

OUR VIEW

Lawmakers must make law, not war

If a hearing before the Oregon Senate’s Committee on Housing and Development Feb. 6 was any indication, the current legislative session may feel both long and ugly to those trapped in the Capitol building in Salem.

Tensions clearly remain high after Senate Republicans walked out of the 2019 legislative session twice, bringing the Senate to a screeching halt each time. Republicans in that body were few in number, though at least one member of the party had to be present to establish a quorum.

Denying Democrats that quorum, the Republicans clearly felt, was the only way to make their voices heard. From their point of view, the Republicans were right. The first walkout was over a \$2 billion business tax, and while the tax was approved, a gun control measure and strict vaccination rules were allowed to die.

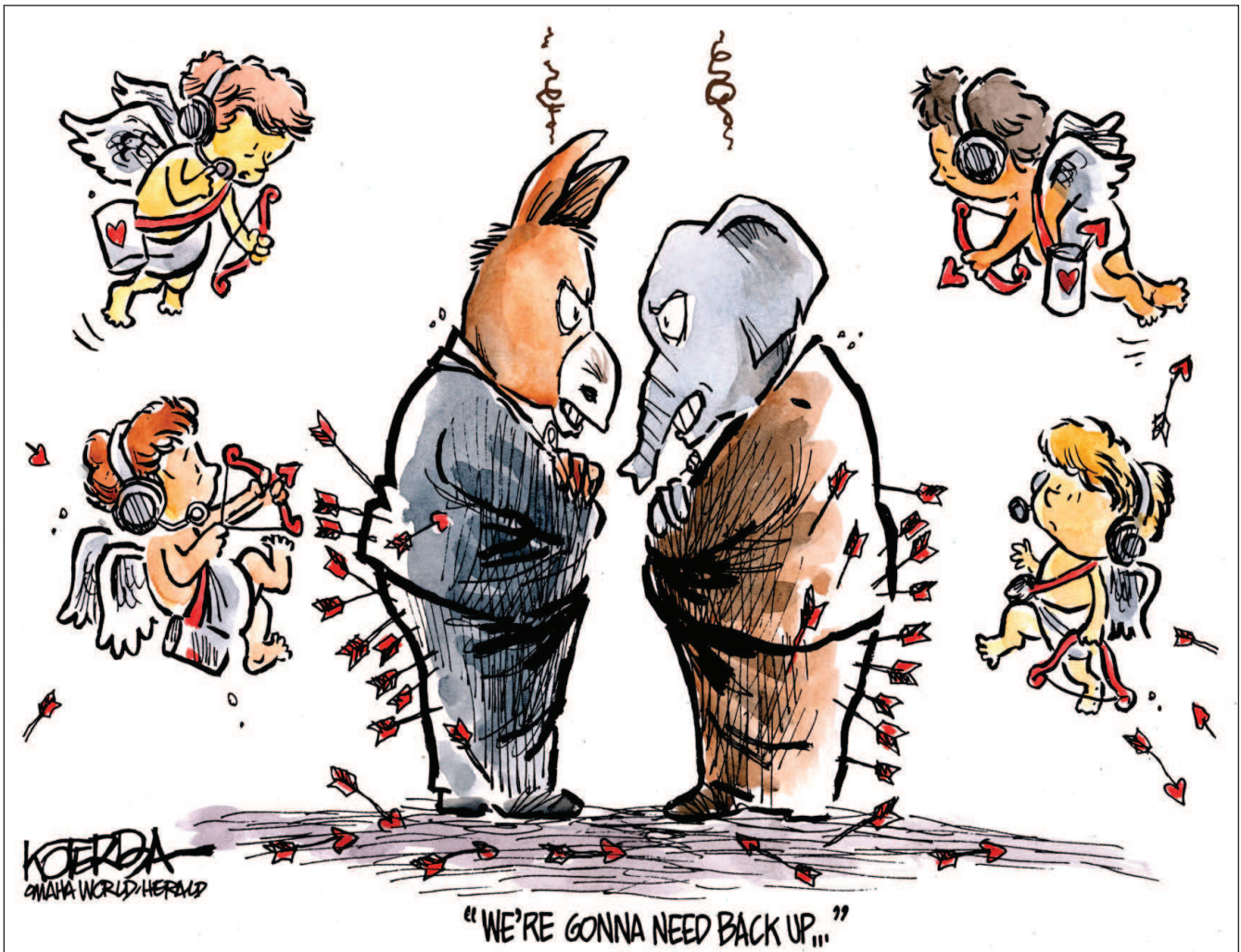
The second walkout, over cap-and-trade climate legislation, also was successful, if success is measured by the fact that the cap-and-trade bill died. It wasn’t clear until just before Republicans returned to Salem that the bill would have died in any event.

