

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Penalize late responses to requests for public records

Editorial from **The (Bend) Bulletin:**

Oregon courts have repeatedly affirmed the public’s right to public information, but many government institutions fail to comply with requests.

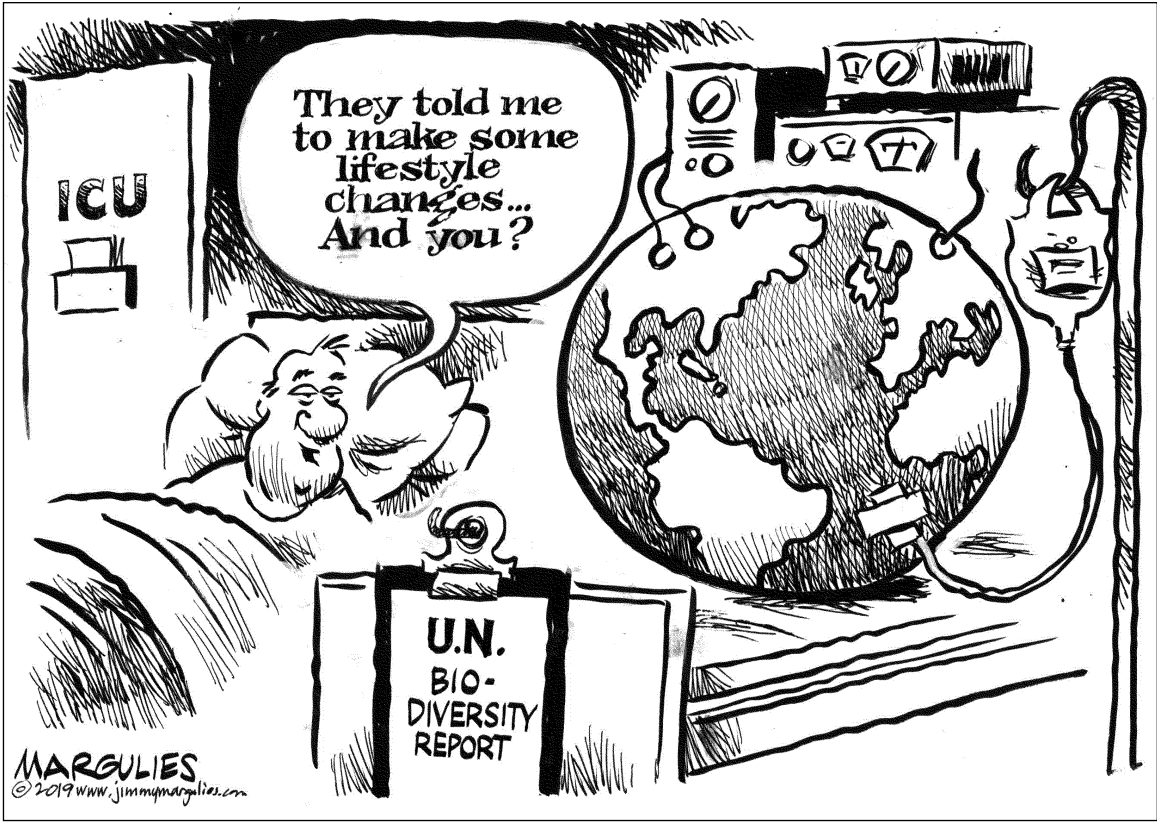
Legislative reforms in 2017 added a time limit. Problems persist.

House Bill 2353 won’t stop public bodies from failing to comply with the law, though, it does put additional pressure on them by adding a fine of \$200. Under the bill, a public body may be required “to pay a penalty of \$200 to the requester if the Attorney General, district attorney or court determines that the public body responded to the request with undue delay or failed to respond to the request.” A fee waiver or fee reduction may also be ordered.

Prompt and proper disclosure of public information is essential for Oregonians to understand what their government is doing. For instance, the state’s Department of Human Services has faced lawsuits and criticism for the way it cares for foster children. We requested information last year about how it was making progress on improving. It didn’t respond within the 15 days mandated by the law to even give an estimate of when the request would be fulfilled. Internal DHS emails we later received showed the agency’s leadership was more worried about how the information might be seen, rather than being open with the public. This year, Gov. Kate Brown finally got so fed up with the agency’s performance she set up an oversight board to get directly involved in how DHS operates.

