

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSH
PublisherKATHRYN B. BROWN
OwnerANDREW CUTLER
EditorWYATT HAUPT JR.
News EditorJADE McDOWELL
Hermiston Editor

Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Here's why Oregon's public records law matters

There couldn't be a clearer case about both the value and flaws in Oregon's public records law than the current one in Douglas County.

The Oregonian, having spent about \$2,000 to obtain records of how the county spent some \$43,000 in federal Secure Rural Schools Act funds, reported this week on what it found. The newspaper has since been billed another \$693.77 to have a county official spend 13 hours reviewing it so the county could answer questions about records the newspaper received.

The newspaper found plenty. Some of the \$43,000 went to pay a \$75 fee to Sunriver Resort to allow Douglas County Commissioner Tim Freeman to keep a dog in his room. Another \$205 went to the Brix Chill, a Roseburg cocktail lounge and restaurant. The receipt was not itemized, as county policy requires, making it impossible to tell if he had purchased alcohol as part of the meal. County policy forbids the purchase of alcohol with public funds. Freeman also flew first class to Washington, D.C., in 2019 because he was



Photo courtesy of the Association of Oregon Counties

Douglas County commissioners, like Tim Freeman, spent \$43,000 in federal money meant to help their struggling county over the past five years. The trips were underwritten by the Secure Rural Schools program, which pays jurisdictions like Douglas County that suffered financially after endangered species listings curtailed federal logging.

invited on short notice to hear a speech by President Donald Trump. Federal funds paid for part of the upgrade from the standard coach seat that Oregon officials usually use. A county spokeswoman said no coach seats were available for the flight.

If private businesses want to spend their money that way, it's one thing,

but for public officials from a poor county in rural Oregon to do so, it's unconscionable.

We don't know what voters in Douglas County will do about the situation, but one thing is clear. Had it not been for this state's public records law and *The Oregonian's* willingness to spend nearly \$3,000 getting information that's

supposedly available to the public, voters may never have found out about the commission's free-spending ways.

That brings up a problem with the current law. It allows a requester — in this case, *The Oregonian* — to appeal proposed fees to the local district attorney, Richard Wesenberg. Wesenberg refused to reduce or cancel the fees, arguing that the newspaper's parent company could well afford them. That's despite the law, which says reducing fees is what should be done if making the record public benefits the general public. It's hard to see how spending of government funds doesn't qualify as information that meets that test.

Lawmakers may not have time to change the law so that getting records is both fast and relatively inexpensive in the coming 30-day session. If not, it should be put at the top of the 2021 to-do list. The law does not require means testing to determine if fees should be waived, and public interest, not a requester's financial statement, should be the standard by which the request is judged.

SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE

In the middle of mad skills

So the plastic bag ban has come to Oregon, and I am so glad I live in Umatilla County. Yes, there are a myriad of reasons to be glad to live here. The one I'm thinking of now is that our area is full of people with mad skills.

I'm talking about all the constructive, artisanal abilities that I have neither the fine motor nor spatial skills to master. One doesn't have to be craft-challenged to appreciate one's neighbors, but it certainly helps. All of you who don't think about how cool it is that you sew, quilt, crochet or knit, please know that you are admired.

Do you not realize how valuable and valued your skills are? Is that why none of last season's farmers' markets and craft bazaars were flooded with handmade produce bags, grocery bags and gift bags?

True, some here are combining confidence with a nose for a good market. I know members of the Athena-Weston 4-H are looking at all the empty feed sacks, looking at all their skilled clothiers and saying, "We got this." No word yet of when their durable, rinsable sacks — emblazoned with the farm animal of your choice — will be on the market. I, for one, am waiting.

A cashier at the Athena Grocery told me he has a pile of old jeans he was thinking about sewing up into bags. Please don't waste another day, sir. Jean bags would be durable and machine washable. And if you do it right, they can have little pockets to carry change and grocery lists. I wouldn't have to carry my purse to the store.

