

OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

SHANNON ARLINT
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

GUEST COLUMN

Gun measure raises thorny issues

If this were a normal year, Room 50 in the basement of the Oregon Capitol would have been packed for last week's gun-control hearing. The overflow crowd also would have filled additional rooms in the Capitol, with people watching the hearing on big screens and hoping to hear their names called to testify.

Yet the final result would have been the same: passage of the gun-control legislation on a party-line vote.



DICK HUGHES

After a sometimes heated debate Thursday morning in the Senate Judiciary Committee, the four Democratic members sent Senate Bill 554 to a vote of the full Senate over the opposition of

the three Republicans.

A couple of hours later, all 11 Senate Republicans boycotted the Senate's weekly floor session, depriving the Senate of a quorum to conduct business. Newly Independent state Sen. Brian Boquist, of Dallas, also was absent, but that was previously scheduled.

Gun control was not mentioned in the Republicans' explanatory press release and their letter to Gov. Kate Brown. Rather, Republican Leader Fred Girod, of Lyons, and his colleagues called on Democratic legislators and Brown to focus on the most important issues affecting Oregonians: reopen public schools ASAP, accelerate coronavirus vaccinations for seniors and ensure rural residents are treated equitably, speed the reopening of businesses and forego tax increases.

For decades, Oregon's political party leadership held little relationship to what happens in the Capitol. That changed when Sen. Dallas Heard, of Myrtle Creek, was elected chair of the Oregon Republican Party in February.

Heard also had been among those pushing for a change in Senate Republican leadership last spring, which resulted in Herman Baertschiger Jr., of Grants Pass, stepping down and Girod taking over. Now a Jackson County commissioner, Baertschiger is the newly elected vice chair of the state GOP and Sen. Dennis Linthicum, of Klamath Falls, is party treasurer.

Why gun control: Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, has long advocated for



Marcio Jose Sanchez/AP Photo

Oregon legislators are considering restrictions on guns.

the concepts in SB 554.

State law bars people from bringing firearms into public buildings. However, that ban does not apply to people who hold a concealed handgun license. SB 554 would allow the state, school districts and local governments to remove that exemption, thereby barring anyone other than police and a few others from legally carrying weapons there. The bill also would increase fees for concealed handgun licenses.

Regardless of what you think about gun control, the measure and last week's actions raise a number of issues.

The question I always try to start with when analyzing an issue is this: What is the problem for which this is the solution?

Firearm violence remains at epidemic levels in the state and nationally, yet Brown has refused to treat gun violence as a public health crisis. The overwhelming percentage of gun deaths are suicides, yet Oregon vastly underfunds mental health care and fails to confront the social, financial and other dynamics that may contribute to suicides, whether in rural areas or cities.

And though almost everyone agrees

that guns should be kept away from children and from people in mental crisis, Second Amendment protectors and gun control advocates so distrust each other that they have not worked together on one obvious, albeit imperfect, answer: jointly launching a massive public information and education campaign to promote safe storage of guns. Instead, they fight.

Which brings us back to SB 554. One advantage of this virtual legislative session is that people across Oregon can testify via phone or videoconference instead of driving to the Capitol in Salem. More than 300 people signed up to testify at the Judiciary hearing on Feb. 22. Over 2,000 pieces of written testimony were submitted, according to Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, the committee vice chair.

The hearing lasted almost four hours. At the allotted three minutes per person, listening to everyone who initially signed up would have taken 16 hours. To expedite the testimony, Sen. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene, the committee chairman, asked committee members not to ask questions of people testifying and said committee staff could provide their contact information to members afterward.

More than two-thirds of people speaking were against the bill. Much of the testimony was thoughtful — the kind that anyone, regardless of viewpoint, should learn from. A bit was off the wall. Almost all was repetitive of what's been said before.

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, has been proud that — pre-COVID — Oregon had perhaps the most open capitol in the country. Indeed, it was so wide open that a few years ago I was showing the Capitol to a vacationing federal law enforcement officer from the East Coast, he was stunned that he entered the building and even ran into Brown without needing to surrender the firearm he always carried out of sight.

More questions: If the supermajority Democrats have the votes to pass SB 554 and then ban guns in the Capitol, which they presumably do, will that prohibition apply to legislators and legislative staff who hold concealed handgun licenses and who regularly are armed? Sen. Thatcher testified that strapping on the holster is just a regular part of starting one's day. However, Sen. James Manning Jr., D-Eugene, said he has a license but supported the bill.

Federal courthouses and other federal facilities allow only specifically authorized people to be armed. They back that up with metal detectors and security guards. Will the Legislature install and staff metal detectors at all entrances, including the parking garage doors used by lawmakers, staff and other state employees?

Opponents of SB 554 say public safety is enhanced when citizens are armed and holders of concealed handgun licenses are statistically less likely than others to commit violent crimes. Supporters say they are uneasy and feel intimidated by being around firearms in public places and that trained law enforcement officers should handle public safety.

How does that square with efforts by some Democrats to remove all school resource officers, who are armed, from Oregon schools? Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, on Thursday clarified that he would not allow such a bill to move forward in the Senate Education Committee, which he chairs.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We choose to adapt

The 2021 Astoria-Warrenton Crab, Seafood & Wine Festival will be a virtual event. Online response to this news has been colorful and voluminous.

Listen, in a perfect (and currently imaginary) world, we would have a live event with thousands of people eating and drinking and celebrating, as in years past. In the real world, the two options available to us were cancel or adapt.

We choose to adapt.

Thirty-eight times previously, we held an event whose purpose and design was to bring maximum benefit to our community and stakeholders, including guests, vendors, local business, performers, non-profits and our own revenue needs. This 39th event will do the same.

