

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Oregon government is losing leadership

Oregon is losing its leadership. State House Speaker Tina Kotek stunned the political world by announcing Thursday that she was resigning as of Jan. 31. That move enables the Portland Democrat to concentrate on her gubernatorial campaign.

House rules would have blocked Kotek from fundraising once the 35-day legislative session begins on Feb. 1. Her campaign treasury pales in comparison with those of potential Democratic candidate Nicholas Kristof and independent Betsy Johnson. However, Kotek's imminent departure, a reversal of her previous pledge, will hand the House to an unproven leader for the



DICK HUGHES

2022 Legislature.

For better or worse, Senate President Peter Courtney and Kotek are the longest-serving presiding officers in Oregon history. On Wednesday, Courtney texted his colleagues that he would retire at the end of the year instead of seeking reelection. The Salem Democrat has been a moderating counterweight to Kotek's liberal policies and those of the increasingly liberal Senate Democratic Caucus.

Meanwhile, of course, Gov. Kate Brown already is on her way out, barred by the Oregon Constitution from seeking another term.

I referred to Kristof as a "potential" candidate because Secretary of State Shemia Fagan on Thursday morning announced that the Oregon Elections Division had found him ineligible to run. That announcement came two hours before Kotek made hers. Coincidence?

The dispute boils down to what it means to be an Oregon resident.

Kristof said the legal case for putting him on the ballot is clear. That is true. The former New York Times columnist grew up outside Yamhill, spent considerable time here while living in New York or abroad, and probably knows more of the state than many folks do.

Yet, also clear is the legal case that he is not qualified because he won't have been an Oregon resident for the required



Sam Stites/Oregon Capital Bureau

House Speaker Tina Kotek and State Senate President Peter Courtney made big political announcements last week.

three years before this year's general election on Nov. 8. The key factor, according to Fagan and her elections officials, was that he voted in New York as recently as 2020.

Of all the political announcements this week, Kotek's legislative departure was the most surprising and Courtney's the least. But Fagan's was the most intriguing.

Fagan, like Kotek and Brown, solidly sits in the progressive — that is, liberal — wing of Oregon Democrats. A late replacement entry in the 2020 secretary of state's race, she narrowly won the Democratic primary with massive support from public employee unions. People have since wondered how she might govern her office. Would she push progressive policies or be more even-handed?

She reportedly was under pressure from unions, Kotek supporters and perhaps others to declare Kristof ineligible. So, in recent days, Kristof's campaign put forth media pieces from former Democratic secretaries of state, a retired judge and others who reasoned he should be on the ballot.

On the one hand, that seemed a public relations effort designed to sway Fagan's decision. On the other hand, it potentially provided Fagan with political and legal cover if she did defy expectations and allow Kristof to run. For her part, Fagan

said Thursday that she did not interfere with the Election Division's clear-cut determination that Kristof was ineligible.

Speaking at his own press conference three hours later, Kristof did not make a rousing defense of why he meets the three-year residency requirement. Instead, he said the Elections Division ruling defied case law and common sense and was done to protect the status quo political establishment from his candidacy.

The residency issue always seemed destined to end up in court. Sure enough, Kristof vowed to appeal.

Kristof smartly sidestepped a reporter's question of whether he thought "the fix was in." I do find it surprising that 1) the Secretary of State's Office made the determination so quickly after receiving the Kristof campaign's hefty legal submission on Jan. 3, and 2) Fagan and elections officials felt there wasn't time to get a formal legal opinion about his residency from the Oregon Department of Justice, relying instead on phone calls for advice.

Fagan and election officials said the Jan. 3 submission included little new information from Kristof.

Kristof emerged as a formidable candidate among Democrats. If I were Kotek, I'd be concerned about his financial advantage. I would worry even more about any perception — accurate or not — of maneuvering to keep him off

the ballot.

So, does Kristof belong on the Democratic primary ballot in May? The answer seems far more muddled than either side contends. I'd been thinking that his voting in New York obviously meant he wasn't an Oregon resident. I do wonder whether Kristof adequately took that into account before leaving the New York Times last year to enter politics.

