Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Treat all records requests equally

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

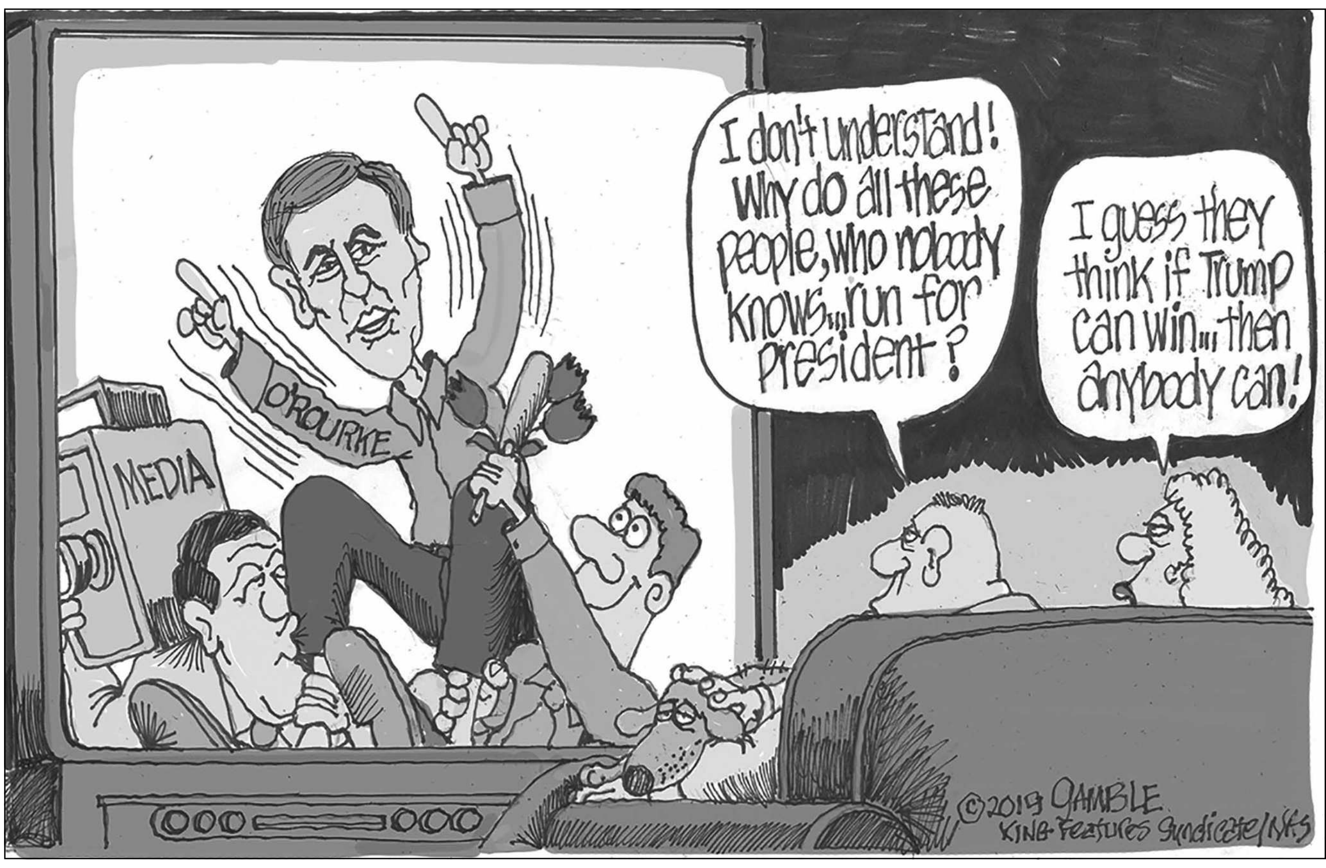
The Oregon Legislature has, for now, at least a dozen bills dealing with public records on its plate. One, House Bill 2345, would require state agencies to charge members of the media only half what they charge the public to fulfill a public records request. It's a bad idea.

The measure is sponsored by Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie. It contains an emergency clause, though it's difficult to see just what the emergency might be. And, while it would go into effect for state agencies immediately, it would be applied to local governments and service districts in 2021.

There's no reason to force the state to treat the press differently than it treats anyone else when it comes to public records. We, along with plumbers and teachers and candlestick makers, share a right to know what public agencies and officials are doing, and our right ranks no differently than theirs.

Rather than order officials to discount public records for members of the press, Rep. Power and her cohorts should ask themselves this: If public records are, in fact, public, why should anyone get special treatment when it comes to seeing them?

A better approach is to treat all requests equally. They should be made available at the lowest possible cost and as quickly as possible, not just to reporters and editorial writers, but to everyone. We in the news media, fry cooks and physicians are all members of the public. Nobody should get a discount. This bill should be allowed to die.



Your views

Concerned about accuracy of allegations against coach

I've known Warren Wilson for nearly 40 years — 20 as a girls' basketball coach at Pine-Eagle when we played his teams from Wallowa, and another 20 as a friend. I got to know him even better after he and his wife retired, and after her being diagnosed with frontal lobe dementia, he moved to Baker City so his wife could get care at Settlers Park.

I find the latest charges against him very troubling and so out of character from the Warren I know. He had the utmost respect from every coach I knew and also from the many kids he taught and coached. He was honestly loved by his players.

I don't claim to know everything, but as a former coach, I worry about injustice. We read on a regular basis, kids who don't get enough playing time, kids who don't make the starting team, or parents who think their kid is the next pro athlete. So they blame the coach.

A school board's job, and the administrators', is to make sure a proper investigation takes place. Interview the coach, his fellow coaches, his immediate supervisors, and as many players as possible who played for him, as well as any other place he may have coached. I think parents of all these kids should also be interviewed.