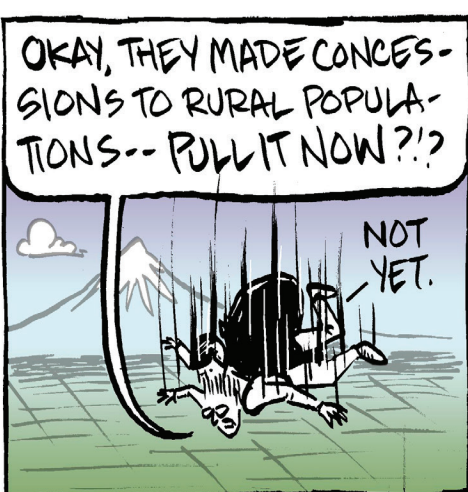
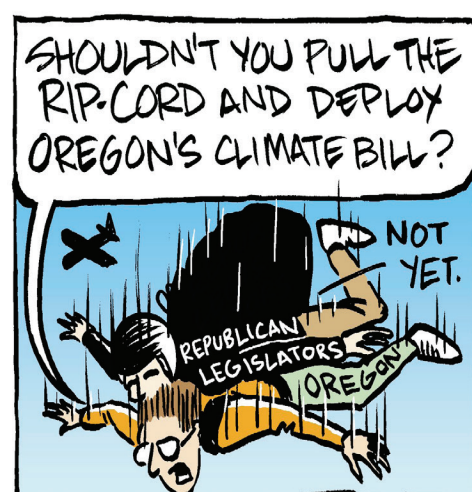
I know of at least one neighbor who's wondering if Safeway will still accept shopping bags for "recycling." I actually hope not, because we will be needing lots of plarn. (Crocheted mesh and net bags are

better for produce when made out of plastic yarn). Plarn bags can be machine washed and drip-dried. Since I can't crochet, I don't know how many plastic bags it takes to make enough plarn for a net bag, so I imagine every bag still in your possession is valuable. On Etsy, plarn bags go for anywhere from \$10 to \$35. And all a person needs is scissors, a crochet hook, plastic shopping bags and skilled hands. Lacking skilled hands, I'll just pay you the money. (College-bound crafters, missionary fundraisers, local service clubs — take note.) An internet search, "how to make plarn," will fill in any gaps in your knowledge, far faster than the gaps in my skills.

Of course, since many combine crafty hands with compassionate hearts, you can also donate your old plastic bags. I've heard that the peer center at Lifeways is collecting bags and making plarn sleeping mats for homeless folks. Since I've started buying compostable bags for trash, I'll be able to pass my extra plastic bags along to have longer, more fulfilling lives.

So in the middle of Umatilla County, we have the knowledge of both how to use less plastic — don't forget Yellowhawk's classes to make beeswax food wraps — and how to make used plastic do more. This opens the discussion for other large-scale upcycling or recycling projects. Our country needs onshore plastic, cardboard and electronic recycling. We've got land and people and skills and lots of train tracks. Why not build it here? (Maybe we can talk about that next time.)

Vikiirna Wenzel is a learner and a teacher, somewhere in the middle of East Umatilla County.

VIKIIRNA WENZEL
COMMENT

YOUR VIEWS

Cooperation and negotiation are key

In small towns and rural areas, depending on your neighbors is a way of life. We pride ourselves in taking care of each other when needed, regardless of the things that separate us, like politics or religion.

It would be good for our state senators to take a clue from this cooperative style, so they can work together effectively on legislation that affects all of us. There are important items on Oregon's 2020 legislative agenda, like funding for police and wildfire protection, that are important to all of us and that need to be dealt with conscientiously, not be thrown under the bus by partisan politics.

This year our state senators need to stay in Salem and negotiate all legislation before them in good faith, instead of sowing seeds of mistrust among us and taking off for the hills as they did last year.

Pamela Starling
Mosier

Scott Fairley a rare individual

I want to add my name to the list of people who are mourning the untimely death of one great guy — Scott Fairley. Scott was not a close friend, but you didn't have to be one to be treated like one by Scott. I met him years ago while I was mayor of Irrigon, and he was the governor's representative for Eastern Oregon. Scott would drop in occasionally to see how things were going and what we might need from the state. He genuinely cared about the small towns in Eastern Oregon and did everything he could to help them get grants and to address our city needs.

Scott always had a smile on his face and always seemed glad to run into you. He was one of those rare individuals who never seemed to have a bad day. Scott was one of the very few people who went out of his way to come visit me during my lowest time of fighting cancer. How tragic to be suddenly taken while on vacation and way too early in life. The only thing left to do now is try my best to appreciate his memory and try to bemoan like him.

David Burns
Pendleton

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

U.S. SENATORS

Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-5244
La Grande office: 541-962-7691

Jeff Merkley
313 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-3753
Pendleton office: 541-278-1129

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE

Greg Walden
185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
202-225-6730
La Grande office: 541-624-2400

REPRESENTATIVES

Greg Barreto, District 58
900 Court St. NE, H-38
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1458
Rep.GregBarreto@state.or.us

Greg Smith, District 57
900 Court St. NE, H-482
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1457
Rep.GregSmith@state.or.us

SENATOR

Bill Hansell, District 29
900 Court St. NE, S-423
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1729
Sen.BillHansell@state.or.us

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