

**GUEST EDITORIAL  
FROM THE BEND BULLETIN**

## Oregon's public records law needs improvement

People seeking public records in Oregon get all kinds of abuse. Public agencies ignore them. Agencies overcharge them. Sometimes, agencies even sue requesters to stop from having to fulfill a request.

That's not the way the state's public records law is supposed to work. But that's the way some public agencies choose to implement the law — especially when a requester is seeking information that could make the agency look bad.

Several bills in the Legislature propose changes in the law to improve it. Not all of them will.

Two would make things worse. House Bill 2345 would reduce the public record fees charged by state agencies to members of the news media by 50 percent. If a request is narrowly tailored, the agency would be required to waive any fees.

This would be great for members of the news media. But it's the public records law, not the news media records law. The law is for any member of the public. The news media does not deserve a special discounted rate. The news media should pay or not pay the same amount as any other member of the public.

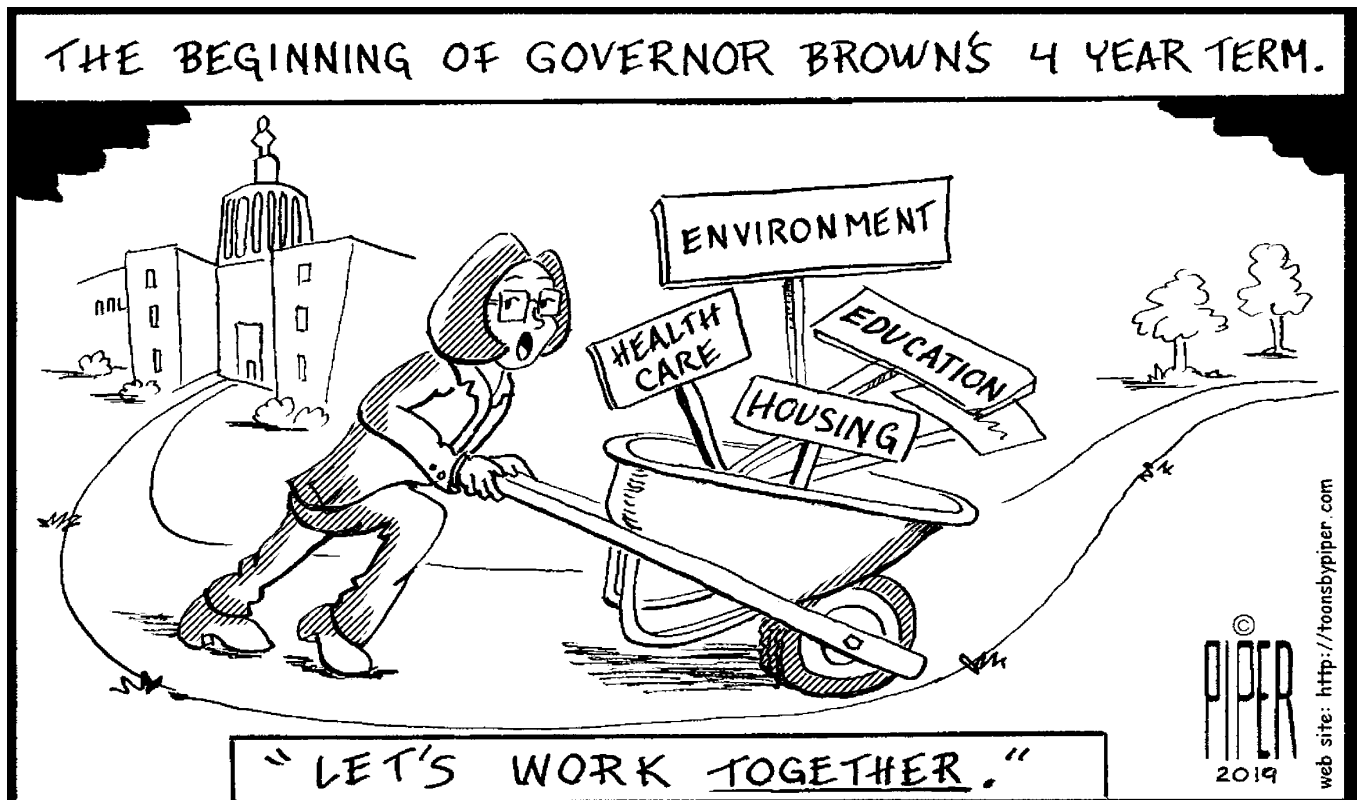
Senate Bill 609 would require that a requester tell a public agency how he or she intends to use the requested records. That's no business of the government. It's a public record. That means it's the public's information. Agencies could use the information from a requester to deny and delay requests. If a requester wants to disclose the information, that's one thing. That may help in disputes over the costs of records or in disputes over why a record should be public. But the disclosure should not be required.

There are also two proposed changes in the law that could make things better. House Bill 2353 adds some teeth. It would allow the attorney general, district attorney or a court to award a penalty to a requester — and attorney fees — if a public agency fails to respond to a request or responds to undue delay. The bill does not put a dollar figure on the penalty.

For instance, last year the Oregon Department of Human Services put us through the public records ringer. We asked for details about how it was responding to a state audit that said the agency was guilty of "chronic management failures and high caseloads" that "jeopardize the safety of some of the state's most vulnerable children." After more than a month went by without details, we asked for emails related to our request for information. The agency had 15 business days under public records law to tell us what was going on. It did not. It did not face any penalty for failing to comply with the law. We did eventually get what we asked for. But should public agencies be able to violate the law without even a token penalty? We don't think so.

