

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Civics lessons go beyond books

Oregon high schoolers may soon have to learn about their government. So today, I offer a primer on what goes on behind the scenes ... the stuff that might not show up in textbooks.

The state Senate overwhelmingly passed Senate Bill 513, adding a one-semester class in civics to the requirements for earning a high school diploma. The bill would take effect in the 2025-26 school year.



DICK HUGHES

The Legislature is more than half-way through its 160-day session and the civics requirement is likely to become law, now that House Democrats and Republicans have reached agreement on how the session will proceed. The chief sponsors of SB 513 are state Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod, of Lyons, and Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth.

During the floor debate, senators pointed to Americans' dismal lack of awareness about how government works. Legislators experience that lack of understanding firsthand. Constituents frequently contact them about matters that actually are the purview of federal, county or city governments and school districts.

Still, there is a vast difference between the basics of government as recounted in textbooks and what really goes on. Here are lessons from the Senate, as well as the House:

Oratory doesn't matter

Legislators spend considerable time making floor speeches. Although they please supporters and make good material for campaign ads, rarely do they change anyone's mind.

Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, acknowledged that rarity in explaining why he voted for SB 16, sponsored by Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena. The bill gives Malheur County more flexibility in converting farmland to housing. It barely passed the Senate 16 to 12, with most Democrats voting "no."

"I voted differently after hearing the floor debate than I thought I would going in; that's rarer in the Legislature than it probably should be," Golden told



Chris Lehman/KLCC

Oregon legislators are considering a bill that would require civics education in high school.

constituents.

Results are determined beforehand

Bills generally don't reach the Senate or House floor unless they have sufficient votes for passage. That is one reason why a bill that handily passes in one chamber might disappear in the other chamber.

It was another rarity when the Senate rejected a mandate that vehicles have their headlights or running lights on during daylight travel. This is a concept that Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, has tried before. His SB 166 failed 13 to 16, in part because some senators were unfamiliar with it.

Golden again: "Hearing about this kind of bill for the first time on the Senate floor almost never happens. Usually the sponsor will flag it for the majority office and Democrats will meet ahead of time for discussion and a vote count. As the carrier (Beyer) started explaining the bill I saw more than a couple of senators looking as surprised as I felt."

The public must talk fast

The Legislature's budget writers — the Joint Committee on Ways and Means — are conducting a virtual state budget hearing for residents in each of

Oregon's five congressional districts. At the first two-hour hearing, on Wednesday evening, testimony was strictly limited to two minutes per person and legislators were not permitted to ask questions.

I have no idea how legislators will absorb all the spoken and written testimony. Every comment — each appeal for money — sounded the same, regardless of content.

Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, apologized that there wasn't time to hear from all who asked to testify. A co-chair of Ways and Means, she said there's never enough time in these budget hearings.

Among the budget details, the Legislature plans to divvy up \$780 million from the latest federal pandemic relief package. Oregon's 30 senators submitted more than 300 requests for how they'd like the money spent. Their ideas added up to \$5 billion. The 60 state representatives submitted more than 900 requests, totaling \$30 billion.

Headlines tell only part of the story

On a 18-12 party-line vote, the Senate passed SB 483 to protect workers from retaliation if they report a workplace safety violation to Ore-

gon Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Afterward, Senate Democrats sent a press release headlined, "Senate Democrats protect workers against retaliation for reporting wrongful conduct."

Senate Republicans responded with, "Senate Democrats look to overturn principles of fairness in the workplace, pass 'guilty until proven innocent' legislation."

Most legislative work is bipartisan

For example, Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, and Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, co-sponsored Senate Bill 458 to increase housing opportunities. It passed 25 to 4, with two Democrats and two Republicans voting "no."

In the House, the staff of Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, issued these statistics: Of the 115 bills that the House had voted on, 70 passed unanimously and 12 had only one dissenter. Nine times that dissenter was a Republican and three times a Democrat. Unlike the Senate, which is moving faster, no bill passed a pure party-line vote.

Statistics don't tell the whole story, which is why House Republicans — until an agreement was reached Wednesday night — were slowing the legislative process so as to stall the Democrats' agenda. Republicans were refusing to suspend the rule that bills must be read aloud word-by-word before a floor vote.

Rep. Bill Post, R-Keizer, explained why in a newspaper op-ed: "While most bills will have bipartisan consensus like the budget, there are still about 10% of the proposals that are partisan, and I believe could make life far worse for Oregonians. This bipartisanship is something Oregonians can be proud of but unfortunately the media does not often report on this important fact."

"The media constantly reports on the 10% or so of the bills that are controversial. When one party is in a majority or even more a supermajority, those 10% can be very contentious. I am asked often by my colleagues from across the aisle why we won't suspend the rules when what we are voting on is not controversial. It is precisely the 10% that creates the need for a way to 'slow down the process.'"

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cadre

Other letter-writers have commented on the wonderful job the Clatsop County Public Health Department has done in the administration of the COVID-19 vaccine.

I echo that praise, not only for the professional health care workers but also for the volunteers who are supporting them. This letter is motivated by those volunteers, who give direct evidence of the level of involvement the community is willing to step up to if the purpose is worthwhile and well-coordinated.

About two years ago, a proposal was made to the mayor's Homelessness Solutions Task Force to form a cadre of volunteers who would be present — perhaps 24/7 — in downtown Astoria, walking the streets in pairs for the purpose of identifying people in crisis and then notifying Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare or the Astoria Police Department to make the appropriate response.

