

O

EAST OREGONIAN

PINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSHKATHRYN B. BROWNANDREW CUTLERWYATT HAUPT JR.JADE McDOWELL

PublisherOwnerEditorNews EditorHermiston Editor

Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

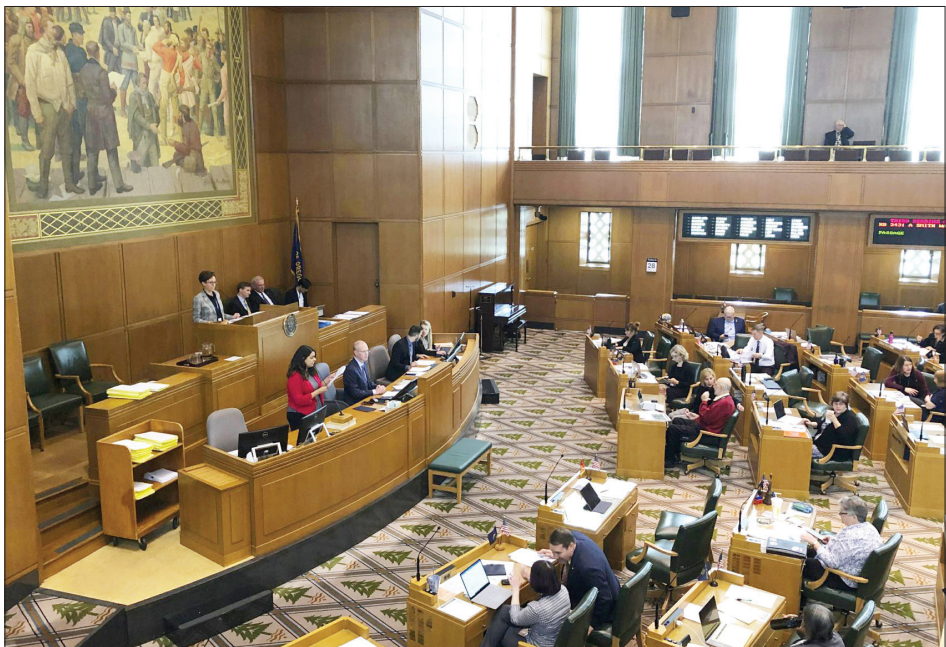
Redistricting commission makes sense

The 2020 general election may give Oregonians the opportunity to change the way legislative and congressional districts are drawn every 10 years. Backers of the move are expected to submit three petitions to change the system to the Oregon Secretary of State’s office soon.

The idea makes sense. Currently, the redistricting task belongs to lawmakers. If they cannot agree on a plan, the job falls to the secretary of state, and that plan can be appealed to the state Supreme Court. If lawmakers do come up with a plan, it can be challenged, the secretary of state creates a plan, and it, too, can be challenged in the state’s highest court.

There’s ample room for partisan politics in the current system, and that’s what a commission system could be expected to change.

Supporters of the proposed plan include the League of Women Voters, Common Cause Oregon and OSPIRG, the Oregon State Public Interest Research Group, and others.



AP Photo/Andrew Selsky, File

Every 10 years, the Oregon Legislature is tasked with adjusting the state’s legislative and congressional districts to account for changes in population. The process is highly political as lawmakers draw a map that could give an advantage to incumbents or their political party.

used in California, with a commission equally divided among Democrats, Republicans, and others. Three administrative law judges would narrow the list to 150, from

which six commissioners would be selected randomly. That six would appoint another six from the same pool. Most elected officials, their aides, political party officials, large political donors and lobbyists would be barred from serving on the commission.

Were Oregon to switch, it would join a growing number of states making the change, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. By 2020, at least 15 states will use commissions for state or federal redistricting, or both.

Giving Oregonians legislative and congressional districts that are designed to meet constitutional requirements of compactness, contain equal numbers of voters and respect “communities of common interest” is not the simplest task. Throw politics into the mix, and it can be nearly impossible. A nonpartisan commission could be expected to change that.

OTHER VIEWS

Wildfire panel establishes worthy goals

Albany Democrat-Herald

A month after Gov. Kate Brown’s Council on Wildfire Response raised eyebrows throughout the Oregon by estimating that it will take \$4 billion over 20 years to improve the state’s ability to respond to wildfires, the council this week released its recommendations on how that money should be spent.

At first glance, it appears the council has done solid work. Its report suggests that the state focus on four broad goals:

- Creating fire-adapted communities.
- Restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes.
- Responding safely and effectively to wildfire.
- Developing cross-functional support systems to continue to develop these goals. (This is the spot in which members of the council make their case for continued task forces and what-not, but this does include a reference to an intriguing proposal being kicked around at Oregon State University to develop a wildfire center to produce, capture and disseminate the best available science regarding wildfire. OSU would seem to be well suited for such a center.)

In all, the final report includes 37 recommendations and assigns priorities to each one: In all, 13 of the recommendations are rated as “highest.” (The other priority levels are “very high,” “high” and “moderate.” Just one recommendation earned a “moderate” rating — that one calls for the Oregon Insurance Commission to monitor the property insurance market to ensure continued access to affordable insurance.)

