



OUR VIEW

County commissioners blundered with secret meeting

Adozen county commissioners from Eastern Oregon met Thursday in Prairie City to complain about Gov. Kate Brown's unilateral authority to reopen the state and control the disbursement of federal coronavirus aid money.

The problem was, the commissioners ignored public meetings laws and tried to gather in secret.

Union County's three commissioners — Paul Anderes, Donna Beverage and Matt Scarfo — joined the group, as did Wallowa County Commissioners Susan Roberts and John Hillock. Anderes contended the meeting was not in secret because news reporters were there. He told *The Observer*, "We didn't publicly notice it specifically, but I talked about (attending) it in a public meeting."

That is not a notice of a

public meeting, and Anderes, Beverage and Scarfo know that. If they do not, as public officials in Oregon, they should.

Indeed, Emily Cureton with Oregon Public Broadcasting and Steven Mitchell with the Blue Mountain Eagle — a related newspaper to *The Observer* — covered the meeting. But make no mistake, those commissioners did not want reporters there.

As the Eagle reported, Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson organized this as an "information seminar" with no announcement to the public or media. Mitchell and Cureton had to negotiate to attend. Albertson noted it was "spooky" the press showed up.

The spooky part was local elected officials trying to duck public meeting laws.

Cureton's photo of Jef-

erson County Commissioner Mae Huston hiding her face from a photo says it all. If you have to hide your face in a meeting, you know you are doing something you should not do.

The commissioners, however, likely face little repercussions for meeting in secret. Oregon law lacks teeth when it comes to enforcing public meetings laws. Per Oregon Department of Justice, "If a citizen wishes to compel compliance with the meetings law, or believes that a governing body has violated the law, the citizen may file a private civil lawsuit against the governing body."

Yep, an Oregonian would have to bring a lawsuit. Unless the meeting was a violation of the regulations for an executive session.

Oregon law allows governing bodies to talk behind

closed doors under certain circumstances, but the body must state the reason for the meeting and reporters can cover most of those meetings and report on their general nature.

The commissioners did not call the Thursday meeting an executive session, but a resident who believes a governing body violated the regulations allowing an executive session may file a complaint with the Oregon Government Ethics Commission. That group can conduct investigations, making determinations and even assess penalties up to \$1,000 per each violation.

Most of the time, however, the ethics commission would rather make a deal with public officials who violate the law and provide them with letters of education in lieu of civil penalties. Fear-some, right?

EO Media Group newspapers — including *The Observer* — in early June took Brown to task for meeting with state lawmakers behind your back. Now our own county commissioners pulled the same stunt.

And the timing could not be worse for Union County, which is in the midst of a coronavirus outbreak and sure to draw more scrutiny from the Oregon Health Authority and governor's office.

Anderes, Beverage and Scarfo and the nine other commissioners may well have legitimate gripes about Brown's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the reopening. But hashing that out in secret is the wrong move. Union County residents expect their commissioners to be transparent and accountable no matter how Brown operates.

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