

# BOOMERANG OPINION

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## WYOMING EDITORIAL

### Wyoming leaders apparently want young people to leave

When months had passed since Americans received their last COVID-19 stimulus checks and certain fast-food lobbies remained closed due to lack of staffing, a common refrain could be heard throughout Wyoming:

“Young people these days just don’t want to work. They’d rather kick back and get paid to do nothing.”

But that makes one major, incorrect assumption: that there were loads of young people lounging around in Wyoming communities who could have filled those vacant service jobs that were causing people to be inconvenienced.

In fact, around the same time the grouching was happening, the Economic Analysis Division reported that the state’s median age had risen to 38.9, and Chief Economist Wenlin Liu said the “outmigration of young people” was one of the causes.

Of course, some people probably did stay home and live off their stimulus checks longer than planned. But the common gripe was incorrect for another reason. Even if there had been plenty of people looking for jobs, at least initially, those positions weren’t paying enough to cover the ever-increasing cost

of living.

The situation was just one symptom of the main problem: Wyoming simply doesn’t have enough young people (defined here as those 26 and younger).

Oh sure, the state’s leaders pay a lot of lip service to wanting to keep or attract young people. Yet, when it comes time to do the things that would help make that happen, they’re nowhere to be seen.

Truth be told, they’re actually doing more to drive older teens and 20-somethings away from the Equality State than to attract them. Whether it’s through their words or their actions (or inaction), state lawmakers and some other elected leaders are sending a strong message that young people aren’t wanted here.

How so? To answer that question, we have to consider what issues those born after 1996 say are important. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the top seven social issues for Generation Z are: health care, mental health, higher education, economic security, civic engagement, racial equity and the environment.

Now consider the most recent session of the Wyoming Legislature.

On health care, lawmakers once again refused to extend Medicaid coverage to those who fall in the “income gap,” where they make too much to qualify for the federal low-income insurance program but not enough to afford health insurance from the federal marketplace.

For the second year in a row, they said women shouldn’t have control over their own reproductive systems by attempting to ban all forms of abortion, and they debated until near the end of the 37-day session about whether to extend postpartum Medicaid coverage to mothers of

newborn babies, even as they stuffed a record \$1.8 billion into savings.

And when it comes to mental health, they created a trust fund to provide stable funding for the state's 24/7 suicide prevention lifeline but refused to put any money in it. (Could there be an example more emblematic of Wyoming's current problems than an empty trust fund designed to help keep people from ending their own lives?)

Lawmakers spent much of this year's session discussing whether parents and doctors should be able to provide gender-affirming care to children and whether transgender youth should be allowed to participate on single-sex athletic teams.

They continue to prop up the state's lagging fossil fuel industries at the expense of resident ratepayers and renewable energy industries, even as study after study by climate experts say continuing to burn fossil fuels is rapidly moving us to a point of no return when it comes to global warming. (What do they think is causing the Colorado River to dry up, exacerbating the state's worsening water issues?)

They try to prevent teachers from telling students that

systemic racial discrimination has been (and continues to be) a factor throughout our great nation's sordid history, as well as attempt to make any mention of gender identity in kindergarten through third grade a crime punishable by fines and jail time.

When it comes to Wyoming's economy and tax system, they'd rather stuff money into savings and draw the interest from it than spend it in ways that generate new types of good-paying job opportunities for young people and their families, fund the development of affordable housing, or build modern schools and other amenities that other states provide.

And when it comes to creating a tax system that rewards economic developers for drawing new industries to the state? Forget about it. We can't even begin to have that conversation.

When you point this out, the answer is usually, "If you don't like it, go somewhere else." Is it any wonder, then, why so many young people want nothing to do with Wyoming?

Of course, it's easy to lay the blame solely at the feet of our elected officials. But we have to realize that we play a role, too. From consistently re-electing the same people to failing to demand and reward new ways of thinking, we're all at fault for not making Wyoming more attractive to younger generations.

We like to end our weekly commentary with suggestions for improvement, but, in this case, there's really only one solution: Either we change our attitudes and start prioritizing young people and what they want, or we put on an apron, pick up a spatula and start flipping our own burgers. Your call, folks.

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