

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

A few reflections on Tuesday's protest

Democracy was on full view Tuesday in downtown La Grande. The good, the bad and the ugly of it.

Protesters and demonstrators starting gathering at 4 p.m. in front of La Grande City Hall, part of the movement stemming from the May 25 police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. We have a full account of the event on the front page of today's edition of The Observer.

I'll start with the bad, or in our local case, at least the impolite.

One protester displayed a two-word insult putting down President Donald Trump, and the group on several occasions chanted the slogan. Most residents in Union County would find that offensive whether or not they supported Trump. But that was about as vulgar as the crowd got, and free speech is about the right to say what others don't want to hear.

The ugly was more intense. One man with an AR-15

slung over his body tried to hijack the protest for his own purpose, whatever that may have been. He had not loaded the magazine in the weapon, so it was more of a prop than anything else (although one

person said the magazine was in his pocket), but it nonetheless sent a

message. The vocal dissenter met with some success in distracting the crowd. But then, he didn't have to try too hard. Most of the protesters were college students who have spent a few years now in classes learning to argue and are keen to make their point.

The final confrontation between the man and remnants of the crowd turned physical, and police busted through to break up the melee, disarm the man and put him on the hard surface of the road. Police also physically blocked and held back several protesters from any further clashes with the man. When the fracas ended, police let the protesters go and led the man away.

The actions of local law enforcement were commendable for how they handled that scene as well the entire protest. Police had to warn protesters from straying too far into the road, but members of the La Grande Police Department and Union County Sheriff's Office were constant professionals, and numerous members of the protests and the officers talked with each other.

That was part of the good, and the good was abundant.

For one, the crowd consisted of locals, primarily Eastern Oregon University students who had to stick around even though spring term went online due to the coronavirus pandemic. But parents and their children were there, and a share of older folks. During a span of about two hours, I spoke with about 10 people, and they were all local, living in La Grande or Elgin or Summerville.

The protesters chanted, sang some and waved at passing drivers — and plenty signaled their approval and support. They were enthusiastic, excited, even angry,

and they knew why they were there. One young man said he grew up in Mitchell, where people tossed racial slurs his way, and he does not want his children growing up in a world where the color of someone's skin dictates their treatment, or, such as with George Floyd, their mistreatment.

The protest was loud, sometimes disorganized and a bit unruly, but overall was peaceful. Those who gathered did not disrespect police nor destroy property — though someone did spray paint graffiti on the Island Avenue underpass that seems related to the protest. They did not give off the vibe they were ever going to riot. They even talked to other locals who showed up out of concern they would need to protect the town should the crowd get out of control. (That's a topic for another day.)

A final note on rioting.

This quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. is popping up in response to protest and riots: "A riot is the language of the unheard."

Most people using this mean well, but these eight

words lack the full context of what King said:

"I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention."

That was at Stanford University on April 14, 1967, little more than half a century ago.

OUR VIEW

Governor, legislators are meeting in secret

Gov. Kate Brown and Oregon legislators are meeting behind your back. They are more interested in expediency than the public's right to know.

Brown has held more than 50 daily meetings by phone for all the legislators. They have been holding the meetings without allowing the public to listen. We only know about the meetings thanks to the reporting of The Oregonian.

The meetings have featured updates on the latest news about the pandemic. Shouldn't the public be able to hear that discussion among its elected leaders?

There have been weekly updates from the head of Oregon's Department of Human Services. He apparently spoke about what a cut of 17% in funding would mean for the department. Oregonians have heard far too many heart-wrenching stories of how the state has failed some of the state's most vulnerable children: those in the foster care system. Fariborz Pakseresh, the department's director, said he had to freeze hiring



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The Oregon Capitol building adorned with the Oregon Pioneer with downtown Salem in the background.

for the child welfare program. Why not let the public listen in?

The struggling state Employment Department also has given presentations. It has some 38,000 unprocessed claims. And there's another staggering figure: 200,000 claims have not been paid during the pandemic. Shouldn't Oregonians be able to hear what the department is saying to legislators and what legislators are asking? Apparently Gov. Brown and legislators don't think so.

And this is where things get really interesting. The intent of Oregon's open meetings law is the public is allowed to know what the government is doing. And it's not only that the decisions are made in public. Deliberations are important, too. That enables the public to know the choices that must be made and the information on which those choices are based.

"Officials in the governor's office and the Legislature's top lawyer argue" that these meetings that the governor is

having with legislators don't trigger the state's open meetings law, The Oregonian wrote. They are getting information, the argument goes, not making decisions.

Baloney.

The information legislators get in these meetings helps them make decisions. Legislators will meet in a special session to make choices about how state budgets will be cut. Gov. Brown and legislators say they believe in transparent and accountable government. But that's not what they do.

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