

OUR VIEW

Public records and real numbers

Ninety million dollars. It's a lot of money. It's the number Adam Crawford, external relations director for the state's Department of Administrative Services, used last week about the cost of public records. He said that's what he thought Oregon might be spending to give media organizations and others public records at reduced cost or free.

"I think the number may be even higher," Crawford replied, when he was challenged on it by another member of the Oregon Public Records Advisory Council. The discussion then quickly shifted away.

If it really is \$90 million or more, it's a mighty sum that Crawford pointed out the state is transferring, in part, to for-profit companies.

But when we later asked him about that number, it seemed an educated guess. He didn't make it clear where it came from. He did mention a survey of state agencies from 2018. It said agencies fulfilled roughly 25,000 public records requests and charged under \$150,000 for doing that, waiving all other staff and legal costs.

Would that add up to \$90 million? Maybe. Maybe not.

If Crawford believes that number is right, though, and he's a member of the executive team of a key state agency, journalists and the public should not be surprised when they face enormous fees when they ask for public records. Government officials may believe they are simply giving away too much at the cost of other state priorities.

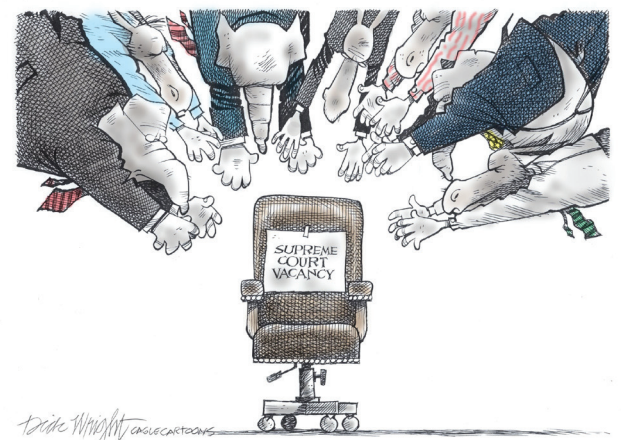
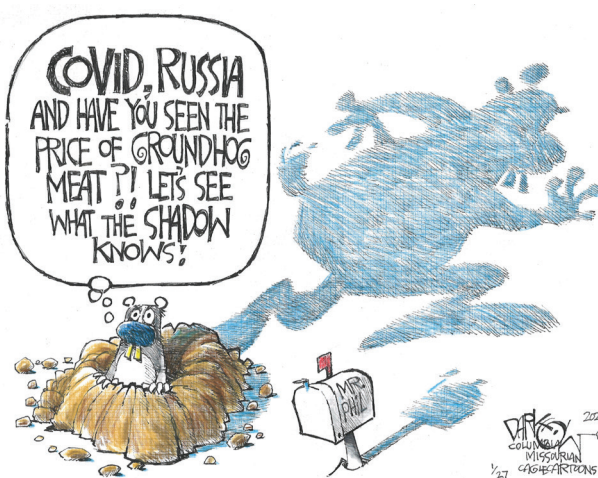
Public agencies can charge reasonable fees for public records in Oregon. They don't have to. They can waive some or all of the cost. Charging high fees can be the same as denying a request. What should be charged and who should pay it is at the heart of the questions the state committee, the Oregon Public Records Advisory Council, is looking at, as Crawford said.

For government bodies, releasing public records isn't just a matter of doing a computer search, the computer spits out the records and then the government hands them over in minutes. State and local government agencies don't always have the most modern computers. The state is in the process of upgrading many outdated systems. The old systems weren't designed to make public records searches easy.

There can also be a problem with how information is stored. Releasable information can be stored mixed in with personal information that should not be disclosed. Scouring records and redacting personal information takes time and effort. Who should pay for that?

And there can be issues when people take on new roles volunteering to serve on government committees. They can end up using their personal email accounts when they email about government business. Those particular emails would be public records. That would mean the volunteers would have to compile them and hand them over if requested. If some of the emails didn't show them in the best light, would they?

What is the solution? That's what Oregon's Public Records Advisory Council is working on. Real numbers should be the foundation of the discussion.



We're still waiting to see the maps



MATT MCELLOGOTT
OTHER VIEWS

Some things from 2021 are still lingering in 2022, like the River Democracy Act that Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley are pushing. They are trying to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968.

For several months I've been following this issue and still there are no answers to many revolving questions. Like why are some of the designated streams not streams at all, but dry washes? Why are the stream buffers increased from a quarter mile to a half mile? The act has pages of coordinates of the streams, rivers and dry gulches to be protected, but not one map.

In May 2021, the Oregon Cattlemen's Association asked for the maps and then they asked again in November. As of this writing, we still don't have the maps from Wyden's office.

I know of two counties in Eastern Oregon that have, at their own expense, hired an engineering firm to map the coordinates in the

act in order to have a visual map of the affected streams. These visual maps give the county a picture of how this act will impact them.

It is unconscionable that any county government should have to spend money from its general fund to map these streams when information should be available upon request from Wyden or Merkley. Yet, they continue to ignore the requests. How will this affect livestock grazing and other natural resource users?

This act talks a lot about fire resiliency but supplies no details as to how locking up 3.1 million acres of federal land will reduce threat of fire to land, lumber and lives. What long-term economic effect will this bill have on rural Oregon? Wyden and his team expound on the great benefits of tourism and the dollars spent on recreation. "Money will flow like manna from the gods to rural Oregon."

That's the well-polished sales pitch and talking points pounded into their heads at staff meetings. When hikers, bikers and ATVers visit rural Oregon most of them bring their own tents, campers or RVs. They fill their coolers and gas tanks at home and don't spend much in the small towns they drive

through. Wyden's bill has a \$30 million price tag. Not just for the first year but every year — forever. Only \$5 million of that is earmarked. What is the other \$25 million for? They haven't answered that one either.

The original intent of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was to preserve certain rivers with "outstanding, natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition." The River Democracy Act as presented is a vast departure from the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. If this act passes into law, it will set grave precedent that will enable lawmakers to circumvent protocol and procedures. Our senators were elected to represent all Oregonians, not a select demographic.

Please take the time to look up SB 192. If you don't like what you see, if you don't want another 4,700 miles of streams and 3.1 million acres of Oregon locked up, reach out to Oregon's senators and let them know.

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