

OPINION



the Astorian

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GUEST COLUMN

On tech glitches and accessibility

The Oregon Capitol remains closed to the public. But the supermajority Democrats say the 2021 legislative session is the most open, transparent and accessible on record, thanks to the use of technology.

Reader Jen Hamaker disagrees, and she's a layperson who has worked to embrace that technology.



DICK HUGHES

"This session has been extremely frustrating, and I feel further silences and marginalized rural Oregonians," Hamaker told me.

Her views may be partisan, but she's right. The technology can be glitchy and confusing.

The Oregon Legislature does most of its work in committees. In many ways, the Legislature has made an astounding transition from in-person committee meetings to videoconferences. Regardless of where Oregonians live, they can testify on bills by phone or video without having to drive to Salem.

Yet it seems a stretch to cast the 81st Legislative Assembly as the paragon of accessibility and public participation.

Legislators can't always see each other during committee meetings, which are conducted via Microsoft Teams. Balky connections frequently cause people to miss their turn to testify. Committee documents sometimes have been inaccessible. In rare instances, the House and Senate floor sessions had to halt because the live video for public viewing had crashed.

Hamaker brought another issue to my attention. If a bill is rescheduled for a hearing on a different day, the previously submitted written testimony seems to disappear. When Hamaker asked legislators and staff about that, they said testimony doesn't carry over to a new meeting date, so people must resubmit it.

But Misty Mason Freeman, director of the Legislative Policy and Research Office, told me that's always been the case. The original testimony is still there, if people know to click on a different tab.

At the least, it's confusing.

Lessons learned: I took advantage of my interactions with Freeman to ask about any technology lessons that have emerged from this virtual legislative session.



Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter

The Oregon Capitol is closed to the public because of the coronavirus pandemic.

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"I do think that folks who download the full Microsoft Teams app are having an easier time participating in meetings than those who use the browser version," she said.

"There are also many ways we are continuing to refine our systems. For example, we continue to update our testimony sign-ups to be easier to read and the follow-up email more straightforward. Our Information Systems partners have made improvements like making clickable links to the online portal for submitting written testimony and the testimony sign-up page. We are also getting better at 'pinning' ASL interpreters and working with Spanish language interpreters during meetings. We still have a lot to learn though!"

And the view from the top: Danny Moran, the communications director for state House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, gave this response to my

questions about technology:

"The speaker's focus for this session continues to be keeping people safe while doing the people's work. More Oregonians are participating in the legislative process due to the use of technology, while preventing the spread of COVID-19. Legislators and nonpartisan staff has worked incredibly hard to manage this technology during an unprecedented session and there have been many improvements each week since the start of the session to improve the user and member experience. Speaker Kotek has collaborated with Republican vice chairs to get their input on how to make improvements."

Don't write in ink on your calendar: Committee chairs reschedule bills for many reasons. One is for the convenience of the sponsoring legislators or supporting organizations. Another

is because proposed amendments have not been worked out. And often it's for lack of time on a crowded agenda.

As of Thursday, the Legislature was halfway through this year's 60-day session. This is a point when it is difficult to look at a committee's agenda and tell what actually is happening.

Tuesday is a critical deadline for many committees to act on bills; otherwise, they die.

"A number of those bills at the end of the day won't be ready by deadline," Kotek said during her media briefing last week. "Things are pretty fluid. Getting the paperwork back. Trying to get the amendments done."

Time is everything: An additional issue that Hamaker raised is that some people get several minutes to testify on a bill; others get less than one.

Because of those crowded agendas, individuals often are limited to two or three minutes of testimony. Sometimes, the limit is as little as 30 seconds, as happened last month when the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee took testimony on House Bill 2844 regarding beavers.

The committee chair, Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, allowed the proponents' panel to speak for 10 minutes. The opponents' panel was stopped at six minutes. A few members of the public then were given one minute each to talk.

When Rep. Jami Cate, R-Lebanon asked whether there would be another opportunity to hear public testimony, Witt responded, "Unfortunately, no. Our agenda's just too full. I'm sorry."

The bill apparently is dead — unless it's resuscitated before the Legislature adjourns for the year.

On the other hand, committees sometimes are wrongly accused of shortchanging public testimony. Sen. Bill Kenemer, R-Canby, said during the debate on a contentious firearms measure, Senate Bill 554, that testimony had been limited to only one minute per person in the Senate Judiciary Committee. That Republican talking point was making the rounds, but it was wrong. Kenemer apologized when the Senate next met.

Committee chair Sen. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene, had allowed three minutes per person, although the nearly four-hour hearing ended before many people got a chance to speak.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Many thanks

Over the past 14 months, I have found it necessary to visit the Astoria Department of Motor Vehicles office on three different occasions, and on each of those occasions I found the representatives there to be professional, knowledgeable, helpful and friendly.

Each time, I received guidance from one of them, I found their body of knowledge impressive, not to mention accurate, and appropriate to my situation. I was also taken by how organized they were, and the manner in which they kept the line moving.

Many thanks to those who helped me navigate my way through the paperwork I needed to complete.

