

EAST OREGONIAN

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OUR VIEW

They're coming to Umatilla County

It may be arriving in fits and starts, but after a long and unusually frigid winter, summer is nearly here.

It's just what Pendleton needs. Tourism isn't strictly a fair-weather business, but around these parts the clear skies and warm nights are the perfect environment to welcome visitors from all over.

Travel Oregon estimates that tourists spent \$137 million in Umatilla County in 2016 on things like hotels, restaurants, recreation and retail, which is enough to support about 2,400 jobs and \$1.5 million in local taxes. Much of that is centered in Pendleton.

And the city is getting notice statewide. At the 2016 Travel and Tourism Industry Achievement Awards last week, Pat Beard of Travel Pendleton took home the Oregon Tourism Leadership Award and the Tamástlikt Cultural Institute in Mission took the Gene Leon Memorial Award, given to a tourism-related activity that focuses on Oregon's natural beauty and outdoor recreation.

Building off these successes, this summer will see four massive events pass through the city, starting with the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest on July 15, Pendleton Bike Week the following weekend, the solar eclipse on August 21 and, of course, the Pendleton Round-Up on the second full week of September.

While the eclipse is a one-off happy coincidence and the Round-Up is a volunteer-driven spectacle developed over more than a century, the music fest and motorcycle rally and other events, like Oktoberfest, are more recent creations by forward thinking locals.

We're glad they've made the effort to invite the world at large to visit our town, and now we must be ready to do our part.

We can pick up an idea or two this weekend when the Pendleton Underground Tours come alive. Each year, the tour brings in volunteer actors to play the parts of

The eclipse is a rare cosmic gift to Pendleton.

Pendleton's denizens of yore throughout the underground labyrinth. They dress and playact the characters and put on a show, which sells out every year.

Keeping that approach in mind, businesses and citizens should remember that we're all part of the tourist experience. It doesn't mean we all must dress in turn-of-the-century garb and pretend we're still living on the frontier to put on a show for spectators, but it does mean we are aware that first impressions are important. Every point of contact matters. We have the potential to turn one-time visitors, drawn by a big event, into regular guests.

Businesses of course take on much of the point-of-contact burden but also have the most to gain. Adding summer hours and staying open on weekends is key to letting tourists see everything the city has to offer.

The eclipse is a rare cosmic gift to Pendleton. There is nothing otherwise remarkable about the weekend, but we have the potential to make new fans of travelers passing through to get a perfect view of the phenomenon just to our south. Resources will be taxed in Grant and Baker counties, but as visitors come back this way we can offer them the Pendleton experience — which cannot be eclipsed.

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

Give churches freedom of speech, but why freedom from taxation?

The Des Moines (Iowa) Register

It's not clear what Lyndon Johnson was thinking in 1954. The then-U.S. senator introduced an amendment to a bill that prevented some tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from engaging in political campaign activity. Congress adopted it without debate. Lawmakers later strengthened the ban. Courts have upheld it.

None of this means the statute makes sense. There is certainly a case to be made that free speech rights should not be tied to tax status for any organization. And Congress can certainly vote to change the law if it chooses.

But President Donald Trump is still figuring out how this "branches of government" idea works.

Last week he signed an executive order he said would free churches from restraints imposed by the law. Seeking to garner as much attention as possible, the signing was staged in the Rose Garden with activists, faith leaders and nuns. They were serenaded by a string quartet.

The order will "prevent the Johnson Amendment from interfering with your First Amendment rights," Trump declared.

Well, no it won't. The executive order does essentially nothing. In fact, groups preparing to sue over what they expected the document to contain said there was no need after they saw the final version. The American Civil Liberties Union called the order "an elaborate photo-op with no discernible policy outcome." Even conservative groups recognized it as little more than a "gesture."

Then again, the amendment is little more than a gesture. It is essentially meaningless because it is not enforced.

