

Blocking Big Brother

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden talks about net neutrality and protecting the privacy of law-abiding citizens in a new era



U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) is leading voice in Congress about government surveillance and Americans' privacy. Wyden spoke with Street Roots on Feb. 25.

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

On Feb. 25, spectators packed into a gymnasium at David Douglas High School in East Multnomah County.

Despite a rare spate of sunshine gracing the Portland area that day, an estimated 3,500 people had decided to spend their Saturday afternoon indoors listening to a politician answer questions.

It was U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden's 800th town hall since he was elected to the Senate in 1996.

"How many have never been to a town hall?" he asked the audience from the stage.

From the highest bleachers on the balcony level to the rows of folding chairs across the gymnasium floor, hands everywhere popped upward.

"That says it all," he said.

The election of Donald Trump has elevated the already-popular senator to a superstar-like status, with constituents flocking to his town meetings, which in years past were more sparsely attended.

At David Douglas High School, Wyden fielded questions about everything from the Affordable Care Act and corporate taxes to impeaching Trump and efforts to destroy labor unions.

After he left the town hall, which had gone into double overtime, Wyden headed to the Street Roots office in Old Town for an interview.

We wanted to know his thoughts on issues he's fought long and hard for, such as net neutrality and civilian privacy, now that a business-minded administration that has

exhibited a willingness to conduct witch hunts is occupying the White House.

The interview kicked off with a few questions from Street Roots vendor Dennis Chavez.

Dennis Chavez: *Since the dawn of the Patriot Act, it's a constitutional issue where people cannot feel free to voice their opinion without repercussion, so I just want to know how the government feels about that.*

Ron Wyden: Well, I can tell you I've been voting against the various extensions of the Patriot Act for a long time.

D.C.: *I know you have.*

R.W.: I think what's particularly unfortunate is people want security and liberty, and they're now getting policies that would give them less of both. And what really illustrates that is weakening strong encryption. Strong encryption is what keeps your information safe, and Donald Trump and some of these senior Republicans want to weaken it. What it's going to do if you weaken strong encryption is give a big gift to terrorists and hackers; your data will be much less protected — your personal information, whether it's health or financial or whatever — and then our companies are really going to get hurt because then they'd be required to put backdoors into their products, and then that helps their competition overseas. So when you and I and everybody else wants security and liberty, a lot of these policies that are coming out of Washington, D.C., give you less of both, and that seems to me to be foolish, even by Washington, D.C.,

standards.

D.C.: *I agree totally.*

R.W.: Good on you. You've been really studying the Patriot Act and these privacy issues and the like? What got you interested in this?

D.C.: *Well, I have a bachelor's degree in political science.*

R.W.: Where'd you get your bachelor's degree?

D.C.: *At Washington State University. And I have a minor in anthropology, so I've kind of been studying how human beings have been manipulating human beings since the dawn of human beings — and I'm not happy about that. I'm a military veteran; I spent four years in the Army as a Chinook helicopter mechanic. But you know, I'm just like, the country we have now is not the country I swore to defend. And I'm unhappy about that. What can I do about it?*

R.W.: Well, what I tell people is that now is really a crucial time. The reality is that people from all over the world still want to come here, and hardly anybody from here wants to move there. But you're absolutely right, this is also a really ominous time. When the Democratic National Committee was hacked by the Russians, Donald Trump

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