I'm not certain most of these things happened. I was truly surprised the public hearing was held during high school practice when kids couldn't be there and conveniently when the baseball team was out of town.

We are talking about a person's reputation being ruined by allegations that may not be true. A thorough investigation with so much at stake is essential.

A very concerned ex-coach.

Chuck Peterson
Baker City

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

What happens to a nation whose citizens are cowed

Please read this quote from Edward R. Murrow. This is what America is now. "A nation of sheep will beget a government of wolves."

Pat Guymon
Baker City

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Forest management and the best laid plans

JAYSON JACOBY

The federal government has rarely finished a task in a year that couldn't be stretched over a decade.

It is not, and I'm being charitably imprecise here, an organization renowned for its alacrity.

But though the entire gargantuan apparatus that is the federal government habitually hews close to the reptilian end of the tortoise-and-hare scale, the Forest Service's attempt to approve new management plans for the three national forests in the Blue Mountains deserves its own subcategory of sluggishness.

Never mind the tortoise.

The Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision "process" — the quotation marks are necessary because process implies a certain amount of progress — is the bureaucratic equivalent to a narcoleptic sloth with a heavy Quaalude habit.

The Forest Service, to widespread surprise but also widespread applause (about which more later), last week withdrew the revised forest plans.

They were supposed to replace the current management plans for the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests, plans which date to 1990.

That was more than a generation ago.

(And two generations of President Bushes.)

I happen to have a copy of the Wallowa-Whitman's existing plan, some of its papers appropriately faded with age, and in perusing it I was nearly overwhelmed by nostalgia at the document's absence of email addresses and URLs.

The thing is as incongruous as a rotary dial phone, or a TV set that weighs as much as a yearling elk.

The Forest Service generally tries to adopt new plans for national forests every 10 to 15 years.

Clearly the word "deadline" does not have the same definition in Washington, D.C., as it has in my office.

I don't mean to suggest the feds haven't been hard at it, lo these many years.

They've been working on the new forest plans for about 15 years, after all. And it's not as if the Forest Service has nothing to show for its investment.

(An investment that only another federal agency, the Government Accounting Office, likely has the fortitude to estimate, and what a depressing audit that would be.)

The revised forest plans constitute a mass of words that would humble any pair of 19th century Russian novelists you care to name.

The whole thing, rendered in paper rather than the comparatively svelte digital version, weighs about as much, well, as a yearling elk (I believe in squeezing as much out of a clumsy comparison as possible).

The saying about politics making strange bedfellows occurs to me here as it appears that the withdrawn forest plans make for, if anything, even stranger mattress companions.

People with diametrically opposed ideas about how the three national forests should be managed reacted with something like glee to the announcement of the plans' withdrawal.

Bill Harvey, the Baker County Commission chairman who criticizes the Forest Service for allowing too few trees to be cut, was pleased.

And so was Karen Coulter, director of the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project, who has argued for many years that the agency cuts too many trees, or at least the wrong trees in the wrong places.

An optimist might suggest then that the Forest Service, having proposed something so widely reviled, has carved out that most elusive niche, the compromise.

That's not an illogical conclusion.

The proposed forest plans did call for more logging than has happened over the past two decades.

And statistically speaking the plans represented a middle ground between two other alternatives that Forest Service officials considered.

One of those alternatives — the one Coulter preferred, although she wasn't completely satisfied with it — proposed comparatively little logging but a substantial increase in acres designated as wilderness.

A second alternative, by contrast, outlined a nearly five-fold boost in logging levels, and no additional wilderness, an approach that Harvey and many other local officials and residents would endorse.

But a more cynical view — mine, for instance — insists on pointing out that the National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to consider a wide range of alternative strategies for managing public land, which makes it relatively easy to choose something in between.

The more pressing question, it seems to me, is whether the Forest Service is capable of producing management plans that it's willing to defend no matter how loud the objections.

I'm skeptical.

And I'm skeptical mainly because of the reasons that Chris French, the acting deputy chief of the Forest Service who ordered the withdrawal of the plans, cited.

French noted, for instance, that during the 15 years the plans were being assembled, there were "a number of changes in organizations, stakeholders, and key Forest Service staff."

But those changes are all but certain to happen during any 15-year period.

French also said that the proposed plans "are very difficult to understand, and I am concerned that there will be ongoing confusion and disagreement as to how each revised plan is to be implemented."

I've read a goodly number of Forest Service plans over the years, most of them rather less verbose than the revised forest plans, and I found pretty much all of them, to borrow French's words, "difficult to understand."

I daresay the Forest Service could spend as little as a year, or as long as a century, preparing a forest management plan and the resulting document would inevitably prompt "confusion" and "disagreement."

Although I don't argue that the years, and untold thousands of dollars, the Forest Service has invested in this exercise were for naught, I'm not convinced the end result will be quite as significant as it might seem.

Here's why: There's ample reason to believe that the actual effect of forest plans — how they influence what happens on the ground — won't be as monumental as the immense effort expended on their creation would imply.

The Wallowa-Whitman's 1990 plan is a fine example. Then as now, logging was a major issue, and the 1990 plan laid out a schedule of harvesting about 140 million board-feet of timber from the forest every year.

But the Wallowa-Whitman hasn't come close to that level since 1990, the very year the plan was enacted. In most years since, the forest hasn't managed to sell even one-third of that timber volume.

There are multiple reasons for the discrepancy. Salmon and steelhead runs were given federal protection. The Clinton administration wasn't as aggressive in cutting public timber as its two immediate predecessors. Legal challenges by environmental groups thwarted some timber sales.

The point is that external factors can, and in some cases almost immediately will, render the most thoroughly considered management plan as irrelevant as, let's say, the rotary dial phone.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.