Fast forward to Thursday, Feb. 6. A hearing before the Senate committee was scheduled for the same time that the Timber Unity rally, with its horn-honking 1,000 trucks and even more people, got underway. The rally’s noise was noticeable, though not deafening. It was too much for committee chair Shemia Fagan, D-Portland, however, who opened the session by blaming the protesters for delaying the 8 a.m. meeting until 9:30 a.m.

That apparently was enough to spur committee member Sen. Denyc Boles, R-Salem, to leave the room, followed shortly thereafter by Rep. Dallas Heard, R-Roseburg, who was scheduled to testify.

While it might be easy to understand each side’s dissatisfaction with the other, continuing the fight ignores the very reason lawmakers are in Salem this month. It isn’t to extend a battle that began nearly a year ago.

Rather, lawmakers of both parties are in Salem to do the people’s business, efficiently and as well as they can. Bickering makes that impossible, and both sides should get a grip, swallow their anger and move forward, keeping all of their constituents in mind.



Good local reporting worth the price

McClatchy, owner of the second-largest chain of local newspapers in the United States, including the Tri-City Herald and the Idaho Statesman, filed on Thursday for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

According to news reports, the company’s reorganization plan would allow its 30 newspapers to continue operating during the bankruptcy proceedings. But the plan also calls for the hedge fund that holds almost all of the McClatchy debt to take the helm.

It’s too early to tell what this means for those local papers. Let’s hope for the best.

Because local journalism matters. That’s why I’ve about run out of patience with complaints on Facebook about The Observer not giving away news stories. I’m trying to figure out how many businesses give away their products and services and stay in business.

I was an English major, but I’m pretty sure that’s a bad business model. Those comments also make me think of the decades of subscribers to The Observer and other papers who always paid to read a story. Before the internet, I doubt newspapers got many messages demanding articles and features for free.

We also see comments encouraging our Facebook users to go to the local radio station website for free news. Certainly folks can go to the likes of Elkhorn Media for free news, but no one should mistake what such companies do for what we do.

Elkhorn and its ilk have news sections. The Observer is a newspaper.



FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK
PHIL WRIGHT

We’re not here to regurgitate some government agency’s news release. That is about the least interesting part of reporting. We chase down stories. We call sources of all kinds. We show up. And we don’t choke down big stories to a mere couple of minutes of reporting.

During the recent snowstorm and subsequent flooding, we took to the streets to capture photos. We called weather forecasters and emergency officials. We spoke with locals dealing with the loss of phone and internet services. We pestered communications companies to tell their customers about what they were doing to restore service.

Sometimes officials and company talking heads ignore us. When they do, we report that as well. Sometimes we can irk local officials and they decide not to talk to us.

So be it. One source does not a news story make.

But that’s also a boon of this work. Our job is to ask questions — particularly to people in positions of power and authority — and tell readers what they said. Seriously, not many jobs pay you to bother people in power.

The Observer and our related papers also benefit from sharing news. Last Saturday, we anchored our page 2 with a story about the massive flooding in neighboring Umatilla County. That’s thanks to top-notch local reporting from the East Oregonian.

And we’re the only news source

around that can provide in-depth reporting on state government due to our relationship with the Oregon Capital Bureau. The Observer’s readers have been able to be as informed about the efforts to stop and to support the big cap-and-trade bills the Legislature is considering as any readers in Oregon.

No, that is not local reporting, which is our stock and trade, but that legislation carries local repercussions. So we owe it to our readers to help keep them informed about what could make differences in their lives.

For our subscribers, there’s a bit of preaching to the choir here, sure.

But as a new editor, to a certain degree I’m striving to reinvent our news coverage. That includes bringing on content The Observer maybe did not use or have access to under previous owners. We recently shared an outdoors article with the Lewiston Tribune, which in turn gave us the OK to run its outdoors articles. The Tribune is a good paper and covers the Snake River. I bet some folks here care about what happens there, including with Idaho Power’s dams.

We’re working on similar deals with other news organizations. Building these kinds of relationships is crucial in the midst of cries for free news and the continued demise of big news companies.

There’s a parallel between the news we publish and our clout. The formula is simple. The better news product we provide, the more respect we gain, the more we enhance our reputation.

I have no interest in giving away any of that.

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By mail, all other U.S.\$15



THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801. Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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Send address changes to:
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La Grande, OR 97850
Periodicals postage paid at:
Pendleton, Oregon 97801

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