That’s just one example. Testimony on the bill offers more.

When Oregonians make public records requests it takes time and effort. If an agency ignores or unfairly dismisses the request, it can cost the requester more time and money to hire a lawyer to help get the agency to act. Public bodies should not be able to violate the law without knowing they may have to pay a token fine. The bill has passed the House. It should pass the Senate and become law.



GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The Philadelphia Inquirer:

Attorney General William Barr’s shameful handling of the Mueller report and his misleading testimony in Congress underscores the need for further hearings regarding Russia’s interference in the 2016 election and the role of all the president’s men.

Barr has disgraced himself in his written summary of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III’s report on Russian interference and possible obstruction of justice by President Trump — and in his evasive and inaccurate testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Instead of performing his sworn duties as the nation’s top law enforcement officer, Barr has morphed into Trump’s personal defense attorney, raising questions about who is representing the American people.

Barr’s four-page summary of Mueller’s report released in March was quick to exonerate Trump and his associates regarding any conspiracy with Russia leading up to the 2016 election. Barr also said Trump did not obstruct justice even though Mueller’s report documented 10 acts that could constitute obstruction.

At the Senate hearing on Wednesday, Barr shockingly admitted he did not read the underlying evidence in Mueller’s 448-page report before rushing to his conclusions in his letter. Sen. Kamala Harris’ questioning of Barr is worth watching to see how far Barr has gone to protect Trump.

Barr also stammered through — and did not deny — questions from Harris as to whether Trump has ever asked him to investigate his enemies — like he did with former Attorney General Jeff Sessions. It was an alarming exchange for an attorney general who is supposed to be guided by a government of laws and not of men.

Instead Barr has chosen to mislead Congress and the public. At a House hearing last month, Barr testified under oath that he was not aware of any concerns Mueller’s team may have expressed about his four-page letter. But in March, Mueller wrote a letter to Barr complaining that his summary mischaracterized the findings in his report following a two-year investigation.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi accused Barr of lying to Congress and threatened to hold him in con-

tempt for his failure to turn over an unredacted version of Mueller’s report. On Wednesday, he refused to testify before a House panel, further stoking contempt threats. Other leading Democrats have called for Barr to resign.

From the moment Trump was sworn in, he has violated the norms of the Oval Office. His actions have sparked mounting investigations and a list of associates who have pleaded guilty to crimes.

As the legal pressures have mounted, Trump has turned to a series of lawyers to make his problems go away. At one point, he asked, “Where’s my Roy Cohn?” — a reference to his former mentor, fixer, and Sen. Joseph McCarthy henchman who was later disbarred. Michael Cohen and Rudy Giuliani have taken turns as Trump’s fixer. Three attorney generals later, Trump has found a lackey in Barr.

The upshot is a democracy in crisis. Lost in the daily drama, is the three-alarm fact that Russia interfered in the 2016 election and is poised to act again in 2020. That is why Congress must investigate Russia’s interference and Trump’s alleged obstruction — and put a stop to the madness.

Swallowing bugs and searching for witch boots

I recently swallowed two bugs in a three-day period and this rate of insectile ingestion, which seems abnormally high, has left me a trifle worried.

My concern is more aesthetic, though, than physical.

I have no idea what sort of bugs I swallowed — these were, as you might imagine, exceedingly brief episodes — but my inquiries of an entomological nature suggest that, having not suffered stings or bites to the esophagus or farther downstream in the alimentary canal, I ought not expect to come to any harm.

(The insects, naturally, had a rather different experience.)

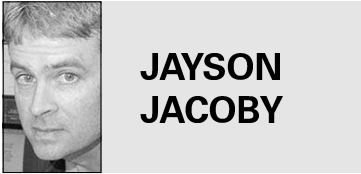
What bothers me is the possibility that on my daily walks about town I might, quite without being aware, have started going around with my mouth agape, and no doubt looking somewhat daft.

This, at any rate, could explain why I have suddenly started sucking up insects in the manner of a whale harvesting krill.

Worse yet, it’s conceivable that I have been appearing this way for months. Our climate pretty much ensures a bug-free environment during winter, so it’s unlikely that, even if had I been strolling along, baring my tonsils to anyone unlucky enough to have looked, I would have gulped down anything except an extra dollop of frigid air.

I suppose I ought to be grateful to the wayward bugs, meager though their nutritional contribution was, for alerting me.

