

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Appointment comes with big paycheck

Oh, what to do if you're ready to exit the Oregon Legislature? How about one of the cushiest jobs in state government.

Actually, it's more of a federal job, but why quibble about the details when the work comes with a \$142,848 annual paycheck and a potentially hefty increase in state pension benefits.

This month, Gov. Kate Brown appointed a longtime colleague, state Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, as one of Oregon's two representatives on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Congress created the four-state commission in 1980 to establish and maintain long-range plans for power generation coupled with protection for fish and wildlife. As described in the council history, it was born from "our region's disastrous experiment with building nuclear power plants in the 1970s and early 1980s."

If you don't remember ill-fated WPPSS — derisively pronounced "whoops" as the acronym for the Washington Public Power Supply System — you're fortunate. It became the largest municipal bond default in U.S. history.

You're still paying for that poor planning and inept execution. The region owes nearly \$5 billion on the one nuclear plant that is operating and two that never were finished. Those costs, which gradually are being paid off, constitute one-third of the wholesale power rate that the Bonneville Power Administration charges its wholesale customers.

So there's a role for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

"It's very important work. It's very complicated work," said Burdick, who admits to a wonky side.

### A spate of ex-legislators

Burdick will take office Nov. 1, allowing former Oregon state Sen. Richard Devlin, who chairs the council, to finish working on the latest revision of the 20-year power plan.

Brown had appointed Devlin, D-Tualatin, and Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli, of John Day, to three-year terms that ended this year. On April 1, Ferrioli was succeeded by Chuck Sams of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Like Sams, Burdick must be confirmed by the Oregon Senate, which should be a given.

Whether Democrats or Republicans, half of Oregon's appointees since the council's inception have been former legislators and other elected officials. They include congressman Bob Duncan; sec-



Dave Killen/The Oregonian

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council looks at energy and environmental needs.

retaries of state Norma Paulus and Bill Bradbury; and state senators Ted Hallock, Joyce Cohen, Gene Derfler and Joan Dukes.

### Oregon generosity

The four member states set their own salaries for the job. Oregon's \$142,848 pay is well above the others: Washington, \$115,000; Idaho, \$119,995; and Montana, \$122,464.

Oregon also finagles the finances so its members can get the Public Employees Retirement System, which usually means a huge pension increase if they already were in PERS. The other states' members have a different retirement setup.

Bonneville, the federal power-marketing organization, pays the council, which in turn pays the council members from Washington, Idaho and Montana. But Oregon's members are paid by the Oregon Department of Energy, which then is reimbursed by the council.

What does it take to be an expert? The council has a professional staff at its Portland headquarters and four small regional offices in Portland; Vancouver, Washington; Eagle, Idaho; and Helena, Montana.

Devlin told me that he spends his days doing reading, more reading, and in all sorts of meetings. "We commonly work hard to reach agreement on issues," he said. "We commonly look for compromises that people can live with that meet their needs."

To illustrate how quickly the plan-

ning scene changes, he cited batteries and fish runs. In just the time he's been on the council, large-scale batteries for power storage have gone from being experimental to becoming part of a utility's mix. On the other hand, he said, some fish runs now look dismal compared with only a few years ago.

In approaching Burdick about the job, Brown wanted someone with collaborative skills, which Burdick honed during 24 years in the Senate. Though the public best knows Burdick for her gun control advocacy, she's relishes digging into tough issues, whether the ignominious Business Energy Tax Credit or cannabis regulation.

And long before entering the Legislature, Burdick worked for Atlantic Richfield Co.; directed environmental analysis for corporate clients; and reported on the environment and energy as a journalist.

Brown makes diversity a key criterion for appointments, and Burdick will be the only woman currently on the eight-member council.

### The cascading effect

A gubernatorial appointment, whether to the power council or another job, can be a way to reward an ally, sideline a political foe, gracefully retire a legislator or open the path for a new legislator.

In this case, as with Devlin's appointment, the changes likely will shift the Senate Democratic caucus further to the left and away from centrist Senate Pres-

ident Peter Courtney, D-Salem, with whom Burdick had a close working relationship. Through a spokesman, Courtney declined to comment on Burdick's appointment.

Sen. Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, took Devlin's Senate seat in 2018 and quickly established himself as a rising star of the progressive wing. Last year, he succeeded Burdick as Senate majority leader.

Burdick will stay in the Legislature through the 2021 session and a potential special session on redistricting. She said the timing is good. "I have been here for 24 years," she said. "I think it's time for a new challenge."

As has been noted by Gary Warner, my colleague with the Oregon Capital Bureau, there undoubtedly will be a fierce fight to gain the appointment to fill Burdick's vacancy from Senate District 18. By law, the Multnomah and Washington county commissioners must choose someone from her party, thus a Democrat. Unlike the days of yore, it's become quite difficult for a centrist Democrat to win appointment or election in the Portland area.

Potential candidates include the first-time state representatives from the two House districts that make up the Senate district — Dacia Grayber, D-Tigard, and Lisa Reynolds, D-Portland. Choosing either one would set off a similar process to fill the then-vacant House seat.

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### No one to blame

In 1956, I was in the eighth grade. During this year, my school taught a class on the Constitutional Convention that created the Constitution we live with today.

This subject was taught for two full weeks, and required all students of this grade level to hear all the major arguments of both sides showing the major debates of how the most contentious issues were argued, and ultimately resolved, so that the states agreed to merge together as a single country.

Hearing both sides of the argument and watching the political process happen was very interesting to me, as I had no understanding of government up to that time.

During the 1950s there was a TV program called "Omnibus," that was shown on CBS, ABC and NBC in different years, that was devoted to running public education programs on many subjects, including the Constitution — no PBS in those days.

