

OUR VIEW

State sends mixed signals

If Gov. Kate Brown is truly committed to government transparency, why is her government so brazenly designed for delay?

The Oregonian laid out the case recently. Brown signed a new law in 2017, putting the first real deadline into the state's public records laws. Basically, government bodies have 15 days to turn over documents or they must cite a legal reason why they do not.

Brown's office relies on exceptions to the law, sometimes taking months to comply with requests. Those exceptions were put into the law to help out small towns or smaller school districts who may not have sufficient staff.

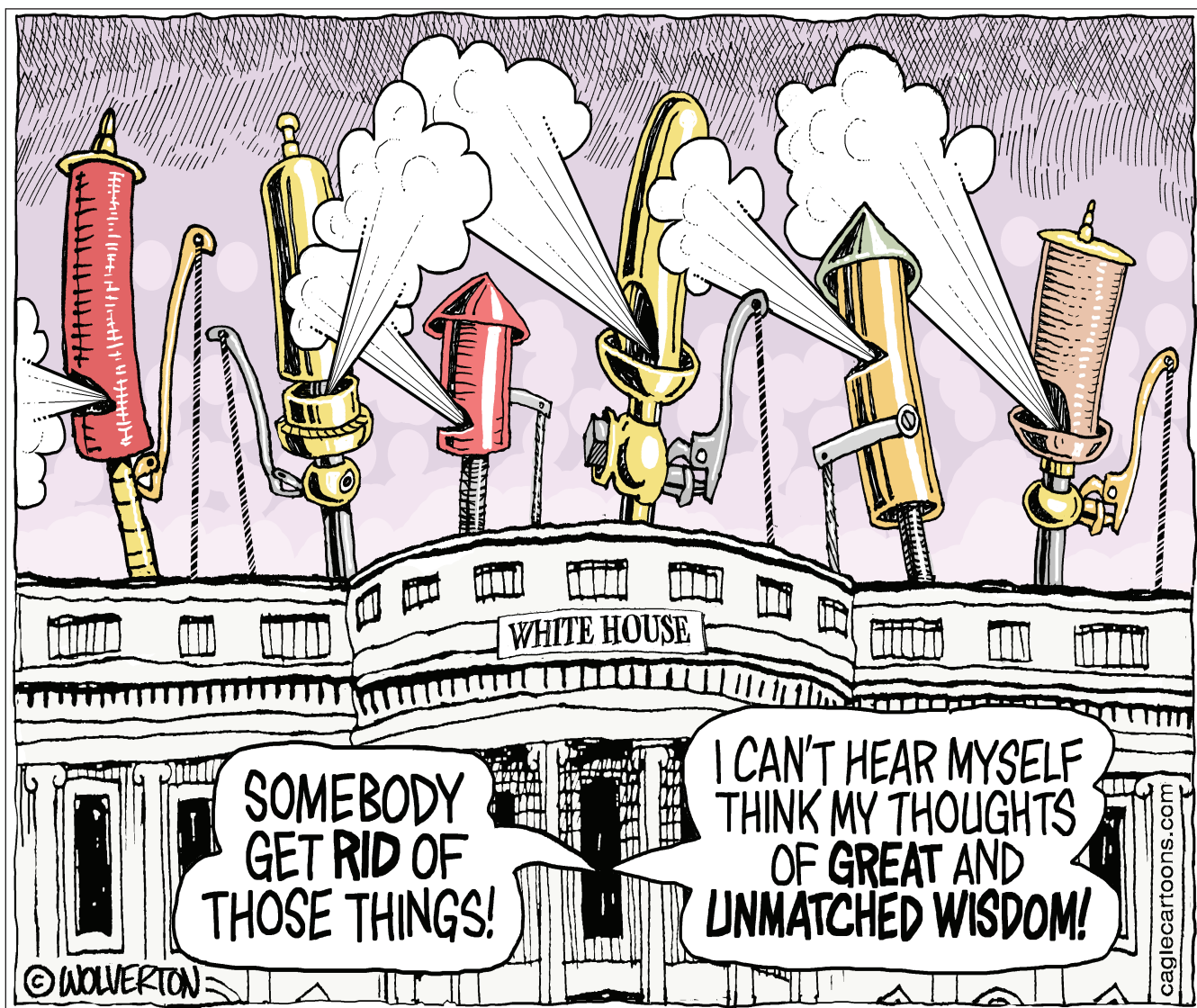
Of course, any office is going to be deluged with work from time to time. Her office says it received a number of high volume requests in the last few months, including over the resignation of the state's public records advocate and the Republican Senate walkout. But providing public information is one of the core responsibilities of her office. Brown should be expected to provide staff to meet the responsibility in a timely way, if she is honestly committed to transparency.

There are public agencies that make every effort to comply swiftly with the law. For instance, the Bend Bulletin editorial page staff routinely asks the City of Bend for public records. Some are more intricate requests, such as emails or text messages. There have been exceptions, but, in general, we get the records back within days.

