GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE BEND BULLETIN

Oregon District Attorneys on handling public record requests

Oregonians like to pride themselves on being leaders in such things as protecting beaches and imposing deposit fees on a variety of bottles. When it comes to transparency of government, however, we have nothing to brag about. Just ask a group of journalism students at the University of Oregon.

The students asked district attorneys in all 36 Oregon counties for copies of public records appeals filed with their offices. The DAs are the first stop in an appeals process that includes the Oregon Attorney General and, ultimately, the courts. Students also wanted copies of the DAs' responses to those records and asked to have fees waived. That information, they argued, would give the public an insight into how well district attorneys carry out their duties under the state's public records laws.

The district attorneys' responses were surprising, though perhaps they shouldn't have been. While Deschutes County's John Hummel had no problem with accommodating the students, more than a few denied the requests, arguing they did not meet the public-interest test. Even more, while they agreed to send the records, they failed to meet the deadline written into Oregon law in 2017: Agencies are supposed to acknowledge public records requests within five business days and, generally, respond to them within another 10.

As for what does and does not meet the standard of what's in the public interest, there is no "public-interest test" in Oregon beyond the DAs' own judgment on the matter. In these cases, the DAs were being asked to judge their own refusal, a situation that seems odd, at best. At the same time, some DAs proposed charging students upwards of $1,000 for the records, though some reduced or waived the charges as discussions progressed.

Moreover, your chances of getting a public record upon appeal can depend on where you live. District attorneys in Multnomah County, and now Deschutes County, post their orders regarding public records on their websites. Hummel said he did so because the students' request made him more sensitive to the notion of transparency in his office.

Things are different in Lane County. There, District Attorney Patty Perlow orders agencies to release records only about a quarter of the time, though that figure does not reflect cases that are resolved before a denial is issued.

Oregonians' ability to see how their government, no matter at what level, operates, should not be limited by the county in which they live. Records in Lane County should be every bit as accessible as those in Multnomah or Deschutes, no matter what a district attorney's view of the law is.

Lawmakers should be able to fix most of these problems easily, if they're of a mind to. They can make it clear that Oregonians expect their district attorneys to understand and uphold the public records law, deadlines and all. They should recognize that some agencies set fees high as a way of discouraging requests, and deal with the problem.

Doing those things would not solve all the law's problems, but it would surely help.

Your views

Journet: Oregonians must demand a strong greenhouse gas bill

To the Editor,

When Thelma and Louise drove toward the cliff, the driver put her foot down. Sure, it was just a movie and the scriptwriter made the choice for them. Unlike Thelma and Louise, we each largely write the script for our own lives, so we can choose whether or not to drive over the cliff.

Across the nation we have heat waves and droughts threatening our agriculture, snowpack dwindling, hurricanes beating up our coastal communities, wildfires burning our forests and homes, and smoke choking us. One would think the evidence is clear enough.

But apparently not to those with blinders, or with heads in the sand or inserted elsewhere.

We have choices. We can choose to act on global warming or accelerate over the cliff.

In Oregon, we can be pro-life for our kids by demanding our legislators pass a strong and meaningful greenhouse gas emissions reduction bill. Since voluntary measures have been in place for a decade, to our regret, the free market has clearly failed to address the problem.

Alan Journet
Jacksonville

Write to us

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letter writers are limited to one letter every two weeks.

Email your letters to news@lagrandeobserver.com or mail them to La Grande Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, 97850.

How Oregon handled its issues in 2018

Editor's note: On Monday, The Observer ran an excerpt from The Oregonian's opinion piece about Oregon's issues. This is a continuation of that piece.

Press for a student-focused education system

Arguing the state needs to develop a "student-focused" education system seems redundant. After all, isn't an education system all about students to begin with?

In theory, sure. In Oregon, however, the answer is a bit more complicated.

Too often it seems, leaders have put the interests of students behind those of adults. For example, elected officials are well aware that a growing share of education dollars is going to employee benefits as opposed to in-the-classroom investments, but they have shown little appetite to change that.

Nowhere, however, was the students-last mentality more obvious than the decision by the state board of education to roll back rules requiring school districts to schedule most high school students for full class loads. The board adopted those rules a few years ago after parents' complaints of "part-time" high school. But under pressure from school boards and administrators wanting more budget flexibility, the state board of education voted to allow broad exemptions to the instructional time requirements. Never mind that graduates of Oregon's K-12 system get a year's less schooling than their counterparts in Washington or that many have to repeat classes before taking college-credit courses. Fortunately, Gov. Brown, who has said she wants to increase the school year, has since directed the board to seek data from schools about their use of exemptions and review its decision in coming months.

On the flip side, the creation and work of the "student success" committee is an ambitious and dedicated effort to put students' needs first. A bipartisan group of legislators spent the year traveling around the state to hear from community members about what's working for schools, what's not and what they want Oregon's educational system to provide.

The committee, the brainchild of Senate President Peter Courtney, developed a host of policy recommendations. It is now paring down the long list into a package of strategic investments, designed to give Oregon's K-12 system the tools needed to improve student outcomes.

Another plus: The gubernatorial campaign between Brown and Republican challenger Knute Buehler directed new energy and attention into the problems afflicting the K-12 educational system.

While Brown emerged the winner, detailed vision for education prodded Brown to release her own platform. While the student success committee's recommendations will certainly shape how Oregon moves forward, Brown is already championing the need for a $2 billion investment of new money into education. Her buy-in and leadership will be critical to get even half of that revenue.

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