

About those door-to-door COVID mask danger rumors

BY BARRY SAUNDERS



We're not stupid here, so you - like I - never really believed the urban myths we grew up hearing about people waking up in a bathtub full of ice after a first date missing a kidney, HIV-infected needles stuck on gas pump handles, that Mr. Green Jeans was Frank Zappa's daddy.

None of those resonated, especially since everybody knew Mr. Rogers was really Frank Zappa's daddy.

But why did it seem somewhat plausible that

the story about a nefarious gang going door-to-door passing out masks that make people pass out could be true?

Possibly because of my own experience with masks.

In case you missed it and don't mess with the internet, there is a story warning that a group of outlaws is going door-to-door offering KN-95 masks that protect against COVID-19.

Before they leave, though - the story goes - they ask you to try it on to, you know, ensure a proper fit. (Sounds perfectly plausible so far, right?)

The next thing people remember after trying on the free masks is regaining consciousness and finding they've been robbed.

So far, at least, all of the

victims still had their kidneys.

Chill, homes. I've already checked with several police departments and none of them had heard a word about the alleged plot.

I contacted the Durham Police Department and, almost apologetically, asked about robbery calls in which the victims, not the suspects, wore masks.

"We checked with our Crime Analysis Unit and our Criminal Investigations Division and they are not aware of any calls similar to this," a spokesperson responded.

Same from Raleigh Police. And Charlotte.

Because I don't equate wearing a paper mask over my nose and mouth to protect others as infringing upon my constitutional

liberties, I rushed out to buy said masks at Dr. Fauci's urging.

The smell of the first new mask was vaguely familiar and not really unpleasant - but it didn't smell like what one would think a new mask should smell like.

Second mask? Same smell.

Had I gotten a bad batch or was this - to poison us with KN-95 masks - some kind of criminal or communist conspiracy?

The mask might indeed save others, but it seemed to be killing me.

In one of the funniest scenes from the greatest novel ever, *Don Quixote*, the famous knight's squire told him that his lady love, Dulcinea, smelled like a goat.

Incensed and offended,

headlights out at night, don't flick your lights to alert them: they'll come back and shoot you.

Being new in town and a reporter, I dutifully called Durham cop shop spokesman Dwight Pettiford and asked if this was true.

After he stopped laughing, he said that unfounded rumor re-appeared every few years. For weeks, he'd jokingly ask if I'd flicked my headlights at anyone.

I was embarrassed, just as I'm embarrassed that my first thought with the aromatic mask went to knockout gas or a communist plot. The incident taught a valuable lesson, though: it taught me to first look inward, which is where the problem with - and answer to - many of the things we fear reside.

It also taught me something Mr. Green Jean's used to stress - to brush after every meal.

Editorial board member Barry Saunders is founder of thesaundersreport.com

Governor: NC must move away from a gas tax

BY GOV. ROY COOPER

Republican lawmakers raised questions last week about how NC will pay for Gov. Roy Cooper's transportation plan. We asked Cooper, a Democrat, and Republican Sen. Vickie Sawyer to address the plan.

In North Carolina, we're no strangers to the threats posed by climate change and the economic opportunities presented by ever-changing technology.

We've watched hurricanes get stronger and floodwaters rise higher. Meanwhile, we see companies find cleaner and cheaper ways to produce electricity and get us from one place to the next.

By embracing the cutting edge of clean energy, we will combat climate change while building a stronger economy that lifts our entire state.

We've set ambitious goals and we're already making progress.

In 2018, I directed our state to develop a clean energy plan for the power sector. The N.C. Department of Environmental Quality convened public and private stakeholders and experts to craft a plan to reduce carbon emissions and a transition to renewable energy that will produce electricity for our homes and businesses in cheaper and cleaner ways.

That plan led to bipartisan House Bill 951 which requires our major utility companies to reach a 70% carbon reduction by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2050. By meeting these ambitious goals NC will be a national leader in clean energy, providing affordable, reliable electricity while getting high-paying jobs from companies that insist on leaving no carbon footprint.

We must build on our progress in the electric power sector by planning for the clean transportation economy that's coming to our country. Everywhere you look, leading auto manufacturers are shifting to electric vehicles. That market transformation is good for our environment and economy, but we have to be

ready for it.

