

OPINION



the Astorian

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GUEST COLUMN

A bad start for transparency

2021 is starting badly as far as transparency in state government. A quick recap of just the past few days:

- The Oregon Health Authority abruptly announced it no longer would disclose information about individual deaths from COVID-19 before Gov. Kate Brown reversed the decision.



DICK HUGHES

- Thirty-two thousand vaccine doses destined for elsewhere in Oregon were redirected to the Portland metro area by the governor's order, but officials did not explain where those doses were being taken from.

- A week ago, Brown held a lengthy press conference that supposedly was "to discuss her legislative agenda as outlined in her State of the State address, as well as Oregon's ongoing response to COVID-19." Instead, most of the time went to Brown and her invited guests praising her controversial decision to prioritize vaccinations for school employees ahead of senior citizens. That consumed so much time that only three reporters could ask questions before Brown ended the press conference. Meanwhile, Brown's post-State of the State press conference that had been scheduled for the previous day had been canceled "due to scheduling changes and changes to the legislative calendar this week."

- The names, titles and email addresses for the governor's staff have been scrubbed from her office website because of security concerns. Fortunately, the public index of state agency employees remains viable (as of this writing).

- Unlike Washington state and California, Oregon's Employment Department will not release information about the number of COVID-19 benefit claims being investigating for unemployment fraud or how much has been paid out in potentially fraudulent benefits.

- Because the Oregon Capitol remains closed to the public, legislative leaders promised unparalleled public access through technology. That new system turns out to be geared toward the technological literate, exacerbating the divide between the technology haves and have-nots.

I'll focus today on that public interaction with the 2021 Legislature, because most of the other issues have been covered widely in the news media.

Legislative staff put together an excellent selection of Citizen Engagement resources. However, the technology can be challenging, to say the least.

State Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, alluded to that in his



Romeo Ceasar

People are encouraged to submit testimony to the state Legislature online because of virus restrictions at the Oregon Capitol.

WRITTEN TESTIMONY CAN BE SENT THROUGH OLD-FASHIONED MAIL, OR BY UPLOADING A PDF OR SUBMITTING TEXT THROUGH AN ONLINE PORTAL. NO LONGER CAN PEOPLE EMAIL THEIR TESTIMONY, ALTHOUGH EMAILS MIGHT BE ACCEPTED IF THERE IS A PUBLIC HEARING ON A TOPIC INSTEAD OF A BILL.

Wednesday evening newsletter. He chairs the Senate Education Committee, which conducted a public hearing that afternoon on reopening public schools. More than 100 pieces of testimony were submitted online. However, many people who had signed up to speak did not do so.

"I'm not sure if the problem was technical or they decided to rely on their written testimony," Dembrow wrote. "In case it's the former, I decided to schedule a 'second chance' hearing for Friday, 3:30 to 5, to give those who had signed up another chance to testify."

To testify before a committee, people must register in advance. Registration closes at the start of the meeting, unlike past years in which the commit-

tee chair often would look around the room and say, "Is there anyone else here who wishes to testify?"

The Legislature uses Microsoft Teams videoconferencing for its virtual meetings. Testimony also can be given by phone. Registration is different for the two methods.

Once a committee arrives at public testimony on the agenda, people in the queue are supposed to stop watching online and instead listen on their phone or through Microsoft Teams, so they don't miss their name being called. That is because the "live" video streaming on the Oregon Legislative Information System is more than a few seconds behind.

People may turn on their camera while testifying, if desired, so others can

see their face. However, unlike Zoom, Microsoft Teams shows only a few meeting participants. Brett Hanes, the interim legislative administrator, says Microsoft has been asked to fix that.

In addition, some legislators turn off their computer cameras except when speaking. The cumulative result is that people testifying — or anyone watching online — cannot pick up the visual clues of legislators' reactions, including whether legislators are paying attention at all.

Written testimony can be sent through old-fashioned mail, or by uploading a PDF or submitting text through an online portal. No longer can people email their testimony, although emails might be accepted if there is a public hearing on a topic instead of a bill.

To add to the confusion, you cannot click on the links listed in committee agendas in OLIS. Instead, you must copy and paste that link into a browser. Or click on the PDF version of the agenda, which does have hot links.

The bottom line is that finding one's way can be confusing and time-consuming.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Octogenarian wisdom

We have had a lot of questions and concerns in the newspapers about the slow delivery of the vaccine to states.

The answer is very clear to us oldsters. For next day delivery, have Amazon.com ship out this vaccine.

