

OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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KARI BORGEN
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DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

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Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
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CARL EARL
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GUEST COLUMN

Legislator conduct queries leave more questions

What really counts as “bad” behavior in the Oregon Capitol?

Political observers are salivating over what will happen to state Rep. Mike Nearman, R-Independence. I’m more intrigued by the conduct case involving Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, whom Rep. Vikki Breese Iverson, R-Prineville, accused of sexual harassment.



DICK HUGHES

Let’s start with Nearman anyway. An independent investigator’s report concluded that on Dec. 21, 2020, Nearman “more likely than not intentionally assisted demonstrators in breaching security and entering the Capitol,” which was closed to the public and

remains so.

Nearman also has been charged with two misdemeanors in Marion County — official misconduct and criminal mischief — from the incident.

It seems a reasonable conclusion that Nearman “more likely than not” deliberately opened an Oregon Capitol door so demonstrators could enter after he exited. A video emerged on Friday of Nearman coaching people to text him and coordinate the entrance.

However, is “more likely than not” the appropriate standard by which the Legislature should judge him?

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and others already have called for Nearman to resign. The speaker announced on Monday that she would convene a special committee to consider expelling Nearman.

First, however, the House Conduct Committee met Friday to discuss what to do about Witt. In a series of votes earlier in the week, they ruled that his text messages responding to Breese Iverson were of a sexual nature and affected her ability to do her job as a legislator. She and Witt serve on three committees together.

Witt disagrees with how his texts were interpreted.



State Rep. Brad Witt is a Democrat who represents Clatskanie.

On Friday, the committee — equally weighted between Republicans and Democrats — voted to recommend that Witt receive coaching and training but could not agree on any other penalties. By Monday, Kotek removed Witt as chairman of the House Agricultural and Natural Resources Committee.

Regardless of whether his texts were clumsy, subconsciously suggestive or deliberately so, they illustrate once again that a) some legislators (and others) still don’t “get it,” and b) the Legislature and Oregon Capitol are inherently hostile workplaces where behavior is tolerated that elsewhere would be considered wrong.

Where is the line, asked committee member Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland: “We can all be offended all the time by lots of different things.”

For example, legislators (and others) sometimes lie. “I personally have been offended so many times recently,” Sanchez said. “What offends me the most is when someone lies to me, straight up

baldfaced lies to me.”

Yet lying doesn’t count as a hostile work environment.

When I first started covering the Legislature years ago, I was stunned to realize that certain legislators had flawless public reputations that belied their duplicity and hypocrisy within the Capitol. Some such legislators have gone on to higher office. On the other hand, there are many legislators (and others) whose word is good.

Politics is built on power. For almost every other occupation, research shows that the most important asset is emotional intelligence, which roughly can be described as a combination of one’s work ethic and one’s ability to work well with others. In politics, what counts is the ability to amass power, whether by personality and charisma, fundraising prowess, alliance-building or arm-twisting (and worse).

By the way, Witt was irritated that Breese Iverson texted him, asking him to support one of her bills, after supposedly opposing much of Witt’s agenda. (She

disagreed with that characterization of her record.)

Two observations: First, I am neither a lawyer nor a legal investigator. However, the Legislature’s outside investigators’ reports often have struck me as full of holes.

Second, the Legislature has a long, long way to go in establishing a respectful, harassment-free workplace — let alone deciding what constitutes a respectful workplace.

From Independence but not: Rep. Nearman is listed as being from Independence because that’s the post office for his mailing address. He lives outside town.

In light of Nearman’s actions, local officials have emphasized that the city actually is in the House district represented by Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth.

O, for transparency: Undecided whether to adjourn or to continue the June 1 meeting, the Conduct Committee took a short recess. That apparently was when the decision to adjourn was made — offscreen and out of public view. When the meeting resumed, co-chair Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, simply announced they would be adjourning instead of deliberating more.

I don’t have a problem with the adjournment decision; I do with the process.

Legislative committees are prone to taking breaks so members can discuss how to proceed or who’s going to vote which way. This applies to Democrats and Republicans alike.

In-person, this can be a couple of legislators whispering to each other or huddling in the hall. Virtually, it means the video cameras and recording are stopped. Whatever the means, the practice runs counter to true transparency and public accountability. The public’s business should be conducted in public. That includes discussions of how to conduct that business.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An exit

Steve Forrester wrote, “It is a curse to live in an era you do not understand.” I suspect that it is a rare era that understands itself.

G.W.F. Hegel said that the owl of Minerva takes flight only with the setting of the sun, that is to say, historical insight and wisdom is possible only after an era has passed. Be that as it may, it is not so difficult to recognize when there is a problem, even if explicitly defining that problem is more difficult. That Oregon now has problems, mostly self-inflicted, is mysterious to no one.

Both Forrester and Dick Hughes, in their essays on Greater Idaho (The Astorian, June 1), emphasized the unlikelihood of Oregon counties successfully pursuing their stated goal, but neither made the obvious observation that this vote is a rebuke and a repudiation of the direction of Oregon’s political development.

Forrester noted that a rosy view of Oregon’s past glosses over the hard negotiations that made our formerly high quality of life possible, but if one is honest, it must be said that the counties that voted to leave Oregon are probably prepared for far harder negotiations.

Where the willingness for such negotiations is lacking is among a political class that has placed ideology above and before keeping the streets clean and potholes filled.

For my part, I would like to see Brownmead also pursue an exit from Oregon, as no one here is represented by the politicians in Salem or the anarchists in Portland.

J. N. “NICK” NIELSEN
Astoria

Shameful

Regarding the humorous reference, in the In One Ear column May 27, to Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair, who was Clatsop County’s influential first woman medical doctor in Oregon:

I had finished a letter to the editor response with historical information about the cruel history resulting from Dr. Owens-Adair’s championing of the sterilization of selected Oregon citizens. Her work eventually became the eugenics laws passed in 1923, and not fully repealed until 1983.

I found that I had written nearly 500 words on the subject, which in itself was a quick summary. However, The Astorian limits letter writers to 250 words.

I would urge readers to look to the

STAR TRIBUNE
SACK



LETTERS WELCOME

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internet to learn more about this history, and the good doctor’s successful effort to harm thousands of Oregonians. It’s easy to find, but doesn’t make for pleasant reading.

As shameful as it is, this is our history, and I do believe it will never be repeated.

JACK OSTERBERG
Astoria

Stop being selfish

It is looking more and more like what the military trained us for may be coming true. Our leaders believe that knowing the truth about what happens during a pandemic will lead to panic. But something as important as one human life being at stake is more than enough for me

to say something.

We are trained that even in a small mortality rate global outbreak, just like the one we are currently facing, it is not the onset of the disease, or even the first year or so, to be fearful of. It is the more deadly and more contagious variant that will find that one host who did not get the initial vaccine.

From the beginning of civilization, there has been a share of every group of people, large or small, tribal or clanlike, who think without empathy, striking out aggressively against any change, without even listening to others.

Today, we all know at least one of these unvaccinated close-minded people. If we truly care for one another, then we must help these family members understand how truly selfish it is to not get vaccinated today.

Please get vaccinated.

TROY J. HASKELL
Astoria