

OUR VIEW

Goal should always be to safeguard democracy

There was not much fanfare, but the official reopening of the Oregon's Capitol last week should be good news for all voters.

Readers may remember the capitol was shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic and, as usual, the closure kicked off plenty of political angst between Democrats and Republicans. In the Senate, GOP lawmakers voted no on many issues not related to COVID-19 in protest. In the House, Republicans declined to suspend rules that require bills to be read completely, which slowed down the legislative session.

The stance of the Republicans was, at least in theory, a good one. Their views were the capitol is the people's building and should not be closed off to the public under any circumstances.

But Democratic lawmakers, such as House Speaker Tina Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney, said in a joint statement the closure was necessary to safeguard people from COVID-19.

They termed the decisions to be "difficult" but they "consulted with infectious disease doctors and public health officials about what changes were needed to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the capitol."

Access to public buildings where lawmakers do the people's business is hardwired into the American psyche, as it should be. We live in a democracy, and that means lawmakers must be accessible to voters.

However, on this specific issue closing the capitol building was the right move. Whether it should have been closed as long as it seems to be open for debate. Lawmakers like Kotek and Courtney did the right thing during a time when the COVID-19 virus crisis was still very real and a threat to all.

Yet there is no denying that cutting off access to the activities of lawmakers hurt democracy. Anytime the halls where lawmakers roam, or committee meetings where legislators gather information to make decisions are blockaded, the people lose.

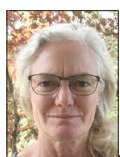
The founders created our system as one that relies on the interplay between voters and lawmakers. Without it, our system does not operate as efficiently as it should.

Lawmakers did not have much choice regarding the closure of the capitol building and, as a one-time measure to avert a crisis, it was the right decision. Such decisions, though, should always be made with careful thought and with the knowledge that the overall goal is always to safeguard democracy.

NASA: MOON 'WOBBLE' TO INCREASE FLOODING...



You don't know what you've got till it's gone



ANNE MARCH
OTHER VIEWS

Joni Mitchell famously wrote "You don't know what you've got till it's gone," a lyric that applies in 2021 as much as it did back in 1969 when "Big Yellow Taxi" was written.

Though our landscape has changed since that song came out, we in Eastern Oregon are fortunate to live in what is a remarkably beautiful part of the world, surrounded by forests, abundant wildlife and mostly pristine views of hills and rivers.

This is true prosperity. If you've been following the news, you'll know that Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley are proposing legislation to expand the Wild and Scenic river system in Oregon, which would include 135 miles of river in Union County. The Wild and Scenic Rivers act of 1968 has the purpose of protecting stretches of rivers with "outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values" for present and future generations.

You may also have read that Union County Commissioners are against this plan ("Commissioners oppose River Democracy Act," The Observer, July 6). I read, in their recent letter to Rep. Cliff Bentz, that they seek to ensure that protection plans aren't too strict or limiting for the county and property owners in the affected areas. This may seem like a wise move, because who can

predict future county and property owners' desires, right? Not so fast.

I am convinced that there is something to be learned from another issue playing out right now in our county. Idaho Power has previously and is currently laying the groundwork and pushing forward to build a 500 kV power line through 300 miles of Eastern Oregon. This will require a 250-foot swath of clear-cut trees and denuded vegetation through Eastern Oregon and will contain transmission towers that are up to 200 feet tall with buzzing overhead power lines.

This corridor will cut through the Blue Mountains, go right past Morgan Lake, through the Ladd Canyon watershed, along Interstate 84 and into the Baker Valley where it and its access roads will cut across the historic Oregon Trail, bringing what many experts say is unneeded electricity to our neighboring state. It will be ugly to look at, drive by and walk under.

We locals who will be impacted by this project will reap no benefit from it, yet will all live with the aftermath and increased fire risks as a result of the lines.

The presiding Administrative Law Judge in Salem wrote on July 13 in agreement with lawyers from Portland and the power company from Boise that "there are no specific scenic views or values associated with the Morgan Lake Park that are regarded as particularly important for purposes of compliance with the Recreation Standard."

She also stated that "the entire Union County/Grande Ronde Valley viewshed is not identified as a sig-

nificant or important scenic resource under the Scenic Resources standard." This is because former county commissioners and city council members didn't protect it when they could have. In other words, there are no laws on the books to prevent scenic degradation in most of our county.

Why don't these laws exist? Probably because no one ever thought a project like this would happen. No one could have predicted that a large corporation would find a way to force itself through pristine property as is currently happening. Now local ranchers, recreationalists, wildlife enthusiasts and property rights advocates find themselves in a major fight to stop this project from proceeding (see StopB2H.org). Idaho Power has an entire team of lawyers to push this power line though by capitalizing on our lack of local protections for the land, waters and views.

My point is that Wild and Scenic designations matter. Nobody knows what kind of industry will want to move in at some point in the future. If we don't have laws on the books, we will naively pave the way for distant corporations to find legal loopholes the size of road graders and use them in our county to their own advantage.

I urge our county commissioners to recognize the fragility of our situation here and do everything they can to protect the wild and scenic land and rivers around us. You don't know what you've got till it's gone.

Anne March is a long-time resident of Union County and an educator in La Grande.

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