

Politics / Local

Merkley holds town hall

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Merkley said recent health care talks involved the health care bill known as “Trumpcare.”

He said, “Then a group of 13 senators meeting secretly developed a Senate version of that.”

He said the two bills wound up being very similar anyway, but condemned any meetings he felt were being held without the knowledge of constituents.

The group of 13 did indeed meet over months to draft legislation, but not so much in secret as their activities were reported by most major news sources across the U.S.

Merkley said according to its Congressional Budget Office (CBO) score, the new bill wasn’t much different from the original.

He claimed, however, that the Senate bill would produce \$33 billion in tax breaks for only 400 “rich” Americans who didn’t need breaks, in his opinion. That tax money, he said, could be given to 700,000 poorer Americans to fund their health care.

The bill, he said, “would vastly reduce health care to give a tax break to the richest Americans.”

He stated that Republicans who supported this bill have cancelled town-halls so as to hide their support from the public.

Merkley then criticized partisanship divisiveness.

Merkley went on to give the statistics that in rural Oregon, one out of every three people are now on the Oregon Health Plan. 65% of citizens across the country are enrolled in the equivalent.

Merkley quickly referenced ongoing “Russia and North Korea issues” before moving on to question and answer time.

Craig Martell wanted to know what Merkley would do about “gimmicks and loopholes for the rich.” Merkley said he had seen a one-page tax reform plan from the Trump admin-

istration that suggested repealing the estate tax, but said the sheet gave no “real details.”

“We don’t have a plan,” he said.

Art Sappington of the Virtue Mine asked specifically what would happen now that Oregon Governor Kate Brown has legislation in place regarding the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality’s policies, which conflicted directly with certain federal laws.

Merkley put Sappington in touch with his staff at the meeting for research, as no one in the room had heard of that exact issue prior.

One lady wanted to know what Merkley would do to stop lobbying and spending, and to limit the group Citizens United. Citizens United is a conservative group that supports President Trump tax-reduction agenda.

Merkley said he felt such groups, had been instrumental in helping legislators like Mitch McConnell “steal” the Supreme Court seat vacated after Judge Scalia’s death.

Maureen McMahon of Halfway wanted to know what Merkley could do to help Oregonians take the mindset of the state’s two Democrat senators and help “influence” more conservative senators outside the state to legislate/think their same way.

Merkley pointed to social media and contacting the offices of those elected officials.

Linda Bergeron of Halfway asked what he was doing about nepotism in D.C.

Merkley said there was “no law against” nepotism, then brought up “emoluments,”—a term not often heard prior to this year.

Merkley explained that emoluments are essentially anything of value (kickbacks) from a foreign government or entity that a sitting president is not allowed to take. For example when President Grant received medals made of

precious metal, he asked permission of Congress to accept them.

He inferred that bookings on Trump’s properties constituted emoluments, and could be grounds for impeachment. He said there was no precedent for such an impeachment as he believed it had never been an issue before, and said Trump had been urged to divest of his holdings, or at least create a blind trust, but had refused.

Other questions involved reducing fuel load on public lands, environmental protection, etc.

Marshall McComb of the Baker County Democrats voiced frustration with what he views as the “inequality of wealth” in the country, and said that 42% of Baker County residents “can’t make ends meet.”

McComb cited stagnant wages and automation as culprits, as well as the top 1% of wealthy Americans keeping too much of their money.

Merkley recalled a trip to a dairy and how the automation process worked, stating it had changed that industry so that people were rarely involved with the cattle.

As most politicians, Republican or Democrat, tend to set a tight schedule during their townhall travels, the hour quickly ran out before questions did. Merkley attempted a speed round to address the desires of numerous remaining people to ask questions.

During that round, Kim Lethlean invited Merkley to the Virtue Mine to show him how to use substances like apple cider vinegar to replace chemical acids during mining, so he knew it could be “done right.”

Another lady told Merkley the story of her own personal disability.

Steve Culley, a “grandparent parent,” brought to Merkley’s attention the methamphetamine epidemic in Oregon and how families are devastated.

In all, the meeting lasted just over an hour.

Controversial gun grab bill passes in Oregon

Salem, Ore. - Amid bipartisan opposition, House Democrats today advanced legislation that establishes a constitutionally tenuous legal process for allowing courts to compel an individual to surrender their firearms. House Republicans argued that SB 719 infringes on constitutionally protected self-defense rights, could put law enforcement officers in harm’s way by requiring them to remove firearms from individuals even if they have not been convicted of a crime, and ultimately fails to address the root causes of violence in Oregon communities.

“I do not begrudge the sponsors of this bill nor the spirit in which this legislation was brought forward, but there are several pieces of this bill that should give us pause,” said Representative Bill Post (R-Keizer). “SB 719 sets up a constitutionally tenuous process for stripping Oregonians of their rights and puts the burden of enforcement on the backs of our already strained law enforcement community. If we want to reduce violence in our communities, we need to get serious about investing in mental health programs and ensuring that Oregonians have access to

the care they desperately need.”

