

OUR VIEW

Why public records law matter

There couldn't be a clearer case about both the value and flaws in Oregon's public records law than the current one in Douglas County.

The Oregonian, having spent about \$2,000 to obtain records of how the county spent some \$43,000 in federal Secure Rural Schools Act funds, reported this week on what it found. The newspaper has since been billed another \$693.77 to have a county official spend 13 hours reviewing it so the county could answer questions about records the newspaper received.

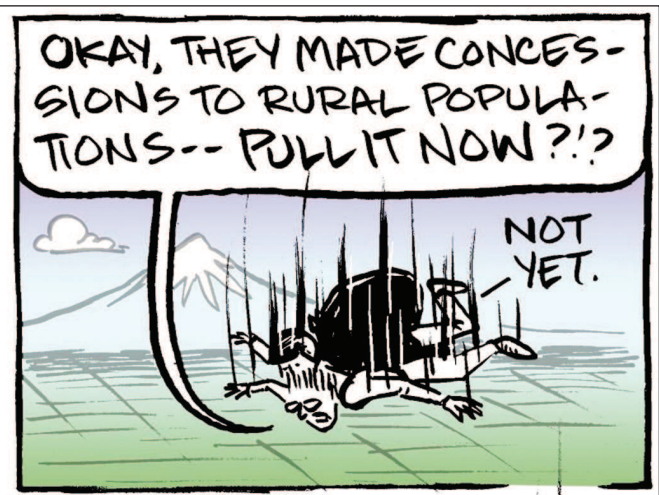
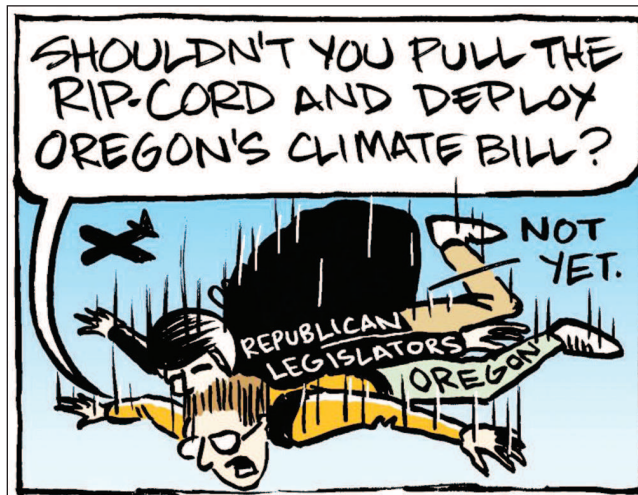
The newspaper found plenty. Some of the \$43,000 went to pay a \$75 fee to Sunriver Resort to allow County Commissioner Tim Freeman to keep a dog in his room. Another \$205 went to the Brix Chill, a Roseburg cocktail lounge and restaurant. The receipt was not itemized, as county policy requires, making it impossible to tell if he had purchased alcohol as part of the meal. County policy forbids the purchase of alcohol with public funds. Freeman also flew first class to Washington, D.C., in 2019 because he was invited on short notice to hear a speech by President Donald Trump. Federal funds paid for part of the upgrade from the standard coach seat that Oregon officials usually use. A county spokeswoman said no coach seats were available for the flight.

If private businesses want to spend their money that way, it's one thing, but for public officials from a poor county in rural Oregon to do so, it's unconscionable.

We don't know what voters in Douglas County will do about the situation, but one thing is clear. Had it not been for this state's public records law and The Oregonian's willingness to spend nearly \$3,000 getting information that's supposedly available to the public, voters may never have found out about the commission's free-spending ways.

That brings up a problem with the current law. It allows a requester — in this case, The Oregonian — to appeal proposed fees to the local district attorney, Richard Wesenberg. Wesenberg refused to reduce or cancel the fees, arguing the newspaper's parent company could well afford them. That's despite the law, which says reducing fees is what should be done if making the record public benefits the general public. It's hard to see how spending of government funds doesn't qualify as information that meets that test.

Lawmakers may not have time to change the law so that getting records is both fast and relatively inexpensive in the coming 30-day session. If not, it should be put at the top of the 2021 to-do list. The law does not require means testing to determine if fees should be waived, and public interest, not a requester's financial statement, should be the standard by which the request is judged.



Your views

Teenager inspires nation to show that it's united

There is a 14-year-old young American man who is getting this nation to wake up. His name is Charlie Hecht and he is on a mission to get all Americans nationwide to buy an American flag and fly it with its blessings on their front porch. There is much evil in the world and it is a spiritual war. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against chief rules, against authority in high places, against the rulers of the darkness of the world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12). In other words, we are in the time of all Christians to unite in spirit and get ready to fight Satan's one world government and Satan himself. He will control the four dynasties of the world. What are the four dynasties? Politics, economics, education and last but not least, religion.

America, listen up, united we stand, divided we fall. Thank you, Charlie Hecht, for standing united. Fly your flag and show the world that this Christian nation stands united, with the one true God of everything.

Gary Robinson
Baker City

Hansell should back climate legislation

Sen. Bill Hansell, I am an Oregon grandfather writing on behalf of my kids and grandchildren — and yours — and children and grandchildren everywhere. While, as an 80-year-old, I will not live to see the full impact of

Write to us

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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the climate crisis, I am committed to bequeathing a habitable planet to our children and grandchildren.

We are in a climate crisis that demands strong climate action. Oregon's oceans are becoming more acidic and wildfires are growing more frequent and massive.

Senate Bill 1530 is a good framework but currently is too weak to meet the demands of the climate crisis. It provides too many giveaways to the fossil fuel industry, allowing these corporations to continue polluting as usual, harming our health and the climate.

SB 1530 needs to be stronger to reduce pollution from fossil fuels and increase investments in a clean economy. It needs to be stronger to reduce greenhouse gases from oil companies all across the state. Investments in communities most affected by climate change — rural, low-income, tribes and communities of color — need to be guaranteed.

Oregon's young people need strong climate action. They need leaders to pass strong climate legislation that will

protect the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the soil that grows the food they eat. That's why Oregon's youth have been taking to the streets in record numbers in all parts of the state. They are calling for leaders to pass strong policies that will give them a future free from devastating climate disasters and collapsed economies.

Oregon's most vulnerable populations need strong climate action. People in poverty have the most to lose under climate crisis disasters.

Rural Oregon needs strong climate action. We are on the front lines of climate change. From ranchers in Union County to tree farmers in Clackamas County to farm workers in Hermiston, there are strong voices from rural Oregon calling for action. Please listen to our voices.

Please build upon the work you have started by strengthening SB 1530 and passing bold climate legislation in 2020.

Bill Whitaker
La Grande

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