

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Redistricting a partisan exercise?

Twenty years ago, Democrats in the Oregon Legislature were publicly incensed about the redistricting plan created by then-Secretary of State Bill Bradbury. The plan arbitrarily benefitted Republican candidates. Or so the Democrats said.

Ah, but their lamentations were for show. In reality, Democrats were downright giddy about how they would profit from fellow Democrat Bradbury's plan. Their public hand-wringing was merely a ruse to dispel the notion that Bradbury was guilty of pro-Democrat bias.



**DICK HUGHES**

The Democrats' target audience? The Oregon Supreme Court.

The ruse largely succeeded. The court rejected almost all arguments against the plan, leaving Oregonians stuck with gerrymandered legislative districts. In one infamous example, the district boundary for Republican state Sen. Jason Atkinson, of Jacksonville, was moved slightly — just far enough to exclude his residence.

Bradbury's blatant partisanship could be repeated this year under Secretary of State Shemia Fagan unless the Legislature bucks history and actually agrees on a redistricting plan.

This year's process has been upended by court cases and late results from the 2020 census.

Generally, if the Legislature fails to settle redistricting, the responsibility moves to the secretary of state. If there's no legislative agreement on congressional boundaries, the courts decide those districts.

In both instances, Democrats have an advantage. Fagan is a progressive Democrat. The Oregon Supreme Court remains reliably progressive, thanks to the judicial appointments by Democratic Gov. Kate Brown.

These realities make the recent agreement between House Republican Leader Christine Drazan, of Canby, and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, particularly intriguing.

House Republicans no longer will slow the process by insisting that bills be read aloud in full before voting. In return, Kotek reconfigured the House



Oregon will draw new political boundaries based on census data.

Redistricting Committee to have equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. She and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, also deviated from the usual budget process and gave all legislators several million dollars in federal money to spend on projects in their district.

More about that unique agreement in a moment. But first, what's at stake.

Redistricting is the process every 10 years of redrawing legislative and congressional lines to equalize the number of people in each district.

"It matters because it makes up the state Legislature and who represents you in Congress," said Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany, the newly appointed co-chair of the House committee. She said having equal representation on the committee opens the door to having equitable political representation in Oregon for the next decade.

Redistricting is even more complicated this year because Oregon will gain a sixth congressional seat, thanks to the state's population growth and other states' declines. The boundaries of every district will be affected, including that of the lone Republican in Oregon's congressional delegation, Cliff Bentz, in the 2nd Congressional District.

To reduce the likelihood of gerrymandering, some states have turned redistricting over to independent, non-partisan commissions. A ballot measure effort to do that in Oregon died last year amid the pandemic. An independent redistricting task force convened by the late Republican Secretary of State Dennis Richardson previously faltered.

Regardless of which political party is in power, that party doesn't want to give up its ability to draw partisan lines while keeping a straight face and promising fair, reasonable, nonpartisan decisions. Incumbents of both parties look out for themselves; they want district boundaries that ensure their reelection. Thus, Oregon has few competitive districts.

Drazan said the Republican agreement with Kotek at least gives Oregonians a chance for less-partisan redistricting. Kotek added Drazan to the redistricting committee and elevated Boshart Davis to serve as co-chair with Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego.

The committee is still collecting information, not drawing lines. That will happen late this summer and early fall, presumably followed by a special legislative session to turn the new boundaries into law. Of course, that assumes that the House, Senate and governor all agree.

For her part, Salinas did not appear pleased with her committee changes, writing in her constituent newsletter: "Prior to these appointments, Democrats held three of the five seats on the committee, and I held the gavel. I will now co-chair, and Democrats hold only three of the six seats."

However, Rep. Anna Williams, D-Hood River, told her constituents: "I'll be honest with you: this may be harder for me, politically, but I think it's good for the state and for the country. As a swing member who narrowly won my last election, I probably stood to benefit from a redistricting process under Democratic control. Our district could have been reshaped in a way that would include more likely Democratic voters and fewer likely Republican voters. That outcome is unlikely now, under a dual-party redistricting system — and that's a good thing!"

But the House is only half the Legislature. Courtney has given no indication that he will equalize membership on the Senate Redistricting Committee. It's also telling that Kotek and Courtney did not create a unified House-Senate redistricting committee this year and instead had each chamber go its own way.

Democrats still hold the majority of the redistricting cards. But Republicans made progress and achieved a big win by getting \$240 million in federal pandemic relief divided among all 90 legislative districts, instead of having that spending determined by the Democrat-controlled Joint Ways and Means Committee.

That is a fraction of the approximately \$2.6 billion in discretionary funds headed to Oregon under the American Rescue Plan. And legislators previously suggested more than \$30 billion in such projects.

Each senator will have \$4 million for one-time projects and each representative \$2 million. Legislators have until May 10 to submit their plans, which will be vetted against the rescue plan guidelines.