MARTI WAJC
Seaside

Valid point

Regarding the April 6 letter, "What chance do we have?": I thought the letter's concluding paragraph makes a valid point:

"Where an old man in charge who has his wits about him is an asset, especially if he is a good negotiator, a stumbling, bumbling, incoherent old man in the White House is incapable of dealing with these ruthless thugs."

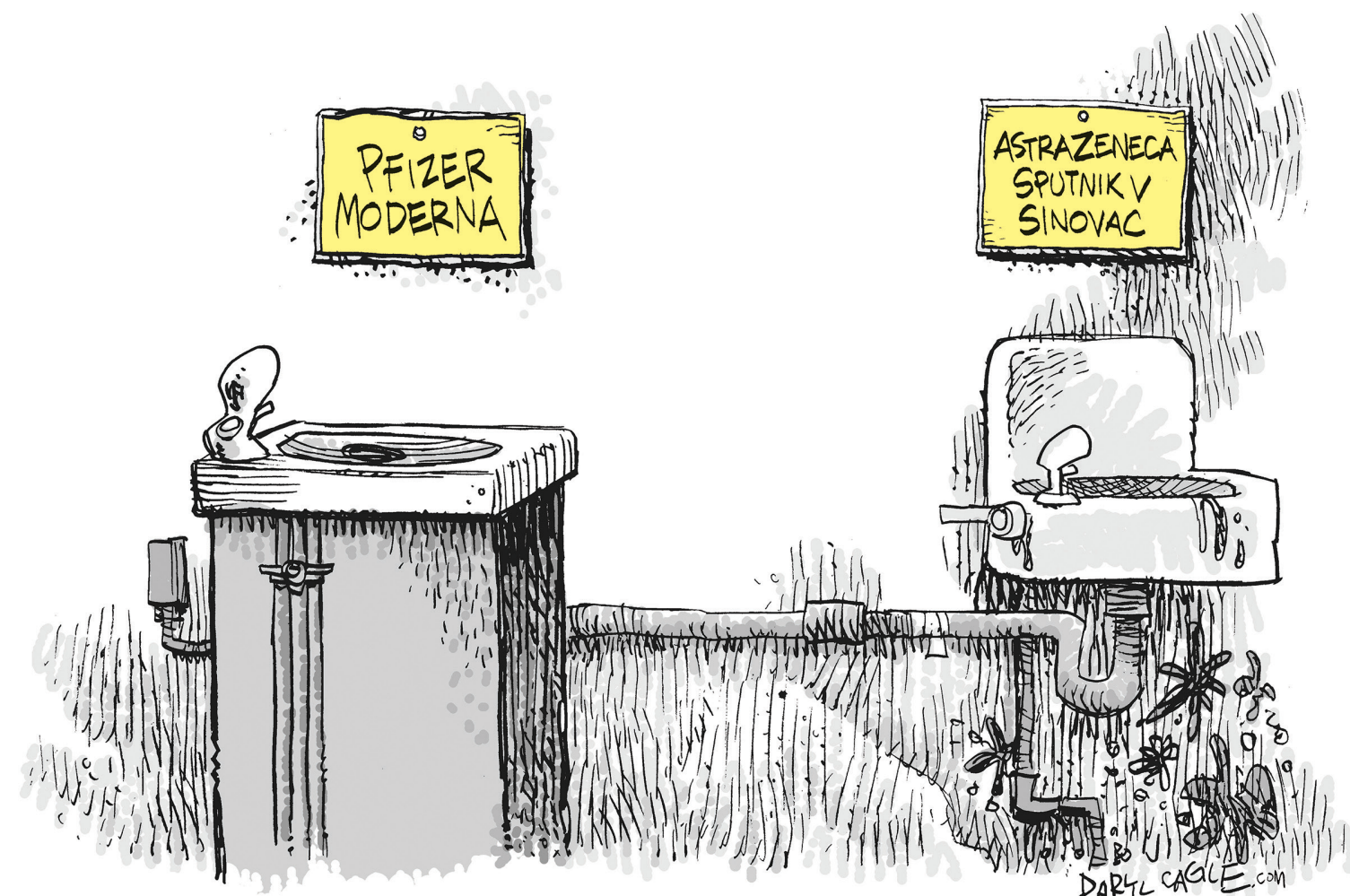
The writer seems not to realize that Donald Trump is no longer in office.

ALLEN GOODMAN
Astoria

Clean slate

We are getting close to the May elections. Many of us do not give this election and ballot items the consideration and attention they need. The majority of Seaside and some outlying areas will vote on board members for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District.

A district is formed by local citizens to meet an important need. Examples might



LETTERS WELCOME

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to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Disclosure 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.

be a fire district, a water district, or in this case, a park and recreation district; they all have their own boards.

Members of district boards should be selected on their dedication to service, their willingness to meet as concerns come

up and they should have a strong understanding of business practices and how a well-managed district should work.

The Seaside area is in need of new approaches and direction for our park and recreational services. As a member of the community, I hope you will take the time to understand the concerns, challenges and management style that is in place, and vote for a clean slate of board members.

Their platforms of transparency, fiscal responsibility, ability to listen, lead and supervise show a bright future for our park and recreation district. Al Hernandez, Patrick Duhachek, John Huismann, Jackie Evans and Stephen Morrison are ready for positive leadership.

KATHY SAMSEL
Seaside