Last year the Bend Bulletin had its own experience of a public records request getting the Brown treatment. A state audit found that the Department of Human Services had been "slow, indecisive, and inadequate" in fixing recurring problems in the foster care system. It wasn't a secret. The state had been paying out millions in settlements for failing to protect children in its care.

DHS vowed to address the issues. The Bulletin asked DHS for an update a few months later. DHS prepared a memo to answer questions. It switched into delay mode. That was, in part, because Brown's office wanted it to hold off releasing anything and roll it into a media campaign, according to internal emails we obtained later. Brown's office was more interested in how the message would be received than in providing the public with timely information about how the state treats some of its most vulnerable children.

The recent resignation of the state's public records advocate was just another symptom of a broader lack of commitment from Brown to government transparency.



Your views

Allen: Respect, kindness, generosity deserves mentioning

To the Editor:
I'm writing this letter because I had an incredible experience with Loveland Funeral Chapel recently.
Not long ago I found out that a neighbor of mine died back in November. He was a recluse and lived a very unobtrusive life. He was a Vietnam veteran and had been wounded in action and suffered from the effects of his injury throughout his life. This man passed away quietly, and suddenly, in his home. He had no known family, did not have a will, and had made no provisions for his death. I received the information, all these months later, that Loveland was still in possession of his ashes. I contacted them and explained the situation and said my husband and I would be happy to pay for his burial. With the information that the man was a veteran, Loveland went into action to see what they could do to get him buried in a national cemetery.

They came up with a plan, and it was one I hadn't even suggested to them. They were able to obtain his honorable discharge papers and arrange for him to be buried at Willamette National Cemetery. They would not accept any payment, not even for transport of his ashes, but did it as a thank-you to a man who defended our country.

I think that kind of respect, kindness and generosity deserves mentioning.

Nancy Allen
La Grande

Swart: What price are we paying to 'make America great again'?

To the Editor:
I am sitting in my living room watching television when I see the president of the United States ignoring laws, defying the constitution of the United States and proclaiming that anyone who disagrees with him is committing treason. Then I pick up The Observer and read the Oct. 2 editorial that decries the fact that men who set fire

to BLM land, our land, my land, might be punished. The rationale is that because the president pardoned them, we should all forget what those men did to our land.

OK, I am not going to waste space explaining to you that BLM land is land belonging to the citizens of the United States of America, not just a couple of guys who abused it. I am drawing a parallel between lawlessness in the current U.S. administration and the disrespect of the law that is espoused in the editorial.

Is this what this country has come to? We are no longer a nation governed by laws, and citizens need not be hesitant to break the laws of the United States? After all, the president does not respect the laws of the country, and it stands to reason the same disrespect is available for all of us to employ. And if lawbreakers happen to be caught, there is a good chance they will not be called upon to pay the price. Is this what it means to "make America great again"?

Yes, The Observer has a right to post views that contradict my belief and my understanding of the way my country stood in the past. And I have a right to let you know that the environmental groups trying to protect the laws governing our national properties have the interests of all citizens at heart, whether we believe it or not. I am not affiliated with any of the groups with which you disagree, but I am glad that someone cares about our laws and our land.

Evelyn Swart
Joseph

LeBold: Climate change crisis is not a political issue

To the Editor:
A recent article in The Observer detailed Oregon State Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr.'s position on human-caused climate change. The inaccurate statements he posted on social media seem to be either a deliberate attempt to confuse voters regarding the urgency to act on HB 2020 (Oregon's Clean Energy Jobs Bill) or a measure of his inability to separate his personal bias

from settled science on rapid climate change at the expense of his constituents.

HB 2020 will be introduced into the Oregon Legislative short session in 2020 (just a few months away). This bill was the subject of much confusion during the 2019 legislative session, and voters would benefit by taking the time now to inform themselves on the purpose, need and content of this important bill.

Unfortunately, Sen. Bill Hansell, who represents Union County, has expressed almost identical doubts as Baertschiger regarding the influence of humans on rapid climate change. In light of evidence showing that human actions are currently the main driver of rapid climate change, these doubts should not be part of any debate on HB 2020. In my opinion, these delaying tactics are elements of the Republican Party position that no significant action is needed on climate change. Across the globe, almost daily, evidence builds in support of immediate action on rapid climate change and a contrary position is untenable and reckless for America and the planet.

The climate change crisis is not a political issue, and I expect my representatives to avail themselves of the best available science then use their individual knowledge and experiences along with critical thinking skills to assess the needs of all constituents and to work within the Legislature to craft appropriate measures.

What Union County needs at this time, prior to the 2020 short session, is information and dialogue from and with Sen. Hansell. The senator, in the past, has been asked to conduct town hall style meetings with focus on climate change issues, but the request did not receive any response from his office.

Please join me in contacting Hansell's office and asking for information, in the form of town hall style meetings, regarding the purpose, need and content of HB 2020.

Chuck LeBold
Union

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