Now I'm leaning toward a broader interpretation of residency. Kristof voted in the New York election but he mailed that absentee ballot from here in Oregon, where he was residing.

I wonder whether the determination of residency should be left to voters. Putting Kristof on the ballot allows them to make that decision through whom they elect. Keeping him off the ballot deprives them of that opportunity.

Bear in mind, however, that I'm not a legal scholar and my bias is that a Kristof campaign would contribute to a robust political discussion about Oregon's future. According to an online survey last month by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, three-quarters of Oregonians worry about the state's future.

Meanwhile, legislators must deal with the present. They begin their work soon under triple clouds of uncertainty: the pandemic, a lame-duck Senate president and an unknown House speaker, whose selection could spur political infighting.

Continuing concerns about COVID-19 mean that legislators will meet by video when they partake in workplace conduct training and then hold three days of pre-session committee meetings. Three people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 were in the Capitol last week.

Any additional health and security protocols for the February session have yet to be announced. The Capitol is expected to remain open to the public in some form, but with committee meetings conducted by video conference. The main committee hearing rooms, located on the Capitol's south side, are unavailable due to ongoing renovation.

If 2022 already has a political theme, that theme is uncertainty.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Something to chew on

There is so much negative going on in the world right now that I keep finding myself looking at all of the positives around us to give us a little balance.

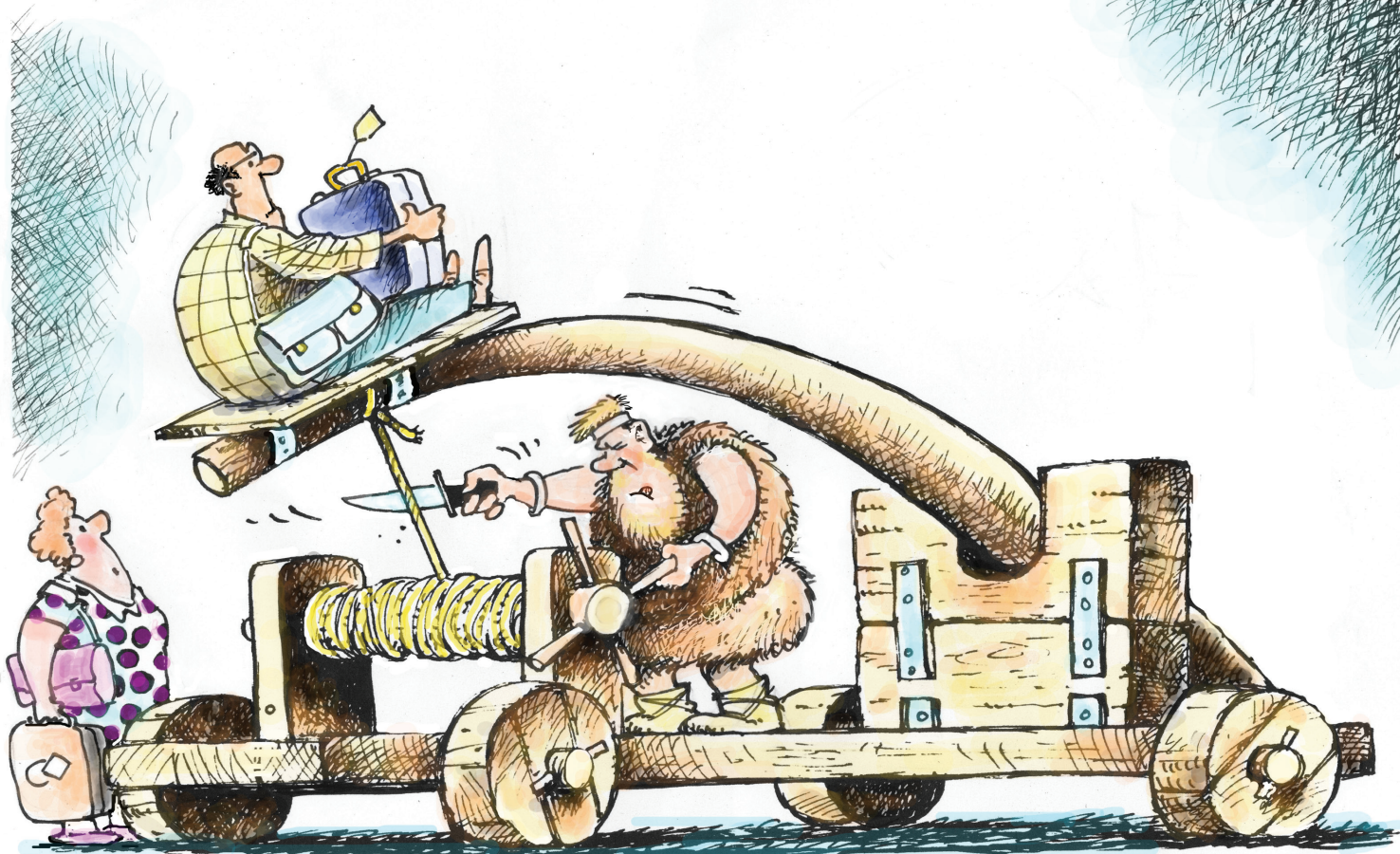
One of the great positives in our little town of Astoria is about to have their one-year anniversary on Valentine's Day and that is our little Italian kitchen, Gaetano's Market & Deli, located at the corner of Commercial Street and 10th Street.