It was a public service by the major networks, and paid for by sponsors as a public service. Those days are long gone, and it appears to me that the general public has little to no interest in how all levels of government work today, and how it ultimately affects their lives.

Apathy, or just a feeling that government is beyond the average person's control, has led to politics run by activists determined to cram their personal desires onto everyone else.

Voters have no one to blame but themselves if they do not participate.

SCOTT WIDDICOMBE  
Warrenton

### Tree removal fiasco

In the name of public safety, the Oregon Department of Transportation and the U.S. Forest Service are benefiting the tim-

ber industry by approving indiscriminate cutting of trees damaged by fire that are on public land adjacent to highways.

According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, environmental groups have co-signed a letter to Deb Haaland, U.S. secretary of the interior, asking her to stop ODOT's "reckless" and "mismanaged" tree-cutting operations.

The situation echoes the malfeasance and ignorance displayed in 2018, when OPB reported that ODOT hired a contractor to spray a weed killer near Sisters that was toxic to ponderosa pines.

The spraying, on U.S. Forest Service land along Highway 20, eventually killed many old growth ponderosas, which were then needlessly fast-tracked for removal in the name of public safety; an outcome that pleased only the timber companies.

In the current situation, ODOT's mismanagement involves the cutting of many trees that could be saved, according to several professional arborists, including Tom Ford, the lead arborist for the company ODOT hired to plan a post-fire strategy, who was later terminated without explanation.

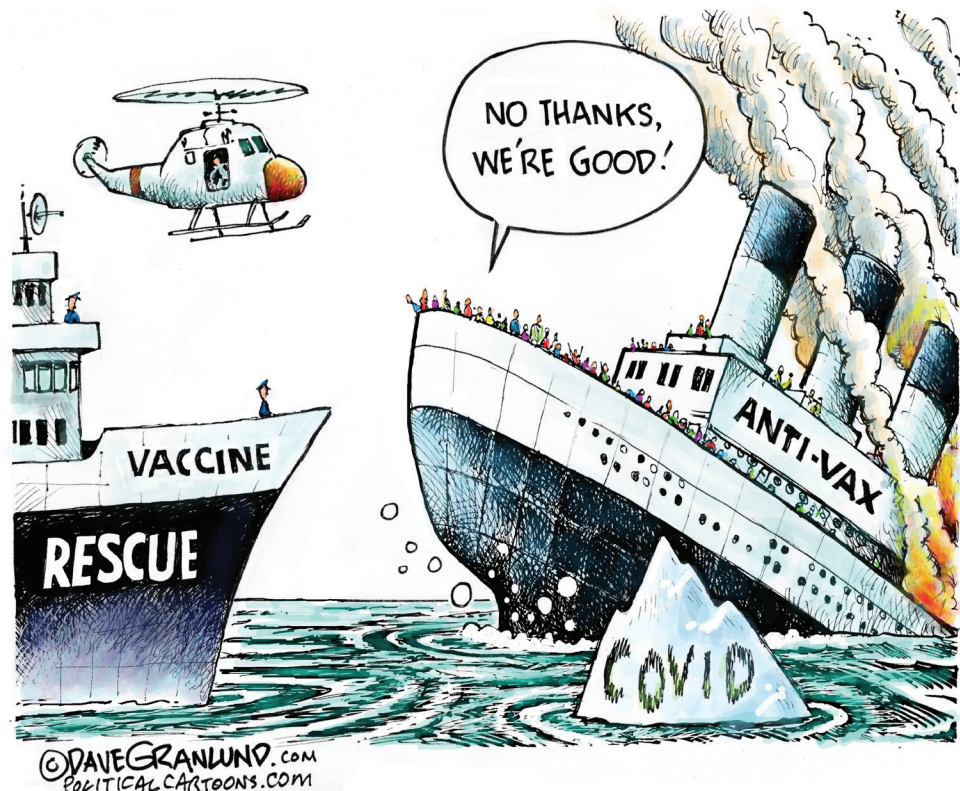
The excessive post-fire tree cutting taking place is another example of ODOT and the Forest Service playing footsie with the timber industry.

Culpability for mismanagement, and the likeliness of corruption, are obfuscated, but the motivation is the same as those who occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge; a narrow definition of public land that favors vested interests, while ignoring science and the will of the people.

ROGER DORBAND  
Astoria

### Dig safely

Spring is here. With the ground ready for planting, you might be gearing up to start an outdoor project that involves dig-



ging. Before you reach for that shovel, remember to call 811 before you dig.

April is National Safe Digging Month, a designation to remind us that our land has a complex underground infrastructure of pipelines, wires and cables. Striking an underground utility line while digging can cause harm to you or those around you, disrupt service to an entire neighborhood and potentially result in fines and repair costs.

That's why it's important to call 811 or submit a request via our NW Natural Safety App at least two business days before digging, regardless of depth or familiarity with the property. It's free and it's the law.

Most importantly, no damage is too minor to report — even a small dent or scratch could weaken a pipeline. If, while digging, you accidentally hit a gas line, report it immediately by calling 911 or NW Natural's 24-hour emergency line at

800-882-3377.

Also, always remember: Smell. Go. Let us know. If you smell natural gas, leave the area immediately, then call us at 800-882-3377, and we will come over to check things out.

We hope you have a beautiful and safe spring. For more tips, visit nwnatural.com

TERESA BROWNLIE  
NW Natural Community Affairs  
Astoria

### Infrastructure

The county I reside in has infrastructure that was better 50 years ago than it is today. As concerns the rail line, the span is closer to 100 years.

Too expensive? Waiting longer won't make it any cheaper.

CHRIS CONNAWAY  
Astoria