

OUR VIEW

Pass bill to ensure COVID-19 transparency

Oregon state Sen. Mike Dembrow, D-Portland, has been noisy about the need for the Oregon Health Authority to be transparent about the COVID-19 data it releases.

His bill, Senate Bill 719, would ensure that transparency. And though the bill should have long since passed the Oregon Legislature, it would seem to be in good hands. It's in the committee Dembrow chairs, Joint Ways and Means.

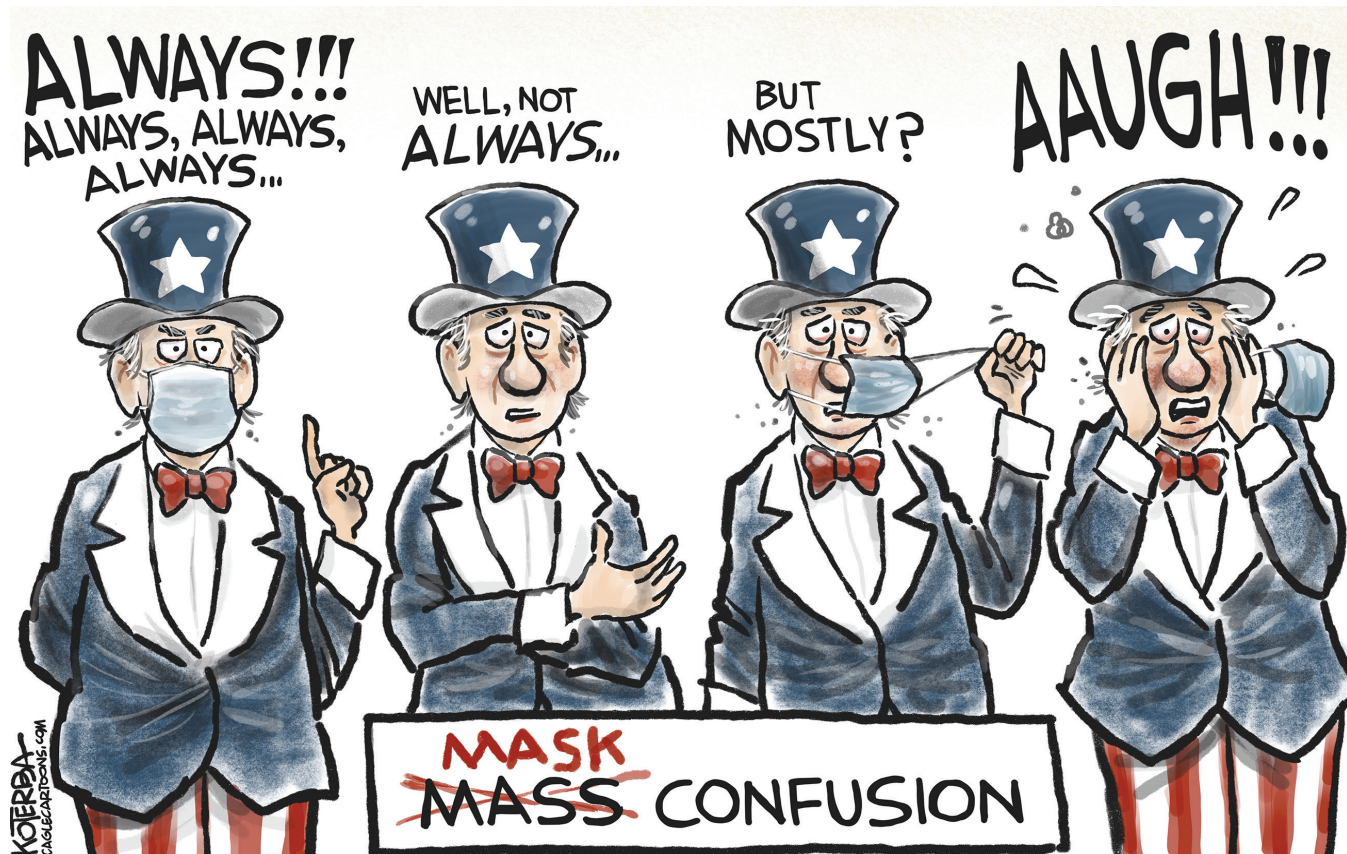
The central premise of Oregon's public records law is that the public has a right to know what its government is doing. Meetings are open to the public. Government documents and the data behind them should be open to the public if requested.

As good as Oregon's law is, it teems with exceptions. One is for public health investigations, Oregon Revised Statutes 433.008. It reads in part: "Information obtained by the Oregon Health Authority or a local public health administrator in the course of an investigation of a reportable disease or disease outbreak is confidential and is exempt from disclosure." So when journalists and others have requested information about testing rates by ZIP code, for instance, the request was denied.

ORS 433.008 doesn't mean that the information must be denied to the public. It means it can be denied. And when government can deny the public information, it often does.

Dembrow's bill simply requires the Oregon Health Authority or local public health administrator to release aggregate information about reportable disease investigations that does not identify individual cases or sources of information after receiving a public records request. This would not only apply to COVID-19. It would also apply to salmonella and E. coli outbreaks.

State officials are trying to encourage Oregonians to get vaccinated and continue to obey COVID restrictions and guidelines. It would send the wrong signal for the Legislature to now tell Oregonians: "Let's keep the secrecy" and not pass this bill.



Vaccines and prescribed fire



BILL ANEY

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

It is prescribed burn season in the Blue Mountains. Springtime conditions allow land managers to use fire safely to reduce fuels, improve habitat and make our forests healthier. Over the course of my career with the Forest Service, I loved prescribed burn season, as it was tremendously fulfilling to see fire returned to its place in the ecosystem.