My recent encounters with invertebrates were if nothing else a reminder of how different the sea-



JAYSON JACOBY

sons are hereabouts — differences that are especially noticeable when you’re out in the open air frequently.

Which is not to say the open air is always pleasant.

When the spring norther is tumbling weeds at extralegal speeds across the Ellingson mill property, I lace my shoes, and don my stocking cap, with a sense of dread at the buffeting that’s about to commence. On a few days earlier this spring I had to lean forward and exert myself just to make progress against the gusts. It was akin to striding across a swimming pool.

And those rare days when a cold rain is sluicing down and fog curls over the brow of the foothills don’t exactly entice me to go splash around for an hour or so.

But then comes that first afternoon when the sunlight falls with real warmth, the breeze soft and the scent of moist earth and new grass sweet and heavy on the air.

And the taste of bugs on the tongue.

I spent the better part of my lunch break the other day trying, and in the main failing, to help my son Max build a paper “gun” that would “fire” rubber bands at rather less than a lethal velocity.

The impediment to anything resembling success — other than my

own clumsy fingers, that is — was the ineffective adhesives we used.

Our instructor was YouTube — the modern equivalent to the medieval apprentice guild, except with the option to rewind and fast-forward.

(And no dark, smelly hut to work in. Or the potential to come down with the plague.)

As with many YouTube videos this one showed only a pair of disembodied hands. These hands were quite deft as they folded and assembled several pieces of paper into a cunning little device.

My hands are decidedly not deft. But we managed to concoct something that vaguely resembled what we saw on the screen.

It just wouldn’t hold together.

The video lacked narration but it looked as though the unseen person used a paste-like glue rather than the sort of “super glue” that can permanently lock your fingers together — and leave you feeling a bit fuzzy in the head besides.

This got me to wondering why the chemists, who are nothing if not clever, haven’t perfected a non-toxic adhesive that’s even more powerfully clingy than the fume-laden goop.

I’ve concocted this very substance without even trying. All I had to do was leave a cereal bowl overnight in the sink without scraping off every trace of sugar-frosted flake.

Those insubstantial scraps, given several hours to bind with milk, latch on to a bowl with a tenacity that would impress a master welder.

Surely the scientists could synthesize this process. And it ought to be perfectly safe, being wholly based

on two edible products.

I’ve hacked at cemented flakes with a butter knife, using a firm grip and considerable force, and most times the bowl gives way before the cereal does.

Speaking of sticky things.

It occurred to me the other day that gossip, which has rarely if ever been as robust as in the age of the internet, is the cotton candy of conversation.

Both are all but irresistible to indulge in.

And both are devoid of any nutritional value.

An acquaintance recently asked me a question that piqued my curiosity as few questions ever have.

“Do you know about the witch boots?”

I allowed as how I am familiar with the style of boot that witches are purported to wear, but that I am not aware of any particular pair or pairs.

After hearing the full story I could scarcely not go and see for myself.

Here’s the basics of what I was told: People driving along the Tucker Flat Road, which runs past Pilcher Creek Reservoir just over the Union County border west of North Powder, and the Forest Service’s Porcupine Road, which continues west into the mountains, have spied several pairs of witch boots hanging by wire from, or otherwise affixed to, roadside pine trees. The

pattern isn’t completely geographic, though, as there’s also a pair at the Haines Pond.

This story was, needless to say, somewhat disconcerting.

Footwear dangling from trees is hardly unknown, of course — the internet oozes with odes to “shoe trees” across the nation. There’s a particularly conspicuous example along Highway 26 between Picture Gorge and Mitchell that I look at whenever I drive past.

But pairs of long black boots, one pair per tree in a relatively rural area, is rather a different matter. And not a little spooky.

I drove out that way on Sunday morning with my wife, Lisa, and our kids, Olivia and Max. We crept along the road at walking speed and managed to find five pairs of boots.

In at least two cases, whoever put the boots in place must have gone to a fair bit of trouble, as they were attached a good ways off the ground and the ponderosas, as is typical with mature examples of that species, had no limbs for the first 20 or 30 feet.

I was, and indeed am, intrigued.

The most chilling theory I’ve heard is that the boots are the work of a serial killer who chose this method to record a tally of his victims.

That’s perhaps not likely. But it’s hardly implausible.

I’d be interested in hearing from anyone who’s seen witch boots — wherever that might be. You can reach me at jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.