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GUEST COLUMN

Strange rhythm of the session

There’s a long-standing joke among Salem residents that state offices shut down the moment a snowflake is spotted.

COVID-19 overruled that joke. With most state offices closed to the public and state workers operating from home, there was no need for weather-related shut-downs. Then came the forecast of big-time snow, which caused the Oregon Senate to cancel its weekly floor session that was scheduled for Thursday morning.

That is part of the strange rhythm of the 2021 Legislature, in which most work is done away from the Oregon Capitol. State Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, described legislative life this way in his constituent newsletter: “Instead of pretty much moving to Salem for six months, I’ve begun shuttling up and down I-5 once a week to sit at my desk on the Senate floor to listen to first readings (of bills) for a few minutes. Then I catch up on mail and new legislation in my office for a couple of hours before driving home.”

Due to the public health restrictions, the Senate and House meet in person for only a few minutes each week – the Senate on Thursdays, the House on Tuesdays. These floor sessions are needed to introduce bills and get them shipped off to committees for possible consideration.

This is among the ways legislating has changed in the era of COVID-19. The Oregon Constitution states, “neither house shall without the concurrence of the other, adjourn for more than three days.” For as long as I can remember, the Legislature faithfully followed that provision. If the House or Senate even took a four-day weekend, one member of that body would show up to ceremonially open and adjourn a floor session on the fourth day, without anyone else in attendance.

In her weekly session with Oregon journalists via Zoom on Feb. 8, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said legislative leaders had begun discussing how to decide when health protocols could be loosened in the Capitol.



DICK HUGHES



Brian Hayes/Statesman Journal

Winter weather hit Salem.

She said changes wouldn’t happen this month but could in March or April. The Capitol is in Marion County, which is among 14 counties at the highest level of coronavirus risk on the Oregon Health Authority scale.

Busy days: Legislative committee meetings are conducted via video conference, with lawmakers logging in from anywhere and the public able to watch online. The schedule is hectic from Monday through Thursday, with 20 or more committees meeting each day, which Kotek called “kind of brutal.”

Little business is scheduled for Fridays. That traditionally was so legislators could be back in their home districts for a long weekend to meet with constituents, see family or, if they were employed, go to work.

Already this year, nearly 4,000 bills have been introduced. As in any session, the majority will die for lack of interest, lack of agreement or lack of time. Kotek said committee chairs are starting to realize that fewer bills will pass than in 2019, given the structure of the 2021 session and the fact that online hearings require more time and planning. Several committees are led by first-time legislators.

Speaking out: Floor sessions include time for lawmakers to sound off through brief remonstrances, under the constitu-

tional provision that, “Any member of either house, shall have the right to protest, and have his protest, with his reasons for dissent, entered on the journal.”

During a 20-minute House floor session on Feb. 9, Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Tangent, relayed the pleas of the Corban University volleyball team asking to be able to play. She quoted the coach and players at the Salem college as they talked about the loneliness and mental health challenges from being unable to compete or to gather outside their family groups.

Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, called for legislative help for tens of thousands of unemployed restaurant and hospitality workers. “As a recovering restaurateur, I understand the perils that these businesses are in, and the demographics and geographics across this state when it comes to the roller coaster of closures that have and continue to occur,” he said.

Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, told of walking his dogs across a Salem pedestrian bridge, witnessing the large homeless population and watching a woman walk shoeless in the rain. “As I continued to walk, I started to notice that my puppies were going to be warmer tonight than that young lady,” Smith told his House colleagues, urging them to collaboratively address homelessness.

Oregon’s plight is Salem’s plight: Seven former newspaper colleagues and I met by Zoom last week. Collectively, we have more than two-and-a-half centuries of journalistic experience.

They asked how Salem has changed in the years since they had moved on. My response was quick and brief: “Homelessness and lack of housing are far greater.”

Local and state officials, like their counterparts around the country, have struggled to fully comprehend and effectively address homelessness, including its root causes. Other issues received far more attention at the Oregon Capitol despite polls showing that housing and homelessness were higher priorities among Oregonians.