Some religious leaders have intentionally flouted the provision in law, trying to draw attention to themselves annually on "Pulpit Freedom Sunday." They tell their congregation which political candidates to support and face no consequences from the Internal Revenue Service.

"We record our sermons, as have

many several thousands of pastors, and then send their sermons to the IRS in hopes of provoking a lawsuit. But we have not been successful," a California pastor told CNN last year.

The IRS could take action. It could revoke the preferential tax status of churches. But it doesn't. After being starved by Congress for several years, it doesn't have the staff. It also likely doesn't have the stomach for the certain political backlash. And the IRS may not even know some churches exist, as they are not required to apply for tax-exempt status and are generally not required to file annual forms with the agency.

A 2014 report from the Government Accountability Office noted budget cuts at the IRS have led to "a steady decrease in the number of charitable organizations examined." In 2011, the examination rate was 0.81 percent; in 2013, it fell to 0.71 percent, lower than the examination rate for other types of taxpayers, including individuals and corporations.

Translation: Pretty much anyone can open a "church," avoid taxation and engage in political activities with no fear of repercussions. And with pressure from the president to leave these entities alone, the IRS is even less likely to scrutinize them.

The question Trump should be asking: Why are churches exempt from taxation in the first place? That could spur the larger conversation this country needs to have about reforming the entire, antiquated federal statute on tax-exempt status. Use of the exemption has run amok.

About 1.6 million organizations, including about 400,000 religious entities, do not pay taxes. That drives up the federal deficit, hurts local governments and forces the rest of us to pay more to compensate. Among the activities our additional tax contributions support: politicking pastors who proudly and loudly violate federal law.

Washington policymakers should ensure everyone has freedom of speech, but revisit who gets freedom from taxation.

OTHER VIEWS

STAR TRIBUNE
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On Capitol Hill, growing frustration with FBI secrecy about Russia probe

Calls for a special prosecutor to investigate the Russia-Trump affair have multiplied in the days since President Trump fired FBI director James Comey. Almost invariably, Democrats and others calling for a prosecutor say such a step is needed to "get to the bottom" of the matter.

Yet there is still uncertainty among the public about whether anything lies at the bottom of the Russia-Trump controversy. Is there a crime down there? No one seems to know. The reason is simple: The FBI, which has been investigating alleged ties between Trump campaign figures and Russia for ten months, won't say.

To question after question; not just from the press, but from lawmakers with a constitutional responsibility to oversee the FBI, the Justice Department, and the intelligence agencies — answers have been withheld on the grounds that they are classified, or the subject of an ongoing investigation, or both.

"I can't answer that," said Comey on many, many occasions during oversight hearings on the Russia affair.

"My answer would require me to reveal classified information, and so I can't answer that," said former acting attorney general Sally Yates in the same setting.

"I can't comment on that," said former intelligence chief James Clapper.

Now, as the Russia-Trump controversy festers, there are signs of growing impatience with the secrecy. Some lawmakers — among them the Republican chairman and the Democratic ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee — are pushing the FBI and other agencies involved to let Congress know what they are doing. In particular, lawmakers want to see evidence — if there is any — to show why the investigation is focusing not just on Russian misdeeds — there's no doubt there are plenty of those to investigate — but on Trump campaign figures, and possibly on the president himself.

On Friday, Judiciary Committee chairman Charles Grassley and ranking Democrat Dianne Feinstein sent a letter to FBI acting director Andrew McCabe and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein demanding briefings on the latest in the Russia investigation. The last paragraph of the letter indicated that the senators' patience is running thin. "Please contact (staff) by 5:00 p.m. today to schedule the briefings," Grassley and Feinstein wrote. "Thank you for your immediate attention to these important matters."

Not by tomorrow, not by Monday, not by the end of the week. Grassley and Feinstein wanted a response by 5:00 p.m. on the day of the letter. Given that the power of both parties is behind the request, they will most likely get what they want.

