

**GUEST EDITORIAL**  
**FROM THE BEND BULLETIN**

## Voter suppression in Oregon

Oregon is a shining beacon of voter inclusion and empowerment. Or so we're supposed to believe.

True enough, the state pioneered vote-by-mail, which has allowed us to vote from our kitchen tables. It surged ahead with a "motor voter" system that registers people to vote whether they want to be registered or not. There's even a push in Salem to eliminate that barrier to voting commonly referred to as a postage stamp. If voting in Oregon were any easier, we'd do it in our sleep. But even as state policymakers, particularly Democrats, baste themselves ritually with praise for their participatory inclusiveness, the Legislature's majority party has tried to engineer an act of voter suppression so brazen and so hypocritical, it should be served up to anyone who questions the maxim about absolute power corrupting absolutely.

The previous paragraph isn't particularly subtle. But it's more subtle than Senate Bill 761, which has metastasized in the Senate Committee on Rules with the complicity of committee chair and Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland.

The bill involves what are known as e-sheets, or electronic sheets, for initiative and referendum petitions. Traditionally, voters have signed petitions at the urging of signature gatherers, who tend to brandish their clipboards in high-traffic public areas. If you visit Bend's downtown library regularly, you've run into them.

A 2007 law made signing a petition much easier by allowing the use of e-sheets, which can be downloaded from the internet, printed and signed at home and returned in the mail. Signatures on such sheets are verified just as those on traditional petitions are, effectively preventing fraud. The validity rate of e-sheets, at 98%, exceeded that of regular sheets by 12 percentage points in 2018. In testimony submitted in opposition to SB 761, Andrea Chiapella, legislative director of the Secretary of State's Office, shared these numbers and told the rules committee that her office is "not aware of any abuses."

So let's take stock. Fraud isn't an issue. And, as Chiapella wrote Monday, e-sheets expand "the ability to participate in the petition process, particularly if a person lives in a rural community or is home bound." What problem, then, is crying to be solved here?

Initially, the supposed problem was a set of rules adopted under the tenure of former Secretary of State Jeanne Atkins, a fundamentally non-partisan soul (wink, wink) who chaired the Oregon Democratic Party upon leaving the secretary of state's office. These rules govern the distribution of e-sheets within newsletters and the like. Rather than downloading and printing an e-sheet, a registered voter could simply tear out the one included in, say, Today's OEA, a magazine regularly distributed to thousands of people by the state teachers union, the Oregon Education Association.

This example isn't hypothetical. The teachers union did distribute a signature sheet for the petition that became Measure 97 in the spring 2016 edition of Today's OEA. Measure 97, which would have imposed a massive gross-receipts tax, went down in flames.

The newsletter rules adopted under Atkins' watch were not considered a problem by either of her successors, Republicans Dennis Richardson and Bev Clarno. Surprisingly, though, they are now a big problem for ... the OEA! Testifying in support of SB 761 on March 13, the OEA's Kelli Horvath claimed the union's own mass distribution of e-sheets "showed us the concerns and opportunity to really abuse the system." Never mind the facts presented by the Secretary of State's Office, which completely contradict Horvath's vague claim.

It couldn't have been more clear even in March that the real "problem" addressed by SB 761 is the very distribution model that helped the OEA three years ago. Sending out zillions of preprinted signature sheets was great when the OEA stood to gain. But it isn't now that an overwhelmingly Democratic Legislature, elected with public employee union support, is doing things to which voters might object. Especially those rural voters who aren't likely to run across a signature gatherer. Dan Meek, representing the Oregon Progressive Party, was right two months ago to call the bill "the epitome of voter suppression." But Burdick's committee was just getting started. On Monday, the rules committee held a public hearing on an amendment to SB 761 that would prohibit the use of all e-sheets until 2023, even those printed out and signed by individual voters. The OEA, naturally, sang the amendment's praises, and this time Horvath was joined by representatives from fellow union heavyweights SEIU and AFSCME. Good-government groups and members of other parties objected vehemently. In submitted testimony, the League of Women Voters said the proposal "is reminiscent of poll taxes." Sal Peralta of the Independent Party called it a "highly cynical political maneuver intended to make it harder for initiative petitions to qualify for the ballot."

Even if SB 761's legislative journey ends now, as it should, the fact that such a hypocritical push to suppress voters progressed as far as it did should fill fair-minded Oregonians with disgust.



## Your views

### Morrison: Sorry to see letter attacking Observer staff

To the Editor:

I was sorry to see John Milbert's May 20 letter attacking the staff of The Observer for a range of problems they clearly have not created and exist beyond their control.

Like many people locally, I have been following news of the bankruptcy of The Observer's parent company, Western Communications, with concern. The implications for our own newspaper, The Observer, are not yet clear. But if we lose our paper, how will that affect the way our small community functions? How will we get news about local issues like city council meetings, or the county budget, or school board actions? Where will we learn about the crises that affect our neighbors, or about social and community events? How will we know when our congressional representatives schedule a visit to our town? The radio stations may step up, but they cannot possibly provide the information that The Observer does. The loss of our paper would cripple the ability of all of us to make knowledgeable, informed decisions regarding issues like taxation, government expenditures or the election of skilled and committed public officials.

But Mr. Milbert's letter surprises me most because of its mean-spiritedness. He must know that The Observer has already lost excellent employees. Surely he realizes that The Observer's small group of remaining employees — writers, editors and office staff — is not responsible for the bankruptcy of its parent corporation, or for the decrease in issues, or for the

increase in costs. Simply from reading the paper we know that the size of the staff is decreasing, leaving fewer people to do the work of many. It is remarkable that we still have employees who continue to struggle to get the paper out, and we should appreciate them for their efforts. Given the circumstances under which they are working, it is understandable that the paper may contain occasional grammatical mistakes or factual errors.

In view of the current, difficult situation, it is amazing that Mr. Milbert can actually justify attacking the employees of our paper. Under the circumstances, an apology to them would be a more appropriate response.

Anne Morrison  
La Grande

### West: Mismanagement of MERA could be catastrophic

To the Editor:

Lately I have heard a lot about how happy some people are that there will no longer be cattle grazing on the MERA property. These are typically people who ride their bicycles, ATVs or hike on the property and simply don't want to deal with a little cow poop on their tires or shoes. I have read where some people believe there is not enough feed for the cattle (false) and they don't need to be up there. The reality is that unless the people who live along the face of Mount Emily want to experience a catastrophic fire like Paradise, California, went through last November, the managers of MERA need to get proactive.

There is an extreme amount of fuel on the MERA property, including trees, shrubs and

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grass. And cattle grazing generates revenue for the county while reducing fire fuels. MERA needs to be logged, thinned and grazed. It is a mountain property, and you can't just ignore it — you have to manage it.

I understand that the bicycle and ATV community was instrumental in helping secure the support for Union County to buy the MERA property and they have an interest in being able to recreate on it. But the people who manage MERA need to realize that MERA is owned by everyone in Union County equally and they need to ignore the voices of people who do not understand what the mountain needs and manage it properly. The lives and homes of the many people who live on the face of the mountain depend on it, and as the managers of the lands in California have found out, there is tremendous financial liability for failing to manage those lands when catastrophic property damage or loss of life is a result.

Graze MERA, log MERA and manage MERA — or sell it to private ownership that will be a better steward of the land.

Steve West  
La Grande

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