

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Behind the scenes with first-time legislators

Suzanne Weber recalls when the Oregon Capitol hallways were so crowded with lawmakers, lobbyists and other folks that she had to edge her way through sideways.

That was when she was a local government official coming from the coast to talk with lawmakers. The former mayor of Tillamook now is a legislator herself, but is working in a quiet, uncrowded Capitol. For health protocols, the Capitol remained closed to the public as the 2021 Legislature toddled toward adjournment over the weekend.



**DICK HUGHES**

To take readers behind the scenes of this year's session, I interviewed five first-

time legislators this week: Rep. Weber, R-Tillamook; Democratic Reps. Maxine Dexter and Lisa Reynolds, of Portland, Republican Rep. Bobby Levy, of Echo, and Republican Sen. Dick Anderson, of Lincoln City. I also requested interviews with several other Democrats and Republicans. I hope to write a future column or two with their stories.

During previous legislative sessions, issues frequently got resolved when lobbyists and others talked and walked alongside legislators who were scurrying between meetings. In contrast, 2021's Capitol atmosphere is strange.

"It's quiet and lonely," Anderson said.

### Good staffs, constant learning

"This has been a really exhilarating experience," Weber said. "I hadn't realized all the work that went on behind the scenes and all the people who were involved in what goes on behind the scenes."

"I have learned so much about the process of government. It's challenging. It's mind-boggling — but not in a bad way."

Said Anderson: "I've been impressed. The people are well-intended. In the most cases, good staffs, very cooperative. ... I've felt good about how I've been treated and the



The 2021 legislative session ended over the weekend.

intent of people."

New legislators face an enormous learning curve. "I have been inspired and humbled by the process," Dexter said. "What I realized is truly we have enormous capacity to make real change."

Anderson was surprised by how often the party caucuses lock up legislators' votes, so outcomes were determined along party lines. As mayors, he and Weber were used to operating on a nonpartisan basis.

Reynolds noted that the vast majority of bills pass with strong bipartisan majorities. For the most part, she said, Democrats and Republicans have more in common than they do differences.

"People show up every day ready to work hard to do what they think is the best thing overall for Oregonians," she said. "People really put their heart and soul into making Oregon a better place."

Of these five new legislators, Dexter is the most experienced. She was appointed a year ago to fill the vacancy created by the death of Rep. Mitch

Greenlick, and was elected last fall to a full two-year term.

Dexter said last year's special-session legislation on police reforms provided insights into bipartisanship. She cited the collaborative work of Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Happy Valley, and two Republicans who are former police chiefs, Ron Noble, of McMinnville, and Rick Lewis, of Silverton.

### Closed Capitol

Getting to know colleagues and their staffs was challenging this year without the impromptu conversations in hallways and elsewhere. Committee meetings were conducted via video-conference, and some personal interactions were restricted by the COVID-19 protocols.

"I'm a one-on-one kind of person — smaller groups — and I knew that was going to be a handicap, getting to know senators on a one-on-one basis," Anderson said.

Still, connections get made.

"There are colleagues that I wasn't expecting to have so much interper-

sonal trust and relationship-building time with," Dexter said. "That's been really important to the work that we've had to do in these extraordinary times."

As for House Republicans, Levy described them as a tight-knit caucus that was inclusive of newcomers: "I have never felt better about a group of people — and I've worked with lots of groups of people — and more welcome."

She has made lifelong friends, including some Democrats.

Levy believes the session would have played out differently if the public had been in the Capitol, enabling more conversations that find middle ground. "We all love our district. We just can't seem to find someplace in the middle," she said.

It's difficult being in the minority party and not from an urban area. Republicans say urban Democrats don't understand rural life but assume they do. "If we talk about our side of the state — so I'm in Eastern Oregon — they don't get it and they don't try to get it," Levy said.

### Public involvement

Weber's early morning routine includes perusing her emails to see what trends have emerged in how people feel about issues. Some topics draw hundreds of comments.

For Dexter, one surprise was that many people don't realize the capacity that legislators have to help constituents with government issues and that legislators have staff — paid with taxpayer dollars — to do so.

When some Oregonians are unhappy with her, Dexter tries to heed Greenlick's advice about not taking things personally: "Nothing is personal as far as how it comes at me, but everything is personal in how people engage as far as from their perspective."

And as Levy said: "It's a learning experience every single day for me. And I enjoy it because I think it's really important that the people in my district have somebody to speak for them."

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The way we were

All this talk about "getting back to the way things used to be" just serves to remind me that blatant bigotry, epic misogyny and systemic racism are our societal norms.

**DONNA LEE ROLLINS**  
Astoria

### Let us vote

Georgia passed a law making it illegal to give water to citizens waiting in line to vote. It seems this law has become the face of other laws some states are trying to enact, apparently for lack of a logical reason, to make voting harder. Stunned? Keep reading.

In some places, citizens are waiting 11 hours, in the heat, to exercise their constitutional right. Logic asks, why not open more polling places?

In Oregon, we used to stand in line. Now we mail it in. Yee hah! For your information, Oregon's safeguards are so good, voter fraud is virtually nonexistent. Yee hah again!

In marathon races, 26 miles, volunteers offer water to competitors during the race. It's not illegal — it's humane. Runners, like voters, want to achieve the finish line. A race determines the fastest person. Voting determines the direction of our county, state and country for years.

The right of every citizen to vote should not be a chess pawn. In Washington, D.C., the Senate must pass the For the People and the John Lewis Voting Rights acts to restore sanity and protection to our election process. You know — one person, one vote, all votes count equally.

This is one vote that should be a 100 to 0 slam dunk.

You can message senators at 202-224-3121. The right of all citizens to have their say by voting is one of the most sacred gifts the Founding Fathers gave us. Either we live our American values, or we don't. History is watching.

**CARL DOMINEY**  
Astoria

### Octogenarian wisdom

I want to say hello to my neighbor, and see a big beaming smile coming back at



me. If it's OK with the government, if we have been vaccinated, why are we so slow in returning to normal?

The COVID-19 country shutdown is probably the strangest thing I have seen in my life. Let me tell you about another strange situation: The cars lined up at gas stations in the 1970s. They went around the block, and even further. Gas prices went up. Sometimes there was no gas available.

I've always been a writer. I wrote this, probably many years later, for a skit, as humorous satire.

Newscaster: "The president has been a busy man. Recently he returned from the country of Mexico with future details of the incidents occurring between our two nations."

"Since Mexico has recently discovered a newfound wealth through their oil, prob-

lems are developing. Underpaid American laborers are quietly slipping across the border in search of higher pay. Mexican authorities say they can only do so much.

"The president, under advisory of his foreign affairs offices, has suggested to Mexican officials that they should construct an 8-foot wall along their side of the river.

"The president has now dropped his original proposal for a \$60 million wall along the American side, and has said, 'It is no longer our problem!'"

**DeLORES MAY RICHARDS**  
Astoria

### Get it promptly

Early in June, the American Medical Association surveyed 301 prac-

ticing physicians nationwide, and found that 96% of physicians have been vaccinated against COVID-19. Of the 11 physicians not yet vaccinated, five planned to get vaccinated.

Those who know the most about COVID-related illnesses and vaccines are the most likely to want the vaccines.

When COVID-19 vaccines were introduced, we knew they would keep vaccinated people from dying — but, at first, we weren't confident whether they would also stop transmission of the virus.

Now we know more about COVID-19 vaccines and transmission. COVID-19 vaccines prevent illness, and they keep us from spreading the virus to each other — but only if everyone who can get the vaccine gets it promptly.

**DAVE CUNDIFF**  
Ilwaco, Washington