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KATHRYN B. BROWN
Publisher

DANIEL WATTENBURGER
Managing Editor

JENNINE PERKINSON
Advertising Director

TIM TRAINOR
Opinion Page Editor

OUR VIEW

How much local control is too much?

It's a bad idea to create 36 different regulatory bodies across the state

The Oregon Secretary of State's Office has dealt a serious blow to an effort to put a initiative on the ballot that is designed to overturn laws preempting local control of matters currently regulated by the state.

Though backers of the "Right to Local, Community Self-Government" initiative are considering their options, we hope this puts an end to this nonsense.

Initiative backers hoped to turn back state prohibitions on local governments banning genetically modified organisms and local regulation of pesticides. They also would like local jurisdictions to be able to regulate fracking, oil and gas development and coal exports.

In part, backers seek to allow local jurisdictions "to enact local laws that protect health, safety, and welfare by: establishing the fundamental rights of natural persons, their communities, and nature; securing those rights using prohibitions and other means; and establishing, defining, altering, or eliminating the rights, powers, privileges, immunities, or duties of corporations and other business entities operating or seeking to operate in the community, to prevent such rights, powers, privileges, immunities, or duties from interfering with such locally-enacted fundamental rights of natural persons, their communities, and nature."

Backers collected more than 1,000 signatures on their petitions, which gave them standing to receive a review for a ballot title — an important step in getting the measure on the 2016 ballot.

But the Secretary of State's Office rejected the initiative. It says the measure is too broad. Specifically, the initiative would "effectuate fundamental constitutional changes to the structure and division of powers of state and local governments" and alter the power of the legislative and executive branches, according to state attorneys.

The Secretary of State's Office says such a sweeping "revision" can't be accomplished with a ballot initiative.

Mary Geddry, a chief petitioner for the initiative, said that proponents haven't yet decided on a course of action but disagree with the Secretary of State's conclusions. She says her group isn't going to roll over.

"We're talking about fundamental rights," she said. "Communities don't have the right to say 'no' under the current system."

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She's right, they don't. But we suspect that she's talking about things liberals don't like. In addition to banning GMOs and pesticide use, we're sure certain "progressive" communities would write their own minimum wage laws, gun regulations and environmental rules. And if they decide they don't like dry cleaners or meat packers, who knows.

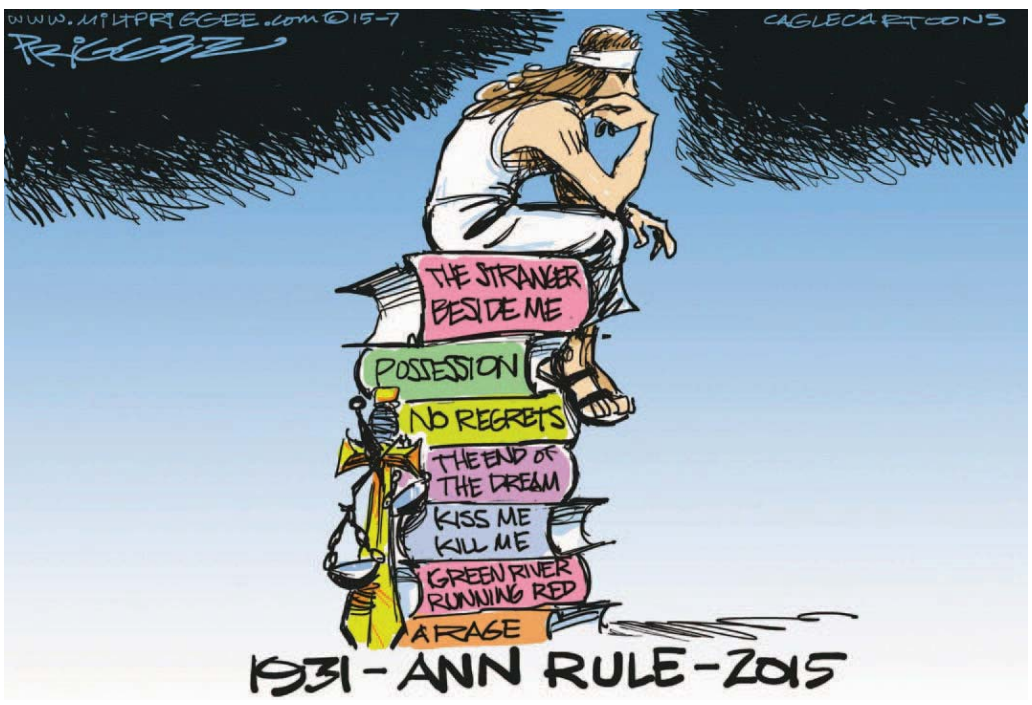
But once passed, the measure would be sauce for the goose.