Do you know how rare it is to have a "real" Italian kitchen in our town? I've been up and down this coast many times and I've never found any place like our Gaetano's. I have a good amount of Italian blood in my veins and I can tell you that Matt Gaetano, Julie Hoffman and Rachel Gaetano know what they are doing in the kitchen. Their dishes are so close to my own grandmother's and my own that I think we must be related!

Truly, try anything and you will be pleased. This is not an ad. I'm not being paid for my opinion, I just wanted to give these fine folks a shoutout and tell them that we appreciate them, their great Italian cooking and we are so blessed that they chose our little town of Astoria to make their home!

MARY HADREAS
Astoria

Alternative to airline cancellations ...



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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.

still plenty of that.

It seems the letter writer does know the difference between right and wrong, even with today's media blathering. It can be done. It is up to each individual to exercise good judgment in each decision they make, and to ignore the nonsense.

ROBERT LIDDYCOAT
Seaside

Not just a vacation rental

My husband and I are the owners of the "Vacasa rental home" featured in "Year in Review: Seaside housing is a study in opposites" in the Seaside Signal.

While this is indeed a vacation rental, first it is our family vacation home. My grandparents purchased the property on the Prom when my father and his siblings

were in college.

When my grandmother passed away in 2008, she left the property to my father. He lived in the house from then until his death in 2017. As his only child, I inherited the property.

My husband — an Astoria native — and I had plans to remodel so our kids could grow up spending summers on the Oregon Coast as we both did as children. But, as the house was built in 1900, it was just too old to remodel.

So, rather than sell the property, we poured our life savings into creating a retreat that our family can enjoy, and that one day our children's families can also enjoy.

It's not just a vacation rental. It's a house for our family to make memories in; renting it while we're not using it helps us pay property taxes and rebuild our savings.

It's not a property we purchased to flip or make money off of, but rather one that's been in my family for decades. And, hopefully, it will be for decades more.

RHIANNON WEST CHAMBERLAIN
Portland

Ignore the nonsense

The "Good ol' days" Jan. 4 writer blames "freedom" as the cause of this perceived "lying, cheating and stealing ... 'new reality.'"

It should be pointed out that these evils have been well documented for 50,000 years of human existence under all kinds of kings, queens, tsars and, indeed, all forms of government. All have tried to eliminate the problem with various types of laws. None have succeeded.

However, the letter does hit on a new element in the battle, the electronic media — where any idiot can opine, and be heard by millions. This may be the cause of yearning for the "good ol' days." The cure is easy. Do not listen to their rants.

The problem is not freedom. The solution is not slavery. What stands between freedom and chaos is morality. Individuals making good decisions in their daily activities and jobs. There is