The revenue we generate for the chamber, incidentally, pays for people and resources to serve our community and members year-round — something we've done with distinction for 147 years, and never more capably than in the past 12 months.

Had we taken only our own revenue needs into account, the decision would have been simple: Cancel. The staff time and effort, money and resources required to put on this virtual event outweigh expected chamber revenue.

But we have never solely taken our own needs into account. That's not how the chamber is built. Instead, we think of the whole community, and act accordingly. So, we adapt and move forward with an engaging, beneficial and enjoyable event.

Like everything we do, this decision is designed to create the greatest benefit to the greatest number. We'd love to have you among that number.

DAVID REID
Executive director, Astoria-Warrenton
Area Chamber of Commerce
Astoria

Positive experience

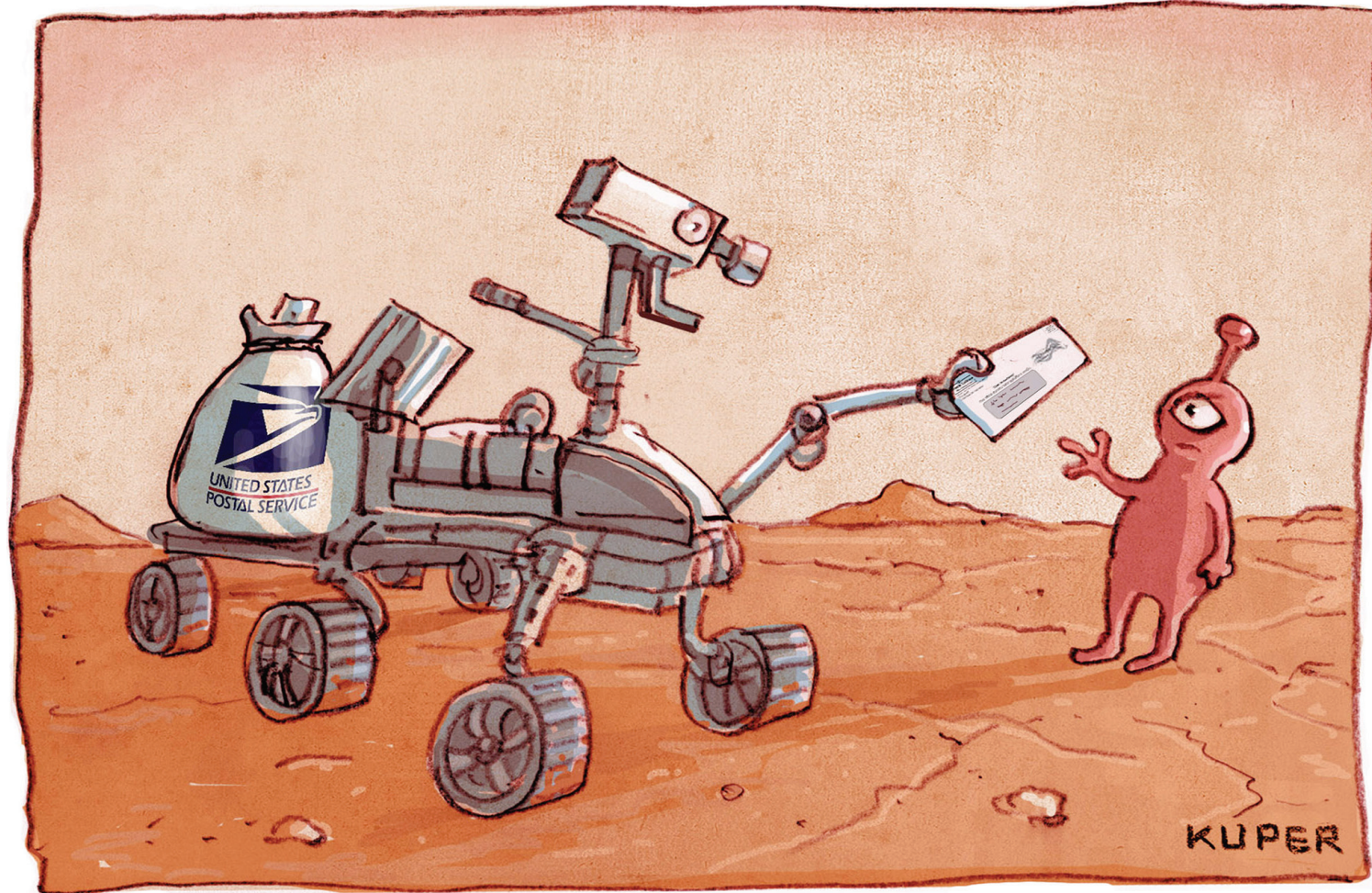
In February, I was at the Clatsop County Fairgrounds for my COVID-19 vaccination. It was a positive experience.

Though there were a goodly number

of cars in the lot, I didn't have a problem finding a place to park. I entered the building and was met by friendly, courteous people who directed me to each of the stations where I needed to be.

After I'd had my shot and checked out, I sat in the waiting area (15 minutes

for me), and looked at the materials I had been given: an identification card that said I'd had the first shot, an appointment reminder for the second shot, two separate fact sheets about COVID-19, the vaccine, the vaccination process and a N95 mask.



“Sorry for the delay, here's your absentee ballot.”

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response

to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.

I returned to my car and checked the time — 45 minutes. A huge “thank you” to those who organized the clinic and to all the volunteers who made it happen.

DOLORES SHARP
Astoria

The pledge

It's a small gripe, but it has been my pet peeve for many years. My former students would not forgive me if I didn't respond to the “Return the pledge” letter in the Feb. 18 newspaper.

For over 30 years I taught my classes to properly recite the pledge without the comma (the pause) after “nation.” The phrase is, “one nation under God.” Unfortunately, it is not very often you hear the pledge recited properly.

TOM SPAAN
Astoria