

UNDERCOVERED

A rundown of the top 'censored' local stories in 2011

BY ALAN PITTMAN

What does censored mean? For the past three decades, Project Censored, a student-faculty media research project at Sonoma State University, has brought the question up with its top list of stories "censored" in the mainstream media.

Even on the left, Project Censored's definition of censored has sometimes drawn controversy. "There are instances when Project Censored seems to wander too far afield," the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* reported on this year's list (see sidebar).

To keep things closer to home, here's a list of some of the top censored stories in Eugene. Of course, making such a list is an inherently subjective exercise, like much of journalism. Since there's no one agency pre-reading everything and blacking it out, "undercovered" may be a better word. Here's this story's list of the top undercovered news in Eugene last year:

Eugene is safe. Local media loves the "if it bleeds it leads" crime stories. They're easy. The police, looking to hype crime to boost their budget, use an overstaffed PR department to spoon-feed a steady diet of crime press releases to lazy local reporters. They're sensational. Fear and titillation have long been a staple for boosting ratings and readership. But the flood of hyped crime news as well as gory cop shows leads to a false fear. Over the past dozen years, the violent crime rate in Eugene has dropped by 50 percent and the property crime rate has dropped by 46 percent, according to FBI data. According to FBI violent crime rates, Eugene now ranks in the top 25 percent of the safest cities in America.

Jails waste money. "Judge Takes \$600,000 From Kids." You won't see that headline in the newspaper after a conviction. But that's what's happening when a judge slams down a 20-year sentence in Oregon. The state pays an average of about \$30,000 a year per inmate. With budgets tight, getting "tough on crime" comes directly out of the hides of children struggling with overcrowded classrooms and inadequate health care. Of course, it's not all the fault of judges; fear-mongering politicians play a role as do TV-scared Oregonians who passed throw-away-the-key sentencing measures. Surveys show Oregonians think crime is up, although it's way down. In Lane County the number of jail beds has dropped 37 percent since 1998 while the crime rate in Eugene has fallen by half.

Homeless harassment. Eugene's de facto policy on the homeless appears to be simple: Go somewhere else. In the 1990s, the city used massive police sweeps to displace homeless street people from 13th Avenue near the UO. The pretenses for the mass arrests were alleged jaywalking, loitering and minor trespassing offenses. After the homeless then moved downtown, the police and city council this year began a crackdown with an "exclusion ordinance" and expensive new downtown cops that have largely targeted the homeless for minor offenses. When the

homeless then moved to the Occupy Camp under the I-105 on-ramps, the police then roused them out of there. Only now that the Occupy movement has drawn attention to the homeless problem does there appear to be some recognition that the city needs a real, humane solution rather than just using the police to sweep the human "trash" around the city.

Right-wingers seize county government. Three years ago, Republicans got only about a third of the presidential votes in Lane County. But now, right-wing Republicans control three out of five of the seats on the Lane County Board of Commissioners. With a recent gerrymandering, they're now angling to boost that majority to four out of five. But how will such a right-skewed county government win support from the Democratic majority in Lane County needed to pass tax measures and make county government actually work?

UO athletics subsidies. The UO and its boosters continue to claim that UO athletics supports itself. That's a load of duck poop. Athletics diverts millions of dollars a year from student tuition and taxpayer funds in the way of accounting gimmicks, legal fees, subsidized overhead, student fees and in diverted money to run and fix the floors in the athletes-only "jock in the box" center.

Independent police auditor not independent. Eugene citizens voted overwhelmingly to create an independent, transparent police auditor, but the police auditor the City Council hired hasn't demonstrated much independence. Auditor Mark Gissener has dismissed nearly every external complaint he has received against police. When it comes to releasing information on police complaints to the public, Gissener takes direction from the police, who keep complaints secret. Councilors opposed to a truly independent auditor have praised Gissener for promoting the image of the police department and avoiding controversy. Voters enacted the auditor after a scandal in which a police officer raped or sexually abused a dozen women over a five year period during which 23 different officers, including current Police Chief Pete Kerns, allegedly ignored complaints from the victims.

Envision sprawl. The city has billed Envision Eugene as a way to plan for a greener, more livable city. In reality, the process is heavily dominated by proponents of urban sprawl and heading toward a big expansion of the city's urban growth boundary to enrich land speculators and developers. With downtown riddled with vast empty and underused buildings and vacant lots, and land and housing prices falling, there doesn't appear to be much need for an expensive UGB expansion that will increase traffic pollution. Nevertheless, the city is targeting the I-5 interchange near LCC for a major Gateway-style land boom.

Huge support for EmX. While the media have focused on opposition from a handful of self-

appointed, anti-transit extremists, media have largely ignored a strong showing of support from a group of 23,000 local citizens. The ASUO, the elected UO student government representing 23,389 UO students, unanimously passed a resolution supporting the West Eugene EmX.

Downtown is booming. Eugene's downtown, which has had the life sucked out of it for decades by urban sprawl, is booming. LCC is filling the Sears pit across from the library with a huge learning center and student apartments, the Centre Court historic remodel is almost done, the adjacent building in the old Aster pit is not far behind, the Taco Time historic remodel and addition is under way across the street, new apartments are going in a couple blocks away on Pearl and the new hotel at 5th Street Public Market is finishing up. A lively reinvigorated downtown will mean a huge historic change for Eugene.

City Hall pit. While the city of Eugene is spending millions to subsidize a makeover of downtown, the city itself appears to be heading toward leaving a nasty pit where City Hall once stood. The city is spending \$16 million to move the police department out of downtown, removing an important law enforcement presence. Next, the city plans to move the rest of its staff out of City Hall to scattered rentals and leave the building empty. That could mean another big pit downtown and a civic center with no there there.

Tax the rich. The lesson from the failed city income tax for schools wasn't that local voters don't support schools or don't support income taxes. It was that voters want taxes that hit those with the largest ability to pay rather than taking another bite out of the middle class. The school measure that the City Council crafted would have hit all taxpayers down to just above the poverty line — it failed nearly 2-1. State Measure 66, a state income tax increase on households above \$250,000 in income, passed in Eugene the year before by a 2-1 margin.

Subsidizing greenwash. The Seneca lumber mill got \$10 million dollars in taxpayer subsidies from the state, countless more millions in subsidies from federal taxpayers and at least \$3 million in secret subsidies from EWEB ratepayers by claiming green power from a wood incinerator that scientists have shown will actually boost global warming.

Freeway plan. The region plans to spend up to \$2.3 billion to increase driving 25 percent over the next two decades under a quietly adopted Regional Transportation Plan that flies in the face of city of Eugene plans to dramatically cut global warming pollution and increase livability by reining in urban sprawl and increasing biking and walking.

Nationally 'CENSORED'

Here's Project Censored list of the top 10 undercovered stories from last year:

1. More U.S. soldiers committed suicide than died in combat
2. U.S. military manipulates the social media
3. Obama authorizes international assassination campaign
4. Global food crisis expands
5. Private prison companies fund anti-immigrant legislation
6. Google spying on personal data?
7. U.S. Army and psychology's largest experiment — ever
8. The fairytale of clean and safe nuclear power
9. Government sponsored technologies for weather modification
10. Real unemployment: one out of five in U.S.

Full descriptions and a longer list of stories at projectcensored.org