

We need more government watchdogs

One thing we learned this past year is that Wallowa County residents on average do a poor job of playing the role of government watchdogs. Nowhere was this more clear than when Wallowa County abruptly announced this past spring it would eliminate the county library.

Actually, several meetings at which the plan was discussed were held prior to the announcement, but no one attended or paid any attention.

There have been other surprise moments for residents at the municipal level as the year progressed.

Poke your head into almost any county, city or school board meeting, and you will discover an appalling lack of curiosity about what tax-supported entities are up to. Yet they spend millions of our hard-earned dollars each year.

For the new year, it's time for all of us — including the Chieftain — to resolve to do a better job at being at the forefront of holding the feet of elected officials to the fire.

That does not mean being obnoxious or confrontational. It

does mean asking the difficult questions that can occasionally be uncomfortable to answer. It means knowing what's being considered and how those decisions can best be guided by those who vote and pay taxes.

Most of our governmental entities are small, and it can be difficult at times to follow the action. First thing you need is a scorecard. That's called an agenda.

For each legally convened meeting, public bodies must produce an agenda and within reason, stick to it.

Some of the agendas are online, some aren't.

Many school district, cities and the county will add you to a distribution list if you wish to receive their agendas.

At minimum, agendas are posted somewhere, and you may need to do a bit of investigation to find out where.

In most cases, an agenda comes with a packet of information to support the agenda items.

These packets are available to anyone who requests one. You may not receive it until five minutes before the meeting, but it is public

information. You have a right to follow along with the board, council or commission as the discussion is taking place.

Most of our public bodies have a procedure for receiving public input. Some are more formal than others, but most make every effort to accommodate taxpayers who show up with notes in hand. Determine the rules and then follow them. Don't expect exceptions to be made for you simply because you are uninformed.

Always be factual in your presentations and discuss the issues, not the personalities involved. No one responds well to name-calling.

If you expect your input to be taken seriously, be informed and prepared to answer questions. Provide a written copy of your remarks to everyone present.

A final strategy, enlist others of like-minded concern. There is strength in numbers.

Our form of democracy requires participation. Without it, you get what you get.

This coming year, get off the bench and into the game when it comes to seeing progress in Wallowa County. Take an interest. Be informed. Share what you learn.

By the way, Wallowa County



begins its budget process in February when budget sheets are given to department heads.

The first county budget committee meeting is usually in late March. Mark your calendars.

EDITORIAL

Voice of the Chieftain

POINT AND COUNTERPOINT: THE TAX PLAN

Tax reform plan 'fixed' what ain't broken

Paul Capelli, a high school classmate of mine, began his life in humble circumstances. He was born in Italy, where his father died when Paul was two.

Paul's widowed mother emigrated with him to the United States a few years later, and they settled in a blue collar neighborhood in Boston. She worked in factories and he sold newspapers on street corners to make ends meet.

Through a combination of a good education, hard work, creativity and a few breaks along the way, Paul eventually climbed the ladder on Madison Avenue, where he developed a successful international advertising agency that handled huge accounts for companies such as Coca Cola and GoDaddy. Paul now lives in a restored villa in Italy with his aging mother where he and his partner host vacation travelers and manage vineyards and olive groves.

Unlike many fortunate people, including some prominent politicians who like to boast about the American Dream but who never had to scramble for it personally, Paul has not forgotten where he came from. He and some of my other high school friends communicate these days on Facebook, where Paul and I are apt to share our mutually held progressive

views on politics.

About a week ago, before the passage of the behemoth tax reform package that Republicans just rushed through Congress in time for Christmas and before their slim majority in the Senate was due to shrink even further, Paul shared this succinct take on Trump's bill: "Before you mess with my taxes, I would like to see yours."

Would that really have been too much to ask for? Every other presidential nominee in the last 50 years, and every other sitting president since Kennedy has shared their tax returns with the American people. But Donald Trump, whose potential and real conflicts of interest and sources of income should have been and still are a source of great concern to anyone who understands why our founding fathers forbade emoluments, was brazen enough to simply refuse to disclose that information, and collectively the voters gave him a free pass on that, just as they did when he bragged about his own sexual assaults.

Have we become so jaded after witnessing one indignity after another coming in the form of juvenile, narcissistic tweets from the Oval Office that we have lost our capacity for outrage and our sense of decency and fairness?

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Pro-growth tax plan will offer 'real relief'

Pro-growth tax reform is on its way to hardworking, middle-class Americans. And it's about time.

The biggest percentage of tax reductions next year will go to those earning between \$20,000 and \$50,000 a year. That's according to the Joint Committee on Taxation. An eastern Oregon family earning the median income of approximately \$50,000 a year will pay about \$1,300 less next year. Over the next eight years that's a savings of \$10,400 for that family.

What does that mean across the country? A typical American family of four earning \$73,000 a year, will see a 58 percent reduction in their federal taxes. That's real relief.

