front page of the Record-Eagle this week for examples — Grand Traverse County officials decided not to renew the contract of their longtime medical director after he spoke out about their meddling in public health policy; and Benzie Leelanau District Health Department officials reported being pressured by several county boards to rescind mask orders.

Ironically, as justification for their own overreach, multiple local politicians have claimed the health departments in our

region have set public health policies that constitute overreach by the departments. We're talking about health departments setting public health guardrails in the midst of a pandemic to which nearly 700,000 deaths have been attributed in the United States alone.

Isn't setting guidelines to help keep our communities healthy and combat infectious diseases their job?

The idea that politicians on either end of the spectrum should feel comfortable inserting their agendas where science and medicine should dictate course is ludicrous. And let's not lie to ourselves here, we've seen elected officers on both sides of the political divide lever their power to sway public health policy at several junctures during the past year. We've witnessed a number of public health orders that sent state officials scrambling for scientific justification. And these latest efforts by local boards seem bent on hamstringing public health experts, precluding them from setting local rules. It's an alarming escalation of the politicization of public health.

Dr. Michael Collins, the soon-to-be-former medical director for the Grand Traverse County Health Department, probably summed up the situation best in his Aug. 27 column in the Record-Eagle criticizing an effort by Grand Traverse County commissioners to constrain the county health department they oversee.

“... Grand Traverse County is being held hostage by a commission of nonmedical politicians, out of their lane and unaware of the fragility of our current medical system,” Collins wrote.

There is a reason we hire engineers to design our roads, pilots to fly our airplanes and doctors to direct our medical treatment. Yet, for some reason, epidemiologists — the folks we hire to combat infectious disease outbreaks — have become targets of efforts to strip them of their expert status in this facts-optional era.

If we want advice on running meetings and weighing budget decisions, we will ask a local commissioner.

But we sure won't be asking our neighborhood politician for advice on combating a pandemic.

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