DeLORES MAY RICHARDS
Astoria

Renewed hope

On the evening of the inauguration of Joe Biden as president and Kamala Harris as vice president, I think I heard a collective sign of relief. Given the horrendous riots at the U.S. Capitol just two weeks earlier, there was legitimate concern for their safety.

What we saw instead was a joyful celebration of the return of good, smart and truthful public servants to our federal government, after four years that will go down as among the worst in our 200-year history, especially with the pain and many losses of the pandemic.

We yearn to a return to a sense of normalcy in our lives. What encourages me is that because of what we have been through, and what we have seen up close on our TV screens, our new normal may be better than before.

For example, we now know that people of color were not exaggerating the fear of their men being stopped by the police. At the same time, we saw police being brutally attacked by far-right groups. We have also begun to realize the needs and vulnerability of the elderly, whether living alone or in group settings.

Correcting these, and other long-standing problems in our society, will take a lot of hard work and involvement, but I

believe that many of our citizens will be willing to make the investment of their time and energy.

Hopefully, future generations will recognize that at this point in our history, the people worked to create a more perfect union.

CAROLYN EADY
Astoria

Scam alert

I was recently the victim of an email scam. While I am embarrassed, and the fault for being duped is entirely mine, I discovered that the Oregon Department of Justice offers a scam alert network, which, had I been signed up, might have raised my level of alert.

The nature of the scam was a request from someone I considered trustworthy, whose email account had been hacked and the address book hijacked. Because the source was trusted, I suppressed my usual alarm bells.

I am hoping that this letter might help others avoid being similarly victimized. The Scam Alert Network can be found at bit.ly/ORScamAlert

The Astoria Police Department was very helpful in this process of filing a complaint and getting signed on to the scam alert network.

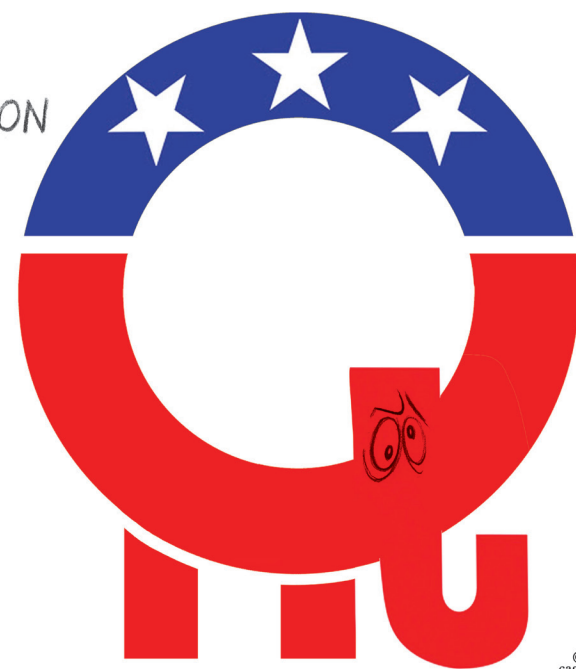
BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria

Huge payback

I've got them "Where's My Vaccination Blues." After supporting everything Gov. Kate Brown has done and said in this last, very difficult year, I can no longer do so.

Putting the teachers ahead of the old-

REPUBLIC-ANON PARTY



MATEON
caglecartoons.com

sters in the line to get COVID-19 vaccinations looks to me like nothing but a huge payback to the teachers' union, the most powerful backers of her career.

We geezers are already dying like crazy to get out of this place. We don't need callous, hollow platitudes about how valuable teachers are echoing in our ears as we do so. Many of us are ex-teachers.

Look out your window, and we'll be gone.

JOSEPH WEBB
Astoria

Political civil war

I have opposed the one-sided conservative rant of the Rush Limbaugh show since its beginning, proposing that equal time be aired for other opinions. Over those years, I was told that he made money for the owners, and because he was on daily for three hours, he had growing numbers of

believers.

In those early days of Rush, if anyone tried to correct him on fake news or false statements, he'd claim that he was an entertainer, and nothing else. I chose to not listen to that type of entertainment, but I do occasionally turn him on for a few minutes to get the slant of his day.

Being an optimist, and hopeful that as a nation we could move beyond that seditious takeover attempt, I turned him on. His words said all Democrats were working to destroy America, that the election was rigged and Republicans had to oppose democratic programs. I turned him off.

I sent an email to KAST suggesting that hisiring. Tom Freely, the program director at KAST, wrote back, "That's his job." What Rush and other nationalistic entertainers are doing further leads us to political civil war. We should work to be better than that.

SARA MEYER
Astoria