

## OUR VIEW

# Disclaimer needed for our public records law

Oregon's public records law should come with a disclaimer. It should be like one of those car ads on the radio where after you hear about the deal, the announcer goes rapid fire through all the conditions that can make you wonder how good a deal it really is.

That's because Oregon law discriminates against people on access to public records.

If you are rich or have a rich backer, the fees for getting access to public records are no problem. If you are not rich or work for a company that makes slim profits or no profits, Oregon's law essentially says you are not worthy of the same level of access to records that are purportedly public.

Oregon's Public Records Advisory Council is developing legislation aimed at improving the equality of access.

Children get public education in Oregon, no matter what their socio-economic status. You get to check books out of the public library, no matter what your socio-economic status. Even Pendleton Parks and Recreation tries to ensure everyone can participate in its programs.

But access to public records, that is based on your ability to pay. Of course, a lot of things are like that. It's hard for most people to find the time and money to pay a lot of attention to what's going on in local, state or national government and try to influence it. Being rich helps. Being poor certainly does not.

A police report. Details about new development in your neighborhood. Plans for trails along the river. Those are all things the public has a right to. All those things are usually pretty easy to get and at low or no cost.

What if you want records that show the negotiations with big tech companies over how much water they will use in their new plants in Hood River? What if you want all the records that show how the police interacted leading up to a protest at Butte Park? What if you are worried your government is doing something it shouldn't? Do you think getting access to those records would be easy or cheap? Most likely not. People with money would be able to at least try. The barrier of fees would stop some from even trying.

Oregon's Public Records Advisory Council has been holding meetings and listening to testimony about this issue for months. Last week, it talked about what possible legislation might say.

One big change: Requester tiers. The type of requester would change what could be charged. Commercial interests would have to pay for the actual cost of any searching, duplication and review of documents. Media and public interest organizations, educational and non-commercial scientific organizations would only have to pay for duplication. Anyone else, including members of the general public, would have to pay for search and duplication.

One additional requirement that is being considered is no fees for a requester's own files or records. Another is that fees would be waived or reduced by at least 25% if the requester is a member of the media and the request is made in the public interest. There's much more to the proposal than we have listed. You can see a draft in very preliminary form here, [tinyurl.com/PRACchanges](https://tinyurl.com/PRACchanges).

A clear outcome of such changes is that costs of public records would shift from individual members of the public seeking information to government, which of course, is funded by the public as a whole. It may also increase demand for records because requesters would not have to pay as much. That may increase the burden on government staff with more requests. But if they are public records, shouldn't the law ensure all the members of the public has reasonable access to them?

You can see more about the Public Records Advisory Council here, [tinyurl.com/ORprac](https://tinyurl.com/ORprac).



# One nation, incompatible



DANIEL WATTENBURGER  
HOMEGROWN

Independence Day was created to celebrate the patriotic beliefs we hold year-round and give voice to our shared vision for the U.S.A.

But when we stand for the flag on the Fourth of July, are we standing in solidarity with our fellow Americans? Or are we standing for some idealized version of a country that matches our current cluster of beliefs?

Healthy disagreement is a sign of a healthy democracy. The big idea that sparked what's good about this country is that each person has a right to their opinion, and a right to express it. It allows us to grow and change as individuals and as a nation. Our strength isn't in the leaders who make the rules but in the collective power and voice of citizens. Politicians come and go, but we, the people, hold responsibility for our own future.

And even when we've failed on that big idea, the rights enshrined in the Constitution have allowed us to get better. We have moved forward, lifting more boats with the same tide.

But distrust and disunity threaten to undo the progress we've made. Some like to simplify the issue into red states and blue states, but in Eastern Oregon

we know it's not so easy. There are conservative pockets in liberal states, where our votes and voices run contrary to the state ideologies. The reverse is true in many "red" states with mid-sized urban centers. There is room for individual disagreement, and no broad brushes.

And what does the red and blue really matter if we're willing to respect one another? There is a current climate of blasting every opposing idea as a fundamental attack on our values. By hyping up the volume and intensity of our disagreements, we don't leave any room for agreement in the middle – or even agreeing to disagree. Giving an inch is the same as surrender, and some would tell us that every battle is for our nation's soul.