Earlier this month, I signed Executive Order 246 which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions economy-wide. That means we must accelerate our state's transition to a clean transportation future, setting the realistic goals of having at least 1.25 million zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) on our roads by 2030, reducing economy-wide carbon emissions 50% by 2030, and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

Just as we did with the Clean Energy Plan, we will convene public and private experts and stakeholders to create a Clean Transportation Plan that will also focus on protecting vulnerable communities and seeking environmental justice.

The market is changing quickly. If we want to make, sell, buy or drive new cars here in 10 years, then our transportation infrastructure and policies must change with it. The Clean Transportation Plan will include strategies to increase equitable access to ZEVs and charging stations, reduce mileage on our highways and enhance the availability of public transit and rail and advance equity and diversity.

We need elected leaders in Raleigh to do their part. Whether due to the resilient rebuilding after storms, changes in the way people and goods travel, or the shift to zero-emission vehicles, we know we need to change the way we fund our infrastructure. A gas tax in a world that's turning away from gas isn't sustainable. So the hard work of agreeing to new funding sources is critical.

A clean energy economy is good for business and the environment. We want to make sure it's also fair, sustainable and less costly for all. We owe to our children and grandchildren great opportunities for decent paying jobs as well as a planet that will sustain us for generations.

Gov. Cooper is serving his second term as governor.



STEVE SACK (Minneapolis) Star Tribune

I see serious potholes in the governor's transportation plan

BY SEN. VICKIE SAWYER

Republican lawmakers raised questions last week about how NC will pay for Gov. Roy Cooper's transportation plan. We asked Cooper, a Democrat, and Republican Sen. Vickie Sawyer to address the plan.

On any given morning, I play with the snooze button, searching for a few more restful minutes before brewing my first cup of coffee and opening my laptop. After returning emails and reading the news I take stock of my day - work appointments, household errands, and making sure our daughter gets to school.

My carefully tailored plans go haywire as soon as I hit the road.

I never know when or how, but at some point, the anxiety-ridden battle of navigating congested traffic begins. It is a race to the next light, or a quick turn out of one lane to another, or a white-knuckled hold on the steering wheel as I see that no one really understands the flow of a zipper merge intersection.

I share this story be-

cause it's the same experience for so many other North Carolinians in our growing state.

North Carolina is at a crossroads. The future of transportation is quickly shifting from a reliance on gas-powered vehicles to electric vehicles.

The free market and governmental forces are favoring electric vehicles. That's not necessarily a bad thing. I am a fan of more fuel-efficient and electric vehicles because I want the cleanest environment possible in North Carolina. Plus, let's face it, EVs are just cool.

Gov. Roy Cooper recently announced a goal of getting 1.25 million electric vehicles on the road in North Carolina by 2030. For reference, as of December 2021, there were 24,997 EVs registered in the state. While I support embracing this new technology, we must be realistic about its impact on the DOT's financial picture and what it means for all of us.

What keeps me up at night is the fact that the N.C. Department of Transportation receives nearly 50% of its funding from a tax on gasoline

sales. That means as more EVs hit the road the state will have less money to maintain and invest in safe and accessible roads and bridges. Potentially eliminating half of the department's revenue source will have devastating consequences.

The NCDOT is already facing a dire financial situation. In 2017, mismanagement led to the department overspending by \$740 million. That's had a ripple effect on current and future projects that is still playing out in real time.

All over the state, projects that were promised to start a few years ago are being pushed to many years from now. I applaud the new leadership at NCDOT for hitting these challenges head on and working to solve the issues, but the impacts of past mistakes will be felt for decades to come.

When I heard about the governor's goal, I was concerned about what this means for all of us, our state's economic competitiveness, and for our future generations. Due to project delays, inflation, and rising material costs, the NCDOT is already

over budget by \$11 billion for future projects. If we want to keep up with the demands of our growing state, we must act now.

The General Assembly has started that process. In the 2021 budget we included an annual transfer of car rental revenue from the General Fund to the Highway Fund. Likewise, existing transportation-related taxes can be dedicated to our roads at no additional cost to taxpayers. However, we must address how EVs, hybrids and other emerging technologies will fairly pay for their use of the roads.

We need to have that hard conversation with the governor, NCDOT, and other stakeholders. We must find real solutions to supplement the loss of revenue as fewer gas-powered vehicles hit the road. We can't let politics get in the way of working together to find a solution.

Senator Sawyer represents Iredell and Yadkin counties in the N.C. Senate and is chairwoman of the Senate Transportation Committee.