The council said the highest priorities are working with power utilities to create risk mitigation plans, changing building codes to require defensible space around homes built near forests, reducing fuels within forests that cause catastrophic fires and educating the public on wildfire prevention.

That \$4 billion price tag does not seem unreasonable, considering that it covers the costs of actively managing forests and rangelands and treating some 5.6 million acres. And even

though the report does not identify sources for that funding, it makes a compelling case that the costs of wildfire to Oregonians are much greater; in fact, the report says, the average costs of wildfire (economic losses, lost taxes, damages to ecosystems, destruction of infrastructure and depreciated property values) are 11 times greater than the immediate costs of firefighting.

In an interview, Matt Donegan, the chairman of the council, said the state spent \$533 million on fire suppression in 2018 and estimated the associated costs at about \$6 billion. This year’s fire season was milder, but it’s a good bet that it also was atypical; the report says that climate change, population growth and record fuel levels have combined to create a growing wildfire threat in the West.

But although those numbers are persuasive, they don’t make it any easier for legislators and other state officials to locate an additional \$4 billion.

The problem here is that it would be easy to glance at the price tag, grimace, and set the report on a shelf at the Capitol to gather dust. That would be a mistake: A number of the recommendations in the report likely can be pursued at a relatively low cost. The report also suggests figuring out a way to treat 300,000 acres of state land each year at a cost of about \$200 million. That’s not peanuts, but it’s easier than finding \$4 billion at once.

The report also urges that we not wait for that long-term funding model to fall into place: These treatments should occur each year, it says, “to the full extent possible through state funds.”

We’ve seen a tendency on the governor’s part from time to time to hold off on immediate action in favor of pulling together a working group to search for long-term answers. That’s not necessarily a bad impulse, but it comes with the risk that nothing happens while we wait for that long-term strategy to fall into place — or, worse, that the strategy never is implemented. The nice thing about the council’s recommendations is that they’re not all or nothing; they include items that we can move on almost immediately. We shouldn’t wait. Wildfires won’t.

Impeachment witnesses the heroes we need right now

If Ambassador Bill Taylor didn’t exist already, we’d have to invent him.

With a made-for-TV voice filled to the brim with gravitas, the West Point grad and career public servant was the living embodiment of everything we hope for from our government employees.

Taylor unflappably told Republican members of the House Intelligence Committee Tuesday that he didn’t consider himself “a star witness for anything,” even as they peppered him clearly leading questions on the opening day of the panel’s impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump.

Next to him sat George Kent, the State Department’s senior official for Ukraine. With a scholarly bearing complimented by his bow tie, the Harvard graduate and career diplomat spoke movingly of his family’s long history of public service.

After three years of listening to President Donald Trump carp groundlessly about biased judges, the “deep state” and witch hunts, the deeply knowledgeable public servants were a visceral reminder of the crucial durability of those institutions and why they need to be protected from the wrecking ball in the White House.

Kent dispassionately unspooled the reasoning behind the United States’ support for Ukraine and the vital importance of protecting it against Putin’s rapacious Russia. It was a stark reminder of the intellectual black hole sitting behind the Resolute Desk, and of the 45th president’s complete ignorance of history and his utter disinterest in learning about world affairs.

After all, it was Trump who once marveled that many people “don’t realize” that President Abraham Lincoln was a Republican (everyone does) and offered that many people also don’t know that the Korean War hasn’t ended, either.

It’s actual, palpable evidence of what conservative author (and vocal Trump critic) Tom Nichols aptly described as “the death of expertise,” in his 2017 book of the same name.

“The bigger problem is we’re proud of not knowing things,” Nichols wrote.



JOHN L. MICEK
COMMENT

“Americans have reached a point where ignorance, especially of any public policy issue, is an actual virtue.”

Contrast that against Kent, whose stores of knowledge and appreciation for history appeared bottomless at times.

The veteran diplomat vividly connected such foreign-born public servants as Lt. Col. Alexander Vindland and former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch — who have served with dignity and distinction, and who became the targets of smear campaigns — to indispensable foreign-born partners of American history.

“They are the 21st century heirs of two giants of 20th century U.S. national security policy who were born abroad — my former professor Zbigniew Brzezinski and his fellow immigrant Henry Kissinger,” Kent said. “Like the Brzezinskis and Kissingers, the Yovanovitches and Vindmans fled Nazi and communist oppression to contribute to a stronger, more secure America.”

And then there was Taylor, who remained as impassive as Jack Webb’s Sgt. Joe Friday character on the old “Dragnet” TV show. As *The Washington Post* reports, Taylor rarely strayed beyond a “Yes, sir,” in his answers.

Though it was Taylor who offered the chief bombshell during the hearing’s first day, describing a phone call in which “Trump spoke to another diplomat and checked on the status of the investigations he had urged Ukraine to pursue.”

At the end of their testimony, it was tough not to yearn for an America that seems to be receding into the rearview mirror: one where expertise and knowledge are still revered and where public service is honored and elevated, not brought low and attacked.

But in Scott and Taylor’s even tones and reassuringly professional manner, there was the hope that those qualities are still in government, and that they, along with the rest of our public institutions, will yet survive this aberration of a president.

John L. Micek is a syndicated columnist.