Officials here in the more rural and largely conservative counties of Eastern Oregon might well decide that Oregon's protections on wolves don't apply, or gun regulations they believe make people less safe and trample on personal freedoms, or state land-use restrictions that violate personal property rights.

During the 1990s, there was a proposal to give county commissions the authority to regulate cougar hunting. This was tantamount to creating 36 wildlife management organizations across Oregon. The plan died.

In theory, it's hard to argue against "local" control. The notion has great democratic appeal. But in reality, turning each of Oregon's 36 counties and 242 incorporated cities into an independent duchy would set up a patchwork of regulation that would make everyone's business difficult, if not impossible.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

Stepping on a slippery slope

JOE NOCERA
Comment

My son Nick, a podcast aficionado, suggested recently that I'd enjoy a podcast called "StartUp," which tells stories of companies that are just starting out. In its first season, the show's host, Alex Blumberg, and his new business partner, Matt Lieber, train their microphones on their own company, Gimlet Media, which Blumberg, who is also the chief executive, hopes to turn into a podcast juggernaut. The second season, in which Blumberg is joined by a co-host, Lisa Chow, chronicles the highs and lows of a new dating app.

Nick was right. Blumberg, a co-creator of NPR's "Planet Money," and Chow, formerly of NPR and WNYC, prove to be first-rate storytellers, hardly a surprise given their backgrounds. What was a surprise were the commercials spliced into each episode. "StartUp's" second season was sponsored by Ford Motor Co., the email marketer MailChimp, and Personal Capital, a financial firm. But instead of running a traditional ad, the co-hosts crafted little stories, often conducting on-air interviews with a company official.

> My second reaction was something akin to horror.

In one fairly typical ad, Blumberg interviews Ford's "general manager of the factory tour," who tells him about the living plants that cover much of a big factory roof. She explains how all the plants help warm the factory in the winter and cool it during the summer. After some banter, Blumberg finishes the ad with a gentle spoof of a traditional advertising tag line. "Ford," he intones. "Making pickup trucks under a living roof."

My first reaction was one of amusement and even admiration. The ads were clever, and their cleverness caused me to remember them, which is what advertisers want.

My second reaction was something akin to horror. The ads reminded me that the great CBS journalist Mike Wallace used to do commercials in the late 1950s for several cigarette brands that sponsored his interview show. Wallace would take satisfying drags from a cigarette while touting its taste, its recessed filter, even the crushproof box. There is a reason journalists have stopped serving as commercial pitchmen: It raises all kinds of potential, and real, conflicts of interest. Could a journalist beholden to a sponsor ever report honestly about that sponsor if the need arose? Would he or she go easy on other companies that might become sponsors — or shy away from controversies that might drive away advertisers?

My third reaction was confusion. As the Internet has eviscerated journalism's traditional business model, news organizations have had to find new ways to generate revenue. The long sacrosanct barrier between the business side and the news side is falling. Many companies with the highest journalistic standards are adopting so-called native advertising techniques, which are meant to mimic the feel of the publication itself.

Martin Baron, the executive editor of *The Washington Post*, gave a speech a few months ago in which he said that journalists needed to "abandon the idea that the newsroom can labor in isolation from the business operations." He added that "advertisers are looking for innovative, measurable and successful ways to connect with potential customers." He's right, of course.

And isn't that exactly what Blumberg and Chow are trying to do?

When I spoke to Blumberg about the ads, he acknowledged, with no hesitation, that "we're still trying to figure it out." In a recent Gimlet podcast devoted to Gimlet's advertising, he and his staff focused on an ad for Microsoft Outlook, in which Lieber, his partner, explicitly endorsed the product, saying that he had converted five colleagues to it. But the hosts of that podcast ultimately felt uneasy about having participated in the ad, and Gimlet decided to stop doing ads that were too "endorse-y" (their word). Blumberg also told me that part of the reason he and Chow are so involved in creating the ads was that Gimlet is still a small company, and everybody has to do everything. He envisioned a day when there would be a greater divide between business and editorial, though a host would likely still be reading the ads.