Moreover, by nearly doubling the standard deduction, even fewer Oregonians will have to hire an accountant to search the 73,954 pages of the federal tax code only to discover darn few of the special interest loopholes apply to them. We're closing the loopholes and making filing your taxes as easy as filling out a postcard.

For those who choose to itemize their taxes, I worked with my colleagues to maintain provisions important to Oregonians such as preserving the ability to deduct medical expenses, and a combination of both prop-

erty and state income taxes up to \$10,000 — helpful in our high-tax state. For students and teachers, I also successfully fought to maintain the deductions for student loans and teaching expenses.

The IRS should have new tax withholding tables in employers' hands before February. Once that happens, taxpayers will begin to see more going into their pockets, and less going to the Washington, D.C., bureaucracy.

In addition to providing historic and meaningful individual tax relief to Oregon families, this measure is also designed to rekindle job growth. Few in Congress were job creators. My wife and I spent more than 20 years as small business owners in the Columbia Gorge. I can tell you from first-hand experience of growing a business and meeting a payroll, passage of this Tax Cuts and Jobs Act will help small businesses, family farms and ranches, and those contractors with a truck and backhoe expand and grow.

Oregon's breweries and wineries get substantial relief from the beer and wine excise taxes thanks to Republican Senate provisions I fought to include in the final bill. These savings will let our craft brewers and wine-

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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

John McColgan



GUEST COLUMN

Rep. Greg Walden

Considering resolutions and predictions

Two things come to mind when I think of the new year approaching. First is resolutions. Second is predictions.

I made a resolution some years ago to stop making new year's resolutions. When it comes to predictions, well, I'm no Jeane Dixon. Remember her?

For as far back as this sort of thing has been tracked, "losing weight" and "getting healthy" have been the top resolutions for Americans. It's easier said than done.

If you have had a health club membership for any number of years, you are aware of what happens right after Jan. 1. Suddenly, the place is swarming with people desperately trying to make their resolution come true.

They sweat and pant, mostly overdoing it. By the end of the second week, they're tired, sore and miserable. Suddenly the couch seems much more inviting than the elliptical machine.

By the end of February, they're gone and the regulars once again have the place to themselves. It

doesn't have to be this way. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Start slow, enjoy yourself and work a bit harder each week than you did the week before. In six months time, you will notice a difference. The important thing is to heed Winston Churchill's advice and "never give up."

Eat fewer calories than you burn, and get 30 minutes of heart-pumping exercise at least five times a week and you'll be well on your way to success.

Predictions are another matter entirely. There are the no-brainer predictions. Like, I predict right here and right now that a large rodeo is going to be held in Joseph in July. There's a high likelihood of that coming to pass.

Beyond those certainty items, things are much more nebulous.

Everyone seems to want to predict the weather. It's going to be

hot summer. It's going to be a cool summer. Next fall will be snowy.

There's probably no more famous weather forecaster than the Old Farmer's Almanac. It seems to me, the key to their success is being just vague enough.

In press materials, the almanac claims 96.3 percent accuracy for its "2015 predictions of a bleak and biting winter." Overall, they claim accuracy rates around 80 percent but have never published evidence backing that claim.

I remember my parents and grandparents putting a good bit of stock in the almanac. It was never scientific enough for my young and skeptical mind. Now older and wiser, I have concluded no one can predict weather — even 24 hours out. I am amazed the meteorologists can be right less than half the time and still keep their jobs. Think of how that would work for

a newspaper editor.

Then you have those who try to predict winners in major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the various events in the Winter Olympics coming up in February.

It's all a shot in the dark from my perspective. Give me a "sure thing" any day of the week.

Let's go back to resolutions for a minute. Here's one I'd like to pass along.

To any agency, group, club, church or organization in Wallowa County that operates a website, please make a resolution to update your content. Almost daily in our search for corroboration and information here at the Chieftain, we bump into a website that hasn't been updated for months or in some cases years.

Speaking as someone responsible for updating our website on a weekly or more often basis, I can testify it can be time-consuming. But it's worth it.

Here's wishing all of our readers a successful and prosperous 2018.



WAHL TO WALL

Paul Wahl

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Hurricane Creek Grange lends support to Lostine River Corridor project

The membership of the Hurricane Creek Grange 608 supports efforts to improve public safety along the Lostine River Corridor.

We have followed this issues as it has evolved and has been reported in the Chieftain. Though we are not in a position to gauge whether any specific legal issue raised against the U.S. Forest Service has merit, we are in full support of efforts to reduce fuel loads and preserve the Lostine Corridor for current and future generations.

A recent presentation at a Grange meeting by Gary and Sue Willis, Lostine homeowners, and Nils Christoffersen, Wallowa Resources Executive Director, convinced us that this project must move forward with intention.

Realizing how much of the West was burn in recent years, the Grange membership encourages resolution of any issues hindering this public safety project from implementation.

Clarann Witty
Joseph

Witty is president of Hurricane Creek Grange 608 in Joseph.

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