Probably because they're being lobbied by constituents and interest groups, most legislators have not announced their choices.

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Not correct

Reelect. Folks, this is not correct. Reelect does not honestly label the four ladies running for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board. You cannot reelect someone if they were never elected.

Only one person on the current board was elected, and he has been there for 19 years; maybe it's time for a change. The rest were hand-selected.

Sure, they will tell you it was a rigorous selection; I know this is not true. I was on the board for a short time, and I was elected. I won my seat by talking to the voters and promising I would do my best for them.

Reelect is an untruth and they are aware of this lie.

Under the direction and encouragement of the executive director, this board spent taxpayers' money like it grows on trees. The purchase of a very old, questionable, unsafe building. They paid \$2.15 million of taxpayer money, and say they saved you millions. Time for a change.

LINDSEY MORRISON  
Seaside

### Capable

A few years ago, Clatsop County snagged a very capable retiree, David Zunkel. If he ever thought of resting on his well-deserved laurels, he did not find them here.

Rather, he immersed himself in our local public life and within a small number of years was elected president of Exploring New Concepts of Retirement Education (ENCORE). Dave has provided our organization with wise leadership and would be reelected if our bylaws did not prohibit it.

Dave's diplomatic skills were especially important when ENCORE separated its organizational dependency from Clatsop Community College. His leadership saw us through difficult adjustments to our educational efforts.

As a radiologist, he was one of the leaders of his professional organizations and once here, dedicated his fundraising ability to Columbia Memorial Hospital's foundation.

I know Zunkel as a person of astute

intellect, impressive diplomatic ability and absolute integrity. He has the ability to become an immediate asset to the Clatsop Community College Board.

ERHARD and ELFI GROSS  
Astoria

### Getting old

I am getting old, and I am finding many strange things to get interested in. The most recent is so-called "death taxes." Of course, my friends, acquaintances and relatives are also getting old, and worse, dying.

Some of them planned, or are planning on, leaving some of what they have obtained to younger relatives, organizations like Greenpeace, Gun Owners of America and video lottery machines. Some of them have something to leave as simple as a house.

These houses were purchased many years ago, with the dollars we were using then. Most of the houses have not been improved much, mostly just repairs. But their value has increased greatly, due to the fact that the dollars we are using now are worth a lot less, some say less than half as much, as way back then.

Politicians are all agendas and very little brains. They want to make a lot of expensive changes, which will probably prove to be worse than what we are doing now. Even if they prove to be better, they are not going to bring in big bucks. A dead loss is better than I expect.

Politicians are going to need a lot of money for themselves, their friends and these projects. Taxing the dead is always easier; they tell no tales, and never complain.

BENJAMIN A. GREAVES  
Seaside

### Excited

I am excited to vote for Al Hernandez for Position 1, John Huismann for Position 2, Patrick Duhachek for Position 3, Jackie Evans for Position 4 and Stephen Morrison for Position 5 for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board.

I feel like they will do a wonderful job if elected. I feel like they will listen to us taxpayers, and do their best to communi-



cate with us, and consider us, before they make any financial decisions in the future.

I hope you will join me in voting for these candidates, so we can get accountability for our tax dollars.

KINDWYN HOGE  
Seaside

### The blue wall

The Bruce Plante cartoon "The verdict" in the April 24 edition of The Astorian was interesting, but a little misleading. It wasn't Lady Justice who breached the wall, it was the Democratic elite.

Like Pandora, they do not know that they have unwittingly opened our home to an unknown plethora of evils. Among them: poverty and crime.

I hope these United States can survive.  
ROBERT LIDDYCOAT  
Seaside

### What has changed?

The Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District is at a crossroads. The current board of directors consists of one elected member and four appointed members; therefore not elected by the voters. On the May 18 ballot, these people are all running to retain their seats, but each has a very well-qualified challenger.

In November 2018, the voters turned down the recreation board's request to build a new facility. At the time they said it would be cheaper to build new than to buy and renovate Broadway Middle School. The vote was 65% against and 35% for.

So why did they proceed with acquiring the middle school in January anyway? Recently, experts have stated the school has mold and asbestos problems, needs a new roof, as well as the windows to be replaced, to list the biggest of the problems.

Combined with these necessary expenses, they don't know how to use all the space! They just recently appointed committees to discuss what to do with the white elephant. One would think that the usage and financial projections would be well researched prior to taking out loans and obligating the taxpayers.

I urge voters to elect a new board to represent the taxpayers. Vote for Al Hernandez, John Huismann, Patrick Duhachek, Jackie Evans and Stephen Morrison to be the SEPRD board.

These individuals all have the experience and foresight necessary to lead SEPRD and its employees in the right direction and maintain their fiduciary responsibility.

MARGENE RIDOUT  
Former SEPRD Board member  
Seaside