SB 719 creates what sponsors of the legislation have dubbed an Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) The process for obtaining an ERPO as outlined by the bill allows an individual who either lives with, or is in an intimate relationship with, a person who they believe may be at risk of harming themselves or others to seek a court order to have the potentially at risk person’s firearms and any items that could qualify as dangerous weapons removed from them. An ERPO can be requested by an individual in secret and does not provide an opportunity for an individual to contest the order until after it has already been issued. Courts may consider an overly broad list of factors when determining whether to issue an ERPO, including convictions for nonviolent crimes and subjective statements.

“The proponents of SB 719 have sought to protect Oregonians from domestic and self-inflicted violence—a goal we all share,” said Representative David Brock Smith (R-Port Orford). “But the process established under this bill has some significant flaws

that could allow for abuse of the system and result in innocent Oregonians having their rights compromised without just cause. We have an obligation to preserve and protect the freedoms guaranteed by our constitution, including the right to bear arms, and I believe this bill runs the risk of coming into conflict with that obligation.”

In opposing the bill, Republicans argued that the best way to reduce violence in Oregon communities would be to invest in mental health services. They cited a study showing Oregon ranking as the worst in the U.S. for mental health, and called for policymakers to prioritize investments in mental health education and services.

Lawmakers have done little to expand mental health treatment this session, including failing to advance SB 1054, which would have led to expanded care options for veterans.

SB 719 passed the House on a 31-28 vote, with several Democrats joining Republicans in opposition to the bill. The bill now heads to Governor Brown’s desk, where it is expected to be signed into law.

City Council

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City Manager/Director Comments

City Manager Warner advised Council the Baker 5J School Board would be holding a meeting in Council Chambers utilizing the recording system.

They have agreed that they would like to start recording and broadcasting their meetings so they would like an opportunity to “try it out.”

Warner suggested if all went well that the City might consider selling

the current system to the District allowing them (the City) to purchase new, updated equipment.

Warner also advised that he has attended Jeff Merkley’s town hall meeting the previous Saturday and felt the meeting held was somewhat productive in that Baker City citizens were able to voice their concerns about things that were important to them such as the City watershed and healthcare.

Council Comments

A question from outside of Council was directed to Councilor Andersen

regarding the watershed. Andersen stated that he felt that was an item that should be discussed at length during a future Council meeting by all Councilors.

He acknowledged a response that had been received concerning a recently drafted City Council letter to the Forest Service about the City watershed but was reluctant to engage in any discussion at the time.

With nothing further, the meeting was adjourned.

Walden’s field rep visits County Commissioners

BY TODD ARRIOLA
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The Baker County Board of Commissioners held a work session on Wednesday, July 12, 2017, 9 a.m., in the Commission Chambers of the Baker County Courthouse, which included discussions with Baker County Planning Director Holly Kerns, about clarifying and updating the County’s nuisance property ordinance, and Congressman Greg Walden’s new Field Representative Tucker Billman, about economic and other issues in the County.

Present from the Board were Chair Bill Harvey, Commissioners Mark Bennett and Bruce Nichols, and Executive Assistant Heidi Martin.

Harvey opened the session, and Kerns explained the issues with the County’s 2006 nuisance property ordinance, which she said has been written complaint-driven, but with little opportunity for en-

forcement, when complaint letters didn’t result in compliance with the ordinance, something the Planning Department recognized in 2013, upon reviewing the process.

She mentioned an email sent to the Planning Department, dated July 11, 2017, from County legal counsel Drew Martin, which addresses issues with the ordinance.

In it, he explained that there are several issues, one being whether the County may be liable if a hazardous property catches fire and damages a neighboring property. He said that the County’s liability would generally be limited by the doctrine of “discretionary immunity,” but that the risk would increase if the County determines that a property is a dangerous hazard, and the County fails to act.

Martin also recommended, in regard to existing nuisance properties, to hold off on proceeding under the current ordinance, because he said

that the ordinance contains some inconsistencies and ambiguities that require clarification, and the enforcement procedure needs to include a more clearly defined right to a hearing and hearing process.

Martin also recommended spending the time and resources to develop a refined process, including County staff familiarization with the process and basic legal rights, if the County anticipates numerous nuisance abatement actions. If the County anticipates infrequent actions, he said it may be simpler to just use the Circuit Court and existing civil procedures and remedies.

The Board discussed the associated issues, and agreed there needs to be a more refined process, in order to protect property owners, to limit County liability, and to put adequate tools in place to ensure there is a resolution in each specific case, when written complaints are filed.

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Published weekly every Friday.
Subscription rates per year are \$29.95 all areas, e-mail delivery. \$39.95 print issue, home delivery, Baker City city limits only. \$49.95 print issue, mail delivery, outside Baker City city limits only.
Payment in advance.

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