The League of Oregon Cities spotlighted housing and homelessness among its legislative priorities this year: “Cities large and small were facing escalating rates of homelessness well before the COVID-19 pandemic began and wildfires damaged communities. The resulting loss of homes and continuing economic downturn will only increase the number of Oregonians facing eviction or experiencing homelessness.”

Some progress was made during last year’s sessions, and Kotek is continuing that effort. She is sponsoring bills to accelerate development of homeless shelters and to clarify whether local governments can regulate “sitting, lying, sleeping or keeping warm and dry outdoors on public property that is open to the public.”

Meanwhile, a pavilion at the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem has been turned into a temporary shelter for 100 people. Union Gospel Mission will open its new shelter for up to 300 men this summer. Yet there still will be many hundreds of unhoused individuals and families camped outside downtown businesses, around parks, in cars and elsewhere.

Last year’s wildfires destroyed more than 4,000 Oregon homes, accentuating the state’s housing crisis. I also worry about the many Oregonians who, for whatever reason, had been living off the land in national forests and backwoods areas that burned.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A good yarn

We country bumpkins love a good yarn. The bigger the fable, the more readily it can be swallowed. Former President Donald Trump’s death grip on the white male imagination is a fine example. Here is another: Logging restrictions devastate our rural economy.

It’s not devastation, it’s a clearcut. It wasn’t, in our spree to harvest, that we were cutting trees faster than they are able to grow. And it wasn’t mechanized production that left too many workers on the bread line.

It wasn’t that automation in sawmills had any discernible effect on our local economy. Or that offshore log markets, or global politics, or globalism itself, or tariffs, or trade wars had any bearing on rural life.

It has nothing to do with the local management decisions — made by graduates of the Oregon State University College of Forestry, in support of financial paradigms — that have never taken local economies into account.

Nope, logging restrictions are to blame. And tree huggers. And that old salt, Captain Traders. And owls and murrelets, and other fuzzy wuzzies. And rising seawater, and warming oceans and domoic acid.

Not all mudslides are created equal. Our hands are clean. Trees are a renewable resource. It’s simple, cut one, and plant 10. Cut 10, and plant a hundred more. Rinse and repeat.

What could go wrong; we are safe. We are living in a bubble.

GARY DURHEIM
Seaside

Journey of understanding

Several years ago, when my wife and I moved to Astoria, we knew winters could be a challenge. To force ourselves to get out of the house, we intentionally did not get internet, and instead opted for a daily outing to the library in order to “get connected.”

Guess who else hangs out at the library? The unsheltered, of course. Thus began my journey of understanding. The folks I met did not match the stereotypes I had imagined. I began to hear stories of struggles, frustrations, failures, successes

and joys.

I heard from folks who graduated from Astoria High School; folks who worked in the fishing industry, and were injured; folks waiting for disability; and of folks working, but not able to afford a place to live. I made new friends.

And, I began to do a little research. I was surprised to discover Oregon is among the top states in the rate of homelessness in the nation. This is based on data from the Point-in-Time count required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

That’s not a top group to be proud of. And Clatsop County has among the highest rates of homelessness in Oregon. Interestingly, Mississippi has among the lowest rates of homelessness, along with much more affordable housing. Housing solves homelessness.

RICK BOWERS
Astoria

Bad idea

I was concerned to read the article on big-box store police calls (The Astorian, Feb. 6), and the thought of charging them for calls. They pay their share of taxes, and should be treated as fairly as any business.

A shoplifter, if he gets to court, is given a deal or slap on the wrist. If a homeowner called the police about a break-in, and had the person in hand, he would have an issue if he received a bill for calling for help.

Yet it seems that this is on the table for stores — to punish the criminal, not the victim. To sit there and say that they have extra calls because of their size is no excuse.

