

Our View

Public records belong to all of us

When The Observer and other newspapers request access to information from the government, it sometimes hits the Wall of No.

Public records are part of the regular diet of newsrooms. But some public bodies throw up tall hurdles — usually in the form of big expenses — to block access to those records. Records that took public money to produce.

Back in 2018, for example, reporter Jackson Hogan with The Bulletin, sister paper to The Observer, asked the Bend-La Pine Schools for a list and price of all apps and textbooks bought for student iPads, specifically those in use. About a month later, the district told him the cost of providing the information would be \$2,000.

Eight district staffers would apparently have to work a total of 18.5 hours to pull the information. Then a lawyer with the High Desert Education Service District would have to work six hours at \$115 an hour to review the information and redact anything necessary. The district offered to give The Bulletin 50% off and charge \$1,000. Still, prohibitively pricey for The Bulletin and other newspapers.

Oregon House Bill 2485 seeks to enshrine 50% off for journalists in law. It requires state agencies to reduce public records request fees by 50% if the request is made in the public interest. It requires state agencies to entirely waive fees if a public records request is in the public interest and narrowly tailored. And it requires requests made by members of the news media to be treated as in public interest.

State Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie, is sponsoring the bill. She introduced it on behalf of the Society for Professional Journalists.

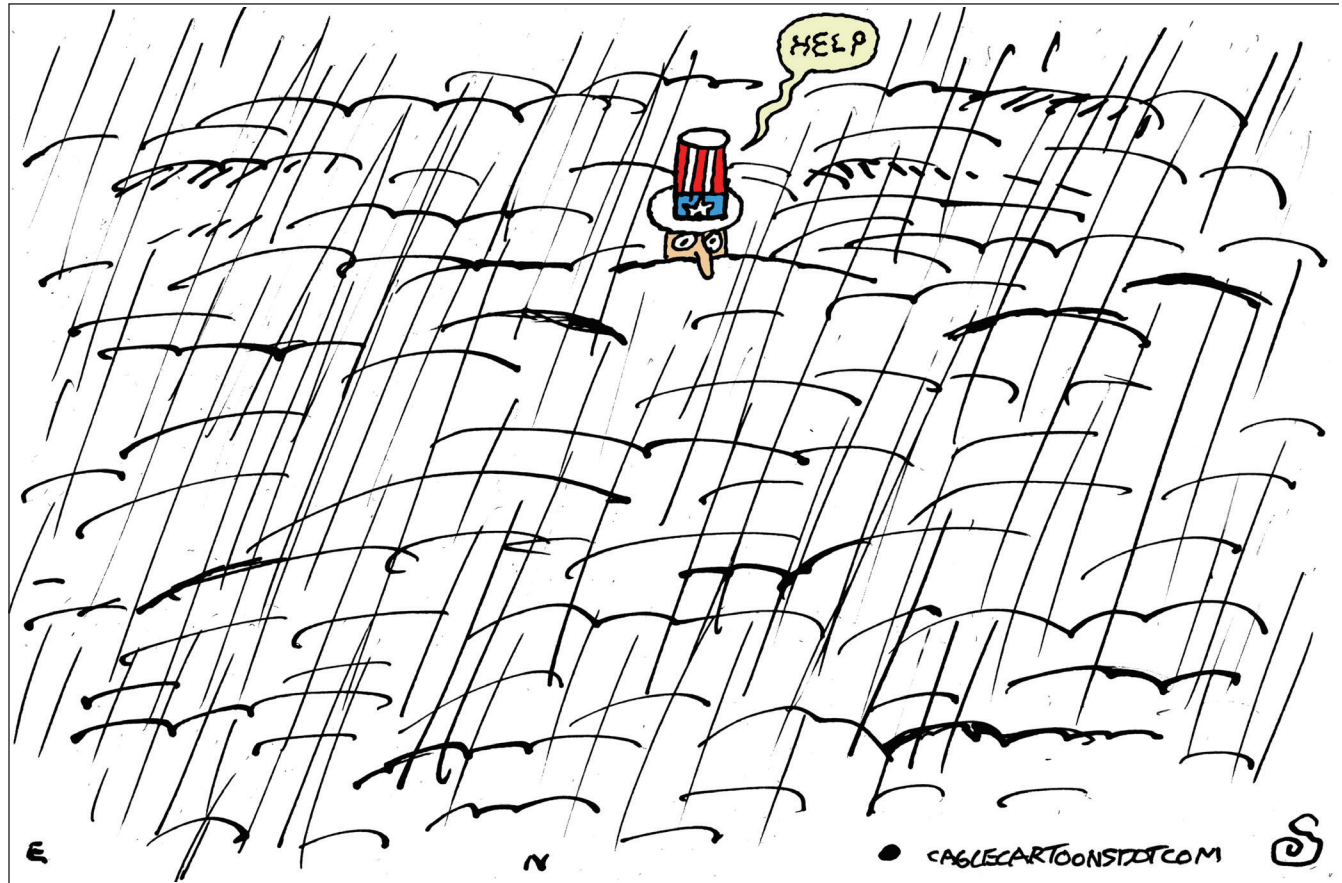
We certainly appreciate the sentiment. But sometimes 50% is no deal. The cost still can be the Wall of No.

News media is not defined in the bill. That can be tricky. Maybe The Observer or The Bulletin would easily qualify. What about a person who diligently tracks and regularly writes about education policy on a blog? Is that person a member of the news media? Are they acting in the public interest?