By the end of our conversation I found myself giving Blumberg and his company the benefit of the doubt. But maybe that's because I know his work from "Planet Money," and he's built up capital in the trust bank. And I like how transparent he and Gimlet are about the inherent problems that come with their kind of advertising. (A recent *New York Times* story about podcast advertising also featured Gimlet.)

But I can't help it: It does have the feel of a slippery slope. "The logical next step," said Rick Edmonds, media business analyst at the Poynter Institute, "will be to set up an in-house studio that will produce ads for advertisers. And maybe ask the journalists to write the copy. I think the line is sliding."

Gimlet's honorable intentions notwithstanding, I think he's right.

■

Joe Nocera is an Op-Ed columnist. Before joining The Opinion Pages in April 2011, he wrote the Talking Business column for The New York Times each Saturday and was a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine.

YOUR VIEWS

Plenty of questions about state affordable housing funds

The Bend Bulletin

Gov. Kate Brown pushed a landmark request in the Oregon Legislature: $100 million for affordable housing.

It didn't happen.

The amount approved by the Legislature was $42.5 million — or $62.5 million if you include $20 million in housing for people with mental illness.

That $42 million plus could still help thousands of families. But there should be real concern about the state's ability to put the money to work and how fairly the money will be allocated.

Both Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, and Rep. Knute Buehler, R-Bend, raised questions about how well the state has been using the money it already has. The state created a document recording fee in 2009. It generated about $59 million for affordable housing.

But the state has only spent over half that. The rest of the money for affordable housing was not doing anybody any good.

Margaret Van Vliet, director of the state agency in charge — Oregon Housing and Community Services, has pledged to do better at, you know, building affordable housing.

And it would also be good if there were a way to reduce its administrative costs. Even Van Vliet said she thought the program's 10 percent administrative costs are high.

The Legislature is going to have to continue to keep a close eye on the agency. Some legislators tried to pass a bill, House Bill 2198, requiring the agency to do more regular reporting about what it's doing and ensure that it distributes money according to relative need. The bill failed in the last days of the Legislature.

That could be an additional concern for Central Oregon. For instance, Deschutes County had contributed about $4 million to the fund. And in return, it has received only about $700,000 in projects financed.

Brown told KATU in Portland that the additional money for affordable housing is "an incredible success. That's a historic level of funding for Oregon and for the nation."

We wouldn't call it an incredible success, yet. The state needs to prove it can do much better than it has in using the money effectively.

YOUR VIEWS

Feckless committees and management mar Pendleton

This letter is in response to Rex Morehouse's recent letter to the editor. He proclaimed, "When is a committee not a committee? I thought since April that I was attending the Capitol Improvement Committee. At the July 7 council meeting Mayor Houk informed me that I had been attending the Capitol Investment Advisory Committee."

First, it's imperative to review some quotes about committees: "If Columbus had an advisory committee, he would probably still be at the dock" (Arthur Goldberg), and "A committee is a gathering of people who singly can do nothing, but together can decide that nothing can be done (Fred Allen).

Mismanagement of advisory committees has a long history. Here is a quote in the *East Oregonian*: "Commission chairwoman MaryAlice Ridgeway said the commission used to have good attendance and make frequent recommendations, but meetings in recent years now boil down to reports from staff and votes on issues already decided by the council."

Morehouse went on to focus on decisions concerning sloppy budget management. Instead of complaining, local taxpayers should be asking questions such as why did the city council build an expensive road to divert traffic to a barren industrial park with no electricity, sewer or water connections? Why does the city council have a history of interagency loans such using the sewer budget money to spend on other projects that have not been profitable?

Morehouse made a point about the expenditure of thousands of dollars for consultants. Here is an example: "Deb Galardi, a subconsultant for the city's utility master plans, said, 'A water system development charge was the largest proposed fee, which is determined by meter equivalents. If implemented citywide, the charge would range from $3,769 for a three-quarter-inch line to $301,550 for an eight-inch line.'" The proposed new charges would be for new developments.

Fortunately, a teacher, McKennon McDonald, made the statement that "she was concerned that a higher system development charge for the airport might discourage development in an area the city has targeted for that purpose."

Time for another question. If you were a business looking for a location, which community would you select, Pendleton or Hermiston?

The answer is obvious and it is safe to predict that the bond as well as the gas tax will not pass in November because people are fed up with the pathetic performance of our city management.

Jerry Cronin
Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

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