Much of this is noise and bluster. There are some fundamental disagreements that must be worked out, and it's uncomfortable to watch the country move in a direction that cuts against our personal beliefs or what we see as its best course. But it's civically exhausting to feel that every item on the party platform is worth our full-throated support. We need to be able to argue a fair case, listen to the best version of the opposing viewpoint and understand that our country is still evolving.

There are reasons for hope. But it will require some big changes.

For one, we must become more technologically literate to distinguish facts from falsehoods when they're presented online. Digital media has turned the

age-old problem of disinformation into a rapidly spreading virus. The antidote is specific education about media literacy and accountability for bad actors.

On that note, we need to expect more from our leaders, and that goes double for leaders in our own camps. Allowing and encouraging disingenuous, name calling, clout chasing individuals to become our standard bearers reduces our ability to truly think and develop our own principles.

But most of all, we need to learn our own dependence on one another and the role it has played in making us the most powerful nation in the world. As a country we have been aimless, lacking a shared definition of what it means to be an American and unable to agree on our goals. This leaves it to the leaders to set their own priorities and campaign on our fears rather than building consensus on how to reach our agreed upon destination.

There is no quick cure for our deep divisions, and we will never truly meet in the ideological middle. But we can all find purpose and pride in living in a country that continues to set new goals and takes measurable steps toward meeting them.

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## YOUR VIEWS

### Taxi contract, who really benefits?

During the recent Pendleton City Council meeting, the local taxi/city bus contract renewal was up for approval, and the general public was expecting changes to address the current inadequate service.

Rather than any substantial changes to improve service, officials concentrated on increasing taxpayer subsidies to cover increased fuel costs rather than raise taxi-ticket rates. Allowing Uber to operate locally on a temporary basis, despite protests from Elite Taxi, was the city's only recent attempt to improve/expand service.

Public sentiment continues to question the wisdom of renewing a contract that increases the burden on taxpayers without any provisions to improve the public transportation system. The answer provided by the program administrator was pretty simple. Elite Taxi was the lowest bidder, in fact they were the only bidder.

The bid requirements specified the programs administrator made it virtually impossible for anyone else to submit a competitive bid. It doesn't take a brain surgeon for those in the public transportation business to realize that owning their vehicles requires factoring in replacement costs.

The responsibility of assembling and retaining a qualified staff requires paying a living wage with benefits including paid vacations, healthcare and a retirement program. Submitting a competitive bid under these constraints would be an exercise in futility for anyone, except Elite Taxi.

The program administrator would have you believe that the lowest bidder, in this instance, provides the best bang for the buck. However, since Elite Taxi is heavily subsidized by using publicly owned vehicles and paying what is considered near poverty level wages without benefits, taxpayers are saddled with providing additional government programs for free or subsidized healthcare, child care, food stamps, rental and utility assistance, etc.

So who are the winners in this approach to public transportation? The taxpayers that pick up the tab? Not likely. Our city officials? Also not likely. It's doubtful they even use the service. Those unused handicapped vans wasting away in the Pendleton City Hall parking lot are a constant reminder of an inefficient, expensive program, an embarrassing waste of resources. Their latest priority? It's the construction of a \$3 million building to hide those vehicles from the public eye.

The only winners seem to be the

owners of Elite Taxi with a new contract, the Pendleton city manager with a large pay increase to cover increased fuel costs for his daily commutes and the Elite Taxi drivers with a 75 cent raise in the minimum wage.

**Rick Rohde**  
Pendleton

### Private insurance companies never asked what we wanted, needed

Thank you for your editorial of June 23 outlining some questions regarding the Joint Task Force for Universal Health Care. As the editorial points out, there are questions and concerns. Right now, the task force is taking input and questions from us, the public. When did our private insurance companies ask us what we wanted, needed and preferred from them?

Many questions are addressed on this link for the Task Force: [tinyurl.com/ORhealthmeetings](https://tinyurl.com/ORhealthmeetings).

To become involved with solutions: [www.hcao.org](https://www.hcao.org).

Let's put our heads together and come up with the best solution for all Oregonians.

**Teresa Smith-Dixon**  
La Grande