Ginger McCall, the state's public records advocate, has pushed for another change in Oregon law that in a way has taken shape in House Bill 2431. The bill requires state agencies to make public the number of requests it received, the number of requests unfulfilled and information about how much was charged.

Passing the bill will enable Oregonians to better understand how well the public records law works — or often doesn't.



## Celebrating 50 years of helping people, changing lives

Have you been around long enough to remember EOCD? What about HELP, Inc.? Ever heard of Northeast Oregon Economic Planning and Development Council? It is hard to believe the organization that began in the 1960s as part of the "War on Poverty" and wasn't expected to exist for very long is still a strong, vital organization 50 years later. Its current name? Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, Inc. Why would a corporation change its name so many times? To best reflect the culture of the time? To reflect the evolution of the corporation's mission? Both reasons and many more.

What was Eastern Oregon Community Development Council? A spin-off from the Northeast Oregon Economic Planning and Development Council. In 1969, EOCD was designated as the Community Action Agency for Baker, Union and Wallowa counties. As they say, the rest is history.

As we prepare to celebrate our 50-year anniversary, I've pondered the existence of this organization, an organization that I have been a part of for 37 years: "Why and how have we survived for 50 years?" Over the years, we expanded and contracted more than once. It's a fluid organization and it has to be that way. Grant County was added in 1987. Some programs have spun off as the genesis for other organizations, some have completely disappeared, and some are stronger than ever.

Reading our scrapbooks is an amazing reflection of history. In the early years, community development was our forte. We worked to eradicate poverty by promoting economic development activities and fostering small business start-ups in the late 1960s and early '70s. We also organized gleaning programs and demonstration gardens and started Neighbor-to-Neighbor Ministries and Wallowa County's Interfaith Caregivers. We had the old CETA program and ran the alcohol and drug program for Union County. If you received butter and cheese in the USDA mass distributions in 1983, you got it from us, with help from the National Guard to distribute the tons of food throughout our region. Were you a part of the Blue Mountain Local Producers Market? That was us.

Our board of directors is unique as boards go. We are governed by a "tri-partite" board, meaning we have equal representation from three sectors — the private sector, the public sector and the low-income sector. Each of our four counties — Baker, Grant, Union, and Wallowa, — have equal representation. Here's the interesting part. Our board believes in a practice called decentralization, and we activity endorse this concept. Each county has at least one advisory council in which

local citizens make local decisions about program operations. The chairperson from one council from each county has a seat on our board of directors. Each county can tailor its services to fit its needs, and they do. For those of you who study organizations, this is an unusual concept, but it has been a very successful structure for Community Connection.

I could write about all the programs we have administered over the past five decades and the building of senior centers, a public transit hub and the many apartment complexes in which we played an integral role, but I prefer to think in terms of people, not programs. To think of the people whose lives we have changed, and the people who have been a part of "us" and helped accomplish our mission.

Are you one of those people with a link to EOCD, HELP, Inc., or Community Connection? Over a span of 50 years, you can imagine the number of employees, board members, advisory council members, donors and volunteers we have had. Thousands. How many people have benefited from our existence? Tens of thousands.

Fifty years ago, if you wanted your child to get a head start in school, you would have sent him or her to the EOCD preschool. Today, in La Grande, your grade-schooler can attend Kids Club at the Riviera Activity Center so he or she doesn't have to be home alone after school. Don't want your sister sleeping in her car tonight? We can find a warm bed for her. Do your neighbors run out of food before the end of the month? The food bank has a box of food to see them through. Are your parents lonely? They're welcome at the senior center to join the games, dancing, meetings and, of course, eat the delicious noon meal. Your mother can't get out to do her grocery shopping and needs help bathing herself and cleaning her house? Our in-home caregiver is ready to assist. Does your father's driving scare you to death, but you can't take him out every day? Our bus driver can. Are you getting ready to buy your first home? Attend our First Time Homebuyer workshop or get help paying for the down payment. Do your grandchildren need a nutritious lunch during the summer? Visit the summer lunch program in La Grande. Are you out of milk and bread, live a mile from the grocery store, have two toddlers in a stroller, it's snowy and windy outside and your car is broken down? One of our buses can take you to the grocery store. Are your toe nails bothering you? Are you worried about your blood pressure? Come to the senior center. Is that high blood pressure or other chronic disease causing pain or limiting your activity? Our six-week

**My Voice ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Margaret Davidson is the executive director of Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, Inc. My Voice columns

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workshop series can help. Does your grandmother sit huddled in a blanket all day because she must choose between heating her home and buying medicine? We'll help keep her warm during the cold months of winter. Do your pipes freeze every year? We can wrap your pipes and insulate your crawl space. Are you lonely and depressed after your wife of 52 years has passed on? I know someone who can help. Are you behind on your mortgage and facing foreclosure? Our certified housing counselor may be able to help. Do you worry about your uncle not eating right but he's homebound? We'll take him a hot lunch every day. Do you have a doctor's appointment in Walla Walla or Boise but can't drive yourself? Give us a call. Are you struggling to keep a roof over your family while you complete job training? We'll help with the roof. Want to play bingo? Call the senior center. Do your parents need help preparing their taxes? We can help. Want to learn how to control your energy costs? We can teach you. Do you like to volunteer and make new friends? Come to the senior center. Do you like to help people? Let's talk!

Over the years our name has changed, the faces have changed, but the bottom line has always been the same: helping people, changing lives.

Please join us in celebrating all that we have collectively accomplished over the past 50 years between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Jan. 28 at the Union County Senior Center. I look forward to seeing you there.

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