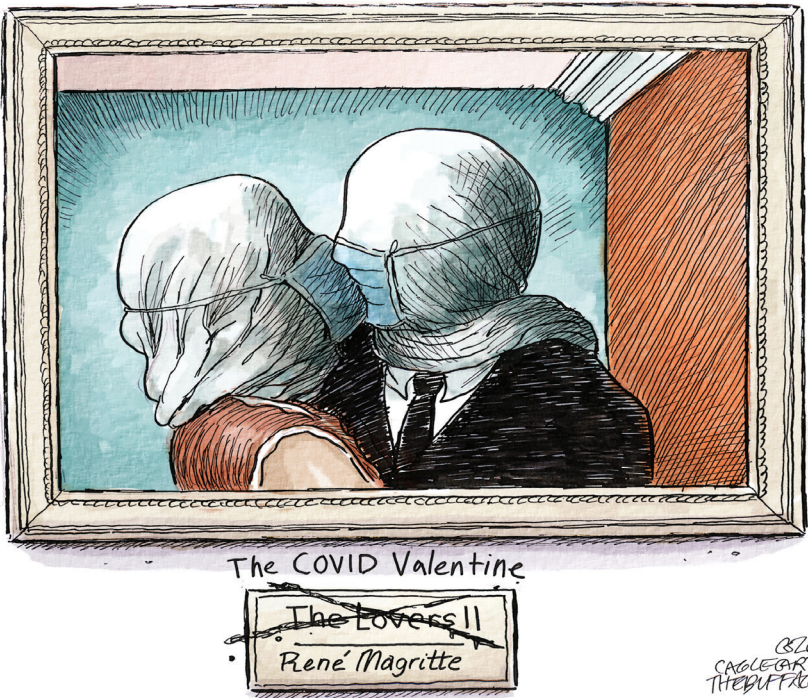
If people knew they would have to pay for the crime, they might do less. I think this is a very bad idea.

JOHN BAGEANT
Long Beach, Washington

We hate Trump

To the U.S. Congress: We get it already. You hate Trump. It’s not like this hasn’t been on your mind for a while. You listened to the lies, and now decided to act — again.

What are you trying to do while President Joe Biden’s plans are on hold? You



are acting like a bunch of spoiled brats ganging up on a dethroned bully. To what end?

Again, I say to all those lost in this hateful malaise: Trump was a blunt, outspoken egotistical man. You don’t have to like him. Look at the facts. He said what he thought, and did what he said. He was not hiding. He was thankfully a patriot, not a smarmy likable lifelong politician.

Now you are still not paying attention to the reality. Trump presided over the best economy in a long while. For three years all economic indicators, for all Americans, went up. Until COVID-19 and antifa became a weapon.

Then those became his fault, while you cried about the death toll and egged anti-fa’s peaceful protests on while they burned inner cities.

I am sorry you are such a snit. But get a grip. Press your agenda. When you are through ignoring the Constitution and tearing America down, see if you really can build back better.

Meanwhile, I worry about your sanity, and America’s future.

ROBERT LIDDYCOAT
Seaside

Imagine

Imagine, if you will, a world where everyone contributes to an insurance plan where there are no out-of-network charges,

medical denials, copays, out-of-pocket expenses and deductibles. A world where everyone is in your network and, thanks to the patriotism of your fellow Americans, you’ll never go bankrupt for seeking medical care.

Imagine a world where, once again, thanks to the funding of our fellow Americans, you’ll have comprehensive care for medical, dental, pharmaceutical, vision, hearing aids and long-term care. Imagine a world that even if you lose your job, you can keep your doctor and your health insurance.

This isn’t a partisan issue, because everyone needs health care. We all pay for public services like the police, fire departments, roads, water treatment facilities, public schools, food inspectors, medication research, the military and infrastructure. We all pay for it because we all know how essential these things are.

Therefore, it is my belief that we must come together and ensure that not one more family goes bankrupt because some shareholders on Wall Street need to make a buck off the suffering of rural families.

If this pandemic has proven anything, it is that during economic downturns our employer-driven health insurance model is extremely flawed, and puts us in a vulnerable position to lose our insurance, and may lead us to not seek health care when we need it.

RICKY BENNETT
Astoria