I retired from that career several years ago, and since April 2020 I have been working with Umatilla County Public Health to limit the spread of COVID-19 through contact tracing and vaccination clinics. It occurred to me recently that the relationship between prescribed burning and wildfire is in some ways like the relationship between the pandemics and vaccinations. I love torturing analogies to see if they can help me think and learn about complex problems, so bear with me here.

One of the reasons for prescribed burning is to reduce the risk of large, destructive wildfires. Much of our Blue Mountains is at risk of such a wildfire, with millions of acres overgrown with small trees and brush. Eventually these acres will burn, whether by a planned (prescribed) fire or an uncontrolled wildfire, and when an acre burns it is at least for a few years protected from another fire. Fire ecologists tell us that when 15-20% of a landscape has been treated, the remainder of the area is more protected because fire has less

ability to spread.

That sounds a lot like herd immunity to me. Epidemiologists tell us that when 70-75% of the population is immune to a particular disease, there is much less risk of spread to the unprotected. Individuals in the population become immune by either infection or vaccination. Infection in my analogy is like wildfire — uncontrolled, potentially dangerous, but effective in building immunity.

Vaccination is like prescribed fire; more controlled, with fewer adverse effects, and also effective in building immunity. Infection combines with vaccination to build herd immunity just like wildfire combines with prescribed fire to better protect landscapes.

No one has the resources to do enough prescribed burning to eliminate the risk of wildfire in the backcountry. Prescribed burning and the forest thinning that is sometimes required to do this safely requires much more personnel and equipment that our agencies can provide. The prescribed burn windows, where conditions are right for an effective yet safe burn project, are limited. And of course, there is a limit to public tolerance for smoke from the hundreds of thousands of acres of burning that would be required each burn season.

So, land managers prioritize. What areas are most vulnerable to wildfire spread, and where would the consequences of a wildfire be greatest? Should they prioritize treatments near homes and communities? Or lower elevations where fuels are drier and the winds blow stronger? Or near valuable natural resources like remnant stands of old growth ponderosa pine or salmon spawning streams?

This reminds me of how health

authorities had to prioritize the early vaccination efforts, recognizing that we could not vaccinate everyone at once. Health care providers and teachers were vaccinated early because they are most exposed to the virus, and we could reduce future spread by protecting these people. The elderly and those with underlying conditions were also vaccinated early because they are at greater risk of severe effects from the virus.

There is at least one key difference between the tools of prescribed burning and vaccinations. The vaccine is now available to nearly all adults in the U.S., but an alarming number of people are choosing not to get the vaccine. I want to be absolutely clear about this: In doing so, we are surrendering to the epidemic. It will continue to spread, like wildfire, until we reach herd immunity through infection (and suffering, hospitalization and deaths). In the meantime, we are prolonging the time of mask-wearing, social distancing, travel restrictions, and the impacts on businesses, schools and churches. This is lunacy, as we have an alternative, much safer way to protect each other through vaccination.

So this spring, when we see smoke rising from prescribed burns in the Blue Mountains, be gladdened to know that land managers are doing their part to manage the real risk of destructive wildfire. In the same way celebrate when our friends and neighbors make the responsible choice to get the vaccine, as they are doing their part to help us reach herd immunity through vaccination instead of infection.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

YOUR VIEWS

Gomez would be a valuable asset to Hermiston schools

I have had the pleasure of knowing Lili Gomez and her family for the past two decades and it is because of this connection that I know Lili is an exceptional choice for Hermiston School Board Position 3. Her background in education, knowledge of business management and cultural competence makes her ideally suited to serve our district's diverse community.

Education has always been a high priority in Lili's life. The daughter of immigrant parents, she had been in the Hermiston School District's English as a Second Language program through middle school. Her enthusiasm for improving the educational experience for others started during this time while serving as a tutor for younger students.

As a first-generation college student, she has since earned a degree in business administration, and continued on to work as a teaching assistant and English language teacher.

With over half of the district's students coming from Hispanic/Latino families, Ms. Gomez's education and experience would make her a valuable asset on the school board. She has the

LETTERS DEADLINE FOR MAY 18 ELECTIONS

The East Oregonian does not run endorsements of more than 400 words. The East Oregonian will institute a deadline for letters to the editor, so we can be fair with all the letters we receive and allow for responses before Election Day, if necessary. We run local letters of endorsement on a first-come, first-served basis. Please submit your endorsement letters to the editor by 5 p.m. on Friday, May 7. You can email them to editor@eastoregonian.com, or mail them to East Oregonian, c/o Andrew Cutler, 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton, OR 97801. We will publish our last letters on Saturday, May 15. Any letters received after the deadline will not run. Election Day is May 18.

passion, understanding and cultural awareness needed to work with the rest of the board members as they guide our staff, students and their families moving forward.

Please join me in voting for Lili Gomez for HSD Board Position 3.

Michelle Kane
Hermiston

Support the first responders that support you

I'm proud to be part of an area that cares about our first responders. And now is a time we can show our gratitude for what they do as we create a safer community.

Bond Measure 30-148 funds critical and necessary equipment for our firefighters and EMTs. Budget shortfalls

impact their ability to safely do their jobs, and this bond will alleviate that.

Emergency personnel are on the clock 24/7, and having adequate housing for both men and women and an upgraded alert system will make sure they're prepared to their jobs. The bond will also replace vehicles in the emergency fleet that need to be phased out so responder can meet the needs of a growing region.

Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 leaders wrote this bond to prioritize the most necessary investments, and has committed to an oversight committee to ensure the dollars are spent as intended.

For all these reasons, I'm voting in support of Measure 30-148. Please join me in supporting our first responders.

GINNY HOLTHUS
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.

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