The proposal had these volunteers being well-trained, wearing highly-visible vests and identification cards, carrying two-way communications equipment and coordinating with professionals, very much along the lines of what we have seen successfully implemented at the COVID-19 inoculation centers.

If either the city or county would implement such an idea as an adjunct to other proposals for coming to grips with the issues of homelessness, then the downtown business owners, along with the cruise ship operators, might feel more comfortable — and less confrontational — when the city opens up again. Having homeless people in our community is not a problem to be solved. However, we can do more, and we can do better, to address it.

BARRY L. PLOTKIN
Astoria

Hope

Congratulations on the well-done article "Police feel the weight of crisis response" (The Astorian, April 13). The frustrations of all parties involved is very evident, as is their determination to think

the problem through, looking for a solution that seems just out of reach.

As pointed out in the article, there is no "one-size-fits-all solution." In today's society, mandated help for those who won't or can't help themselves seems unacceptable. The results of this attitude is catastrophic for many individuals.

Reading the article should cause thinkers to realize how big the problem is, and that stronger actions may be required to help individuals and, in the long term, society.

Thank all who contributed to the article. Hope is there when people think and search together for a solution.

BERT WILLIAMSON
Burlington, Washington

Consult

Regarding the story "Police feel the weight of crisis response" (The Astorian, April 13): This is a serious and very challenging and accurate description of situations which have existed in many cities for years.

It is correct to accept the reality that law enforcement should not be expected to handle crises which involve any aspect of mental health or addictions issues.

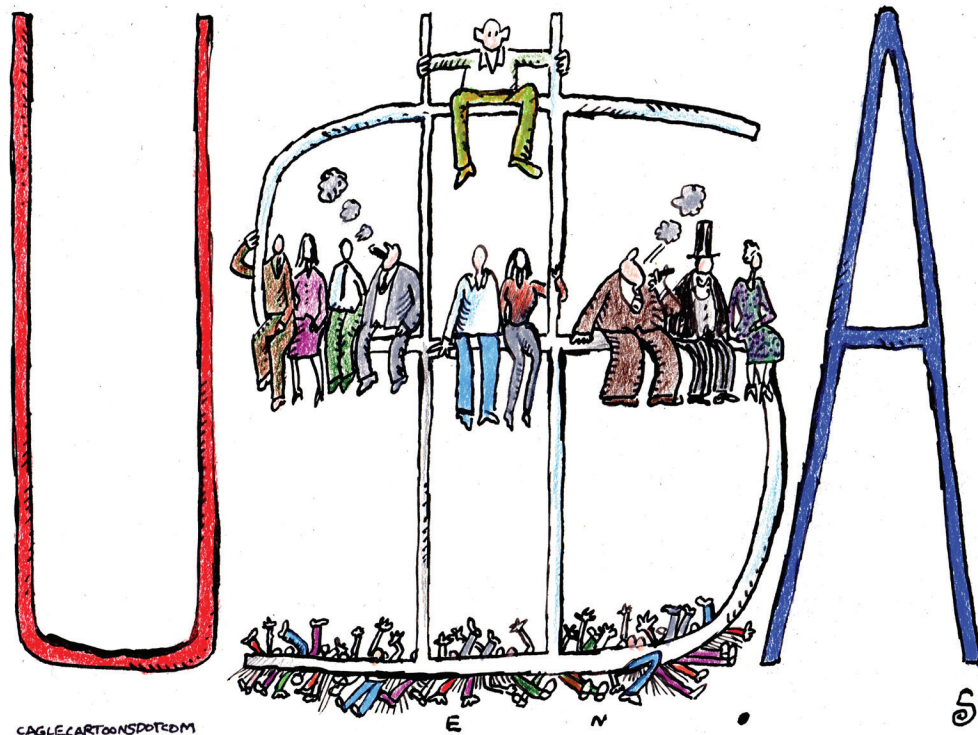
There are communities which have had success in developing resources to mitigate these challenges. It seems wise to consult with these communities, and follow their best advice about how they worked it out successfully.

Law enforcement cannot be expected to solve these problems or fund their solutions. Successful programs do exist, and the people who have developed them will surely be willing to share their strategies.

NANCY WINTERS
Alsea

Thoughtful

Our police chief and deputy chief were both thoughtful and eloquent in discussing the complex problems first responders are trying to deal with throughout the country (The Astorian, April 13). We see the heartbreaking results on TV



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.

every day. In summing up, the chief says, "It's almost like you have to take each individual, triage them and say, 'What does this person need?'" I say, "Yes, sir." And I think many would agree with me. That's exactly what we need. Let's do that.

Years ago, I was a clerk in Multnomah County hospital's emergency room, where we "triated" patients to see who were "real" emergencies; who instead needed a routine appointment; who'd come to the ER by mistake; or for something to do; or to get a warm bed.

"Detox" should be added to and high on that list. And police officers are cer-

tainly not best suited to do that. We are proving that time and again in city after city. As your article mentions, two people suffering mental problems were killed by police in Clatsop County last year.

Many different people and agencies try to handle pieces of this problem, but they're after-the-fact and, of course, a dollar short. Can't the city and county governments address this jointly — as they seem to have done in Lane County and Eugene — and set up a suitably trained and oriented group to perform this badly needed service?

JOSEPH WEBB
Astoria