As much as we like the idea of getting 50% off, Oregon's public records law is Oregon's "public" records law. The news media can play a critical watchdog role and help spread information. It just seems unfair that a member of the public could be charged double for the same record as a journalist. The member of the public has just as much right to it under Oregon law, not just as much right at twice the cost. And by charging journalists half the cost, the costs of providing information to other members of the public would presumably go up, because they would be subsidizing the work of journalists.

More than 40 bills in play this legislative session aim to change Oregon's public records laws. Some seek to block disclosure of information to the public. Some seek to make disclosure easier. We are flattered the intent of HB 2485 is to help journalists tear down the Wall of No. But all Oregonians have the right to know what their government is doing.

HB 2485 is scheduled for a public hearing on Thursday, Feb. 18, in the House Rules Committee.



Other Views

Biden, Social Security, and my retirement



TOM PURCELL
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

It's February. It's cold. To fend off the winter blahs, I dream of one day retiring to a warm beach, where I'll stand in the surf, sipping beverages from glasses with little umbrellas in them.

I spend hours using the Social Security Benefits Calculator to determine how much Social Security will pay me, after I've paid in many thousands of dollars throughout my working life.

And I wonder if my full Social Security benefits will be there when I retire, so I can afford to escape cold, gloomy winters.

It's a realistic question. In 1950, there were about 16 workers paying into Social Security for every person drawing benefits. Today, there are roughly two.

According to Kiplinger, "starting in 2021 the program's annual costs will exceed its income from employee and employer payroll taxes and interest earnings. Once the program turns that corner, Social Security will begin drawing down assets in its trust funds to continue providing full benefits."

If nothing is done, the trust fund will run dry by 2034 and will only

be able to pay 76% of its promised benefits.

Worse, that would also take a heavy toll on elderly Americans who struggle to get by with Social Security as their primary income.

The Biden administration has a plan to prevent cuts and increase benefits for elderly Americans most in need — but wealthy Americans aren't going to like it much.

Currently, workers pay a 6.2% Social Security payroll contribution on wages up to \$142,800; their employers pay an additional 6.2%. If you're self-employed, like me, you pay the whole 12.4% — which we former English majors refer to as "a lot!"

Social Security was considered an insurance program when it was created in 1936. Under its original classification, payroll contributions weren't really "income taxes" at all, but "insurance payments" made throughout our working lives so we can get monthly retirement benefits until we die.

But some policymakers don't see the program that way. They see it as too heavily funded by the middle class and not funded enough by the well-to-do.

Consider: A self-employed person who earns \$142,800 a year pays the exact same amount of Social Security taxes — \$17,707.20 — as someone who earns, say, \$10 million a year.

The Biden administration hopes

to change that, by keeping the cap at \$142,800, but having the 12.4% payroll tax kick back in on incomes of \$400,000 and up.

In that scenario, a self-employed person earning \$10 million would be taxed 12.4% on the first \$142,800, nothing on income beyond that up to \$400,000, then an additional 12.4% on the rest of his income.

If my calculations are correct, his Social Security contributions would jump from \$17,707.20 to more than \$1.2 million — what we former English majors call "a heckuva lot."

Forbes reports the change would affect about 800,000 buzzing-mad high earners.

I don't know how such a large tax change would affect markets, investing, the economy and ultimately me. Frankly, government math makes my head hurt.

I just hope to goodness our policymakers, as divided as the rest of the country, will find a way to collaborate to bring a meaningful solution to the Social Security challenge, so that I may one day enjoy my retirement on a warm beach, sipping beverages from glasses with little umbrellas in them.

Tom Purcell, author of "Misadventures of a 1970s Childhood," is a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review humor columnist and is nationally syndicated.

Letter to the editor

Stand against the River Democracy Act

If this new River Democracy Act passes, 4,700 river miles of rivers in Oregon will be included in the Wild and Scenic designation. Considered a "remarkable achievement" by some, but others see a monster land grab, a back door to more lock-up and lock-out.

Increasing the buffer zone from one-fourth to one-half mile on both sides of the rivers creates approximately 3,008,000 acres of de facto wilderness. Baker, Union, Wallowa and Grant counties will be saddled with 700 miles. Wallowa County alone 440 miles. Management plans will be developed by the U.S. Forest Service or other agency. Presently the Forest Service is way over its head in managing the forest.

Unsettling, upsetting, disturbing — this is happening under the term democracy. How

and when did we lose control to a roomful of politicians in Washington, D.C.? Have we become so complacent this is acceptable? Ignoring impacts and input at the local level has become standard operating procedure. Lack of coordination with the counties circumvents local input. Failure to recognize local concerns was the primary factor in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision withdrawal. "Ditto," trying it again.

No one cares more for our public lands and waterways than the residents of Eastern Oregon. Federal and state agencies use many tools to protect and preserve special places. Additional restrictions, outside those presently available, are unwarranted. I'm urging the Eastern Oregon Counties Association to join in and support Baker County's opposition to The River Democracy Act.

*D.M. and Wanda Ballard
Baker City*

WRITE TO US

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Phone: 541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214

Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com

POSTMASTER Send address changes to: The Observer, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850

STAFF

Regional publisher.....Karrine Brogotti Home delivery advisor.....Amanda Fredrick
Regional circulation director.....Kelli Craft Advertising representative.....Juli Bloodgood
Editor.....Phil Wright Advertising representative.....Amy Horn
News clerk.....Lisa Lester Kelly National accounts coordinator.....Devi Mathson
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