

## OUR VIEW

# An important pillar in our democracy

The fight for more transparency is more important now than ever before, and one of our most important jobs as a newspaper is to consistently push to ensure the light of clarity shines into every corner of government.

To some extent we have it pretty lucky in Oregon. The state's open records law allows residents — and newspapers — to seek records that may otherwise be kept secret from the public. The law is a crucial pillar in our democracy, though it is consistently tinkered with by lawmakers.

Just as consistently, newspapers and other legitimate news outlets must remind readers and lawmakers that in a democracy the workings of government and elected leaders are open to public review. That's how democracy works, and remains one of its fundamental themes. The people — not bureaucrats or elected officials — oversee government. Bureaucrats and lawmakers serve at the discretion and pleasure of the people. Not the other way around.

Since the deadly Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, America has gradually — and in some cases, readily — moved away from open government. The terrorists that slammed jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon killed thousands of innocent people, but they also helped trigger a new era of secrecy, where documents and records that should rightfully be accessible to the public are hidden.

Some secrets — even in a democracy — are justifiable. A top-secret military experiment should be shrouded from the public view. Anything that can harm our nation's security and give our enemies an upper hand should be hidden.

Yet, that is most likely the only justifiable secret in a democracy.

As we stated, Oregonians are fortunate in that our public records law allows for a reasoned and precise method to attain records regarding specific subjects that are important to the public. As a rule — there are, of course, always exceptions — bureaucratic institutions, such as governments, err on the side of secrecy always. That means somewhere a person not elected can decide arbitrarily to keep a document hidden.

That is where our public records law comes into play. Make no mistake, the public records process isn't an easy one and, if a specific state agency wants to fight such a request, it can lead to court battles and large expenses.

Why should a public agency fight to keep records away from the public in court? They shouldn't, but they often do.

Nothing is more important in a democracy than transparency. When a government agency or lawmaker fights a public record request, the first question should be: What are they trying to hide?



## A resolution for the miserable month of March



DANIEL  
WATTENBURGER  
HOMEGROWN

March is the worst month of the year, and it's not really that close. It's too long, too cold, and full of false promises.

The start of spring? Don't get your hopes up. This week's forecast notwithstanding, every nice day in March seems to come paired with another that's blustery, rainy, snowy, or otherwise miserable.

March Madness? Two long weekends of basketball we only care about because brackets make us feel like we're participating (and the Final Four and championship game are always in April anyway).

St. Patrick's Day? A shifting holiday that more than half the time lands on a weekday and comes with truly awful culinary traditions of corned beef, cabbage and green beer. Unless you're planning a trip to Heppner, you'd might as well skip it.

Shortest weekend of the year? Check, thanks to daylight saving time.

Federal holidays? Nope, five-day work and school weeks across the board.

Football is over. Baseball hasn't

started. Movies are bad. Taxes are coming due.

That warm glow from the good winter holidays is long gone, and we're stuck in a limbo where the only saving grace is that at least the sun is out a little longer each day, slowly moving us toward better and more interesting times.

It's a lot to deal with, especially in a year when everyone's patience is already worn thin. This March also marks the anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic in Oregon, a year of illness and death and stops and starts and disagreements that have tested our friendships and our faith in our institutions.

COVID has taken from all of us, and we've too often taken it out on each other. I have felt frustrated and helpless and bitter, a bad combination for anything but stewing or lashing out — neither of which are healthy. I have felt disappointed in myself and others, and uneasy about what our disjointed and divided response to the current crisis says about our future.

I used to make it a point not to complain about Mondays or hold any ill will toward them. That may seem strange, coming from a guy who just spent half of his monthly allotment of column inches deriding an arbitrary 31-day period. But aside from my natural aversion to cliché, I felt that if I hated

Mondays, it meant I hated the idea of a new week. And if I hated starting a new week, then there isn't much point in getting out of bed any morning. And that's a depressing thought.

The point is, I need to treat this March like a Monday. I can't merely slog through, keeping my head down and ignoring the opportunities and life in front of me. I can't keep letting the uncertainty of the coming months and years dictate the way I interact with other people.

I have to redouble my efforts to extend gratitude, as well as the benefit of the doubt. Nothing is as simple or as good as it was a year ago, but I can't to add to the discontent.

I know full well that this month will determine Umatilla County's fate for the real spring months, maybe even beyond. I want to be able to confidently circle calendar dates in a better future, like family vacations, the Umatilla County Fair, the Pendleton Round-Up.

But regardless of what comes next, I'm preparing to focus on what is happening now. Cliché as it is, *carpe mensis* — seize the month.

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## YOUR VIEWS

### Why is B2H zigzagging across the state?

When it comes to tax money there is no level of government that doesn't slobber over getting more, even at the loss of land and freedoms to enjoy it by the owners. Such is the case with the visions of tax money flowing into state and county coffers from the unneeded, for profit only, power line from Boardman to Hemingway, Idaho.

B2H is pushing to build this high voltage line with towers up to 150 feet tall across Umatilla, Morrow, Union and other counties of Eastern Oregon.

This unneeded line will be across 100% private property in Umatilla County! When I was in school there used to be a theory that the closest distance between two places is a straight line. If that is still true under Oregon law. I ask why does the proposed line zigzag across, only on private lands in Umatilla County, sometimes almost going backward, to get from A to B?

I am guessing the real reason is "ease" of running over private citizens as opposed to going through all the regulations, paperwork and hearings required if they built on federal, state, county and tribal lands. No less than 700 private landowners

will be displaced of their land should the government/Idaho Power group succeed in their push.

Each of these monster towers, with their crackling, fire-prone lines, will require concrete footings (four for each tower) up to 40 feet deep. In the case of many, including our family, the construction of the towers will require clear-cutting of standing timber, blasting of rock and, in our case, loss of our two main water sources, which provide water for wildlife and cattle all year. Idaho Power will say they will maintain the right-of-ways to stop invasive weeds and little impact on the area, but I say look at the failure to do so on current lines. All one has to do is follow one of the existing line paths and see the garbage, weeds, deep ruts and trespassing that exists.

Both Bonneville Power and Pacific Corp. are considering pulling out of the project at this time. Without their support the rate payers could be on the hook for thousands of dollars should the project fail in any part. Yes folks, that is you even if you are not close to the line.

I encourage private citizens to contact their federal, state and county officials and demand this private for-profit plan be stopped, or at the least have it built in a straight line without the approximately extra 50 miles

added to avoid public and tribal lands.

John Harvey  
Stanfield

### Hermiston's Man of the Year an easy choice

This year, the selection committee for the Hermiston Distinguished Citizens Awards banquet hit a home run with the persons/entities that were recognized and honored.

At previous banquets, the Woman of the Year and Man of the Year awards were saved for the end. This year, the Man of the Year award was first. Why? Here's why — because Ken Huber immediately left the celebration to get on the road and assist with bringing home our friend and co-worker who recently lost his battle with COVID-19.

Ken arrived at the fire station on Westland Road around 8:50 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 24, and was greeted by numerous police vehicles, fire vehicles, and personal vehicles of friends all wanting to pay respect to our friend, Glen Phillips. Ken then participated in a procession, driving Glen on a ride past the police and fire station one last time.

Hermiston is a great place because of selfless people like Ken Huber.

Jason Edmiston  
Hermiston

### EDITORIALS

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

### LETTERS

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published.

### SEND LETTERS TO:

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