

Riled Republicans: Masks, vaccination, Afghan immigrants and the 2020 presidential election had Oklahoma Republicans of various stripes in a tizzy last week. State GOP Chairman John Bennett, whose legislative career was marked by sharp anti-Muslim rhetoric, reverted to form with a video on the state party website condemning the evacuation of Afghan nationals to the United States. "There is no way the government can properly vet these people," Bennett said. "If the government says otherwise, they are lying." In Bennett's view, virtually all Muslims are suspect. "What Ten-year-old Muslim children are taught about Islam is the same as what Al-Qaeda or the Taliban teaches," he said. In a similar vein, state Sen. Nathan Dahm, R-Broken Arrow, filed a resolution asking Congress to give states sole authority on refugee resettlement. Other Republicans, including Gov. Kevin Stitt, have welcomed the refugees, who according to government officials are individuals vouched for by American military or civilian personnel with whom they have served. Meanwhile, in Tulsa, Republican U.S. Senate candidate Jackson Lahmeyer hosted an "Audit the Vote" event at his church, featuring one of the Arizona state lawmakers behind the long-running reexamination of presidential ballots in that state. Lahmeyer wants to overturn the 2020 election and is also a critic of most COVID-19 prevention measures. He is aligned with Clay Clark, the Jenks businessman who sued the city of Tulsa and Mayor G.T. Bynum over last year's mask mandate and refers to COVID as the "scamdemic." The Ekklesia of Oklahoma, a religious sect with political ambitions involved in the election of at least two state senators, told its followers that "healthy people do not die of COVID" and "do not take the vaccine." Instead, followers were encouraged to try ivermectin, a drug used to treat parasites and head lice in humans and, in higher doses, animals. Ekklesia founder Daniel Navejas also advised against remdesivir, an anti-viral sometimes used to treat COVID-19 patients although its efficacy is widely questioned. Meanwhile: State House Minority Leader Emily Virgin said complaining Republicans have no one to blame but themselves for President Joe Biden's attempt to enforce vaccination mandates on employers. Virgin said Gov. Kevin Stitt and Republican leadership have "remained silent"

while COVID-19 has surged, in large part because of Oklahomans who refuse to be vaccinated. “I understand that nobody likes a mandate, but if Republicans want to find someone to blame for the president’s actions, they should look in the mirror,” Virgin said. Instead, the state’s Republican leadership is promising to challenge Biden’s plan to impose workplace safety rules that would require all workers at businesses with 100 or more employees to be vaccinated or be regularly tested for COVID. Virgin also noted the Republicans have enacted legislation that prevents local school districts from requiring masks, although some districts are essentially doing so, anyway. “Last November, when 1,400 Oklahomans had died of COVID, our caucus asked Governor Stitt what his plan was to keep that number from getting to 2,000,” Virgin said. “Today, 10 months later, more than 8,000 Oklahomans have died, and we are still waiting on a plan from the governor.”

**Fines and fees:** An interim study by four Republican House members signaled that the funding structure of state courts, which rely heavily on fines and fees, is likely to be on the agenda again next session. “Under the current system, we run the risk of perpetuating the problem we are trying to solve,” Rep. Bob Ed Culver, R-Tahlequah, said. “The goal for any person who gets in trouble with law enforcement should be to rehabilitate them into productive members of society. If they are constantly indebted to the court system, that makes it much harder to move on with their lives. It’s important that we in the Legislature work with experts to determine if state-appropriated dollars can help fix some of the issues we are seeing.”

**Cyber stuff:** Also due to get another look is data privacy. After going down swinging on the issue last year, Rep. Josh West, R-Grove, and Rep. Collin Walke, D-Oklaoma City, filed new legislation that would limit how businesses gather and use digital information. “Last session we attempted to compromise with many in the tech industry on our data privacy legislation, but many preferred to not meet us halfway and stopped our bill in the Senate,” West said. “Because data privacy is clearly a matter of

personal, state and national security, we cannot wait any longer for implementation. That is why I am proud that we have authored the most stringent data privacy law in the nation for the second year in a row.

• Candidates and elections: Mark Sherwood, a naturopathic doctor and former Tulsa police officer, is a Republican candidate for governor. Sherwood has ties to the Ekklesia movement and to U.S. Senate candidate Jackson Lahmeyer. The Susan B. Anthony List endorsed U.S. Sen. James Lankford. Meetings and events: Dahm will be featured at the Republican Women's Club of Tulsa County at 11:30 a.m. Tuesday at the Tulsa Country Club, 701 N. Union Ave. Second District Congressman Markwayne Mullin will meet with constituents at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday at the Dutch Pantry, 10 W. Main St., Chouteau, and at 9:30 a.m. at the Mayes County Courthouse, 1 Court Place, Pryor. Bottom lines: Gov. Kevin Stitt's press office circulated a Wall Street Journal editorial headlined "Justice Gorsuch Tears Up Oklahoma" and targeting Gorsuch's McGirt. In an unusual move, House Speaker Charles McCall, R-Atoka, promoted Rep. Nicole Miller, R-Edmond, to chair the House Transportation Committee and named current Chairman Todd Russ, R-Cordell, who is term-limited, "chairman emeritus." This week the state Senate Finance Committee and the Senate Agriculture Committee, in separate interim studies, will take up the contentious issue of agriculture sales tax exemptions, which some officials believe are abused and which some rural lawmakers say are being unfairly denied. Stitt held a press conference to ceremonially sign nine anti-abortion rights bills he had already signed in the spring.

U.S. Sen. James Lankford participated in the Pregnancy Resource Network Conference, hosted by Hope Pregnancy Centers, a ministry of Oklahoma Baptist Homes for Children.

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