The day before, on Thursday, Grassley and Feinstein made news when they strongly suggested that Comey told them President Trump is not under investigation in the Russia matter. In a public committee meeting, Grassley said that when Trump said recently he had been informed he is not under investigation, "Sen. Feinstein and I heard nothing that contradicted the president's



BYRON YORK
Comment

As the Russia-Trump controversy festers, there are signs of growing impatience with secrecy.

statement.

"I very much appreciate what you've said," Feinstein said to Grassley. "And it's very accurate ..."

A short time later, a Republican aide explained that Grassley was deeply concerned by last week's events. "We've seen an uptick in speculation about what has or hasn't happened," the aide said, "and what has or has not been found — and that's not helpful if it is speculation not based on anything other than rumor or anything factual."

Now, others on Capitol Hill are expressing similar concerns. "It's hard to do oversight, especially on counter-intelligence matters, with so little information," said a Senate Republican Sunday. "That's been true for months."

"There is a counter-intelligence investigation focused on Russia, but the media and the Democrats conflate that with there being a criminal investigation focused on Trump," added a House Republican. "The FBI has fed into this by being coy."

"Coy" is an understatement.

The result of the dozens of questions left unanswered by Comey, Yates, Clapper, and others is that the public — and, to a lesser extent, lawmakers themselves — don't know the basics of the Russia-Trump matter.

But what to do? Classified information is still classified information. Ongoing investigations are conducted in secrecy (except, of course, for leaks). How can Congress pry information out of the agencies?

"Congress can always coerce the FBI," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in an email exchange Sunday. "Power of the purse. Change the law."

"Senators can make it an issue in the confirmation process for a new FBI director," the House Republican quoted earlier said.

Maybe so. Right now, though, it appears that bipartisan pressure, like that coming from Grassley and Feinstein, might help get information out. Does all of the information the FBI and other agencies have classified actually need to be classified? Can nothing more be made public? Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate could push hard on those questions.

In addition, Grassley and Feinstein want the FBI to brief every member of the Judiciary Committee, not just the chairman and ranking member. Just as a practical matter — multiplying the number of people on the committee who know the facts by 10 — that will certainly make it more likely that information will get out.

If nothing changes, the country could be facing months and months of accusations without voters knowing their basis in fact — or lack of basis in fact. Meanwhile, the FBI and other agencies could remain "coy" while Democrats seek to create the impression in the public's mind that Trump and his aides colluded with Russia to throw the 2016 election. If the Trump team did that, the public needs to know. If they didn't, the public needs to know that, too. Soon.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.

YOUR VIEWS

Hermiston still needs some sprucing up

In the 19 years I've lived in Hermiston I have to give credit to the city for making great strides in making our community a place that people would be proud to call home. However, the continued lack of concern by some local businesses along [Highway] 395 concerning their outside appearance is disturbing.

I, for one, will not bring my patronage nor encourage anyone I know to do so, to a place of business that hasn't the good business sense to know that outside appearance is akin to making a very important first impression for the customer to feel comfortable enough to walk in the door. This is especially true when it comes to a restaurant. I can only imagine what your kitchen looks like if you care so little about what the customer first sees when driving into your establishments.

Pull some weeds, buy some Roundup, mow the lawn! It doesn't take that much of an effort to bring in more business and to add to

the aesthetics of our growing city.

David Gracia
Hermiston

Department of Corrections should release inmate early

I am asking that the Department of Corrections finally show some compassion for an inmate.

There is an inmate that was transferred to another prison/jail as he is getting out in two weeks. I am asking that this man, Ed Barlow, be released early as his father has to have a quadruple bypass as soon as possible. He needs to be with his mother and father at this time.

The Department of Corrections and the law very rarely show compassion or feelings to the inmates, but this man is due to get out June 2 and his father must have this surgery soon. Come on DOC, show us that you have a heart somewhere.

Barbara Dickerson
Milton-Freewater