

GUEST EDITORIAL

Put teeth in the public records law

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:
Oregon House Bill 2353 would put teeth in the Legislature’s 2017 law that set deadlines for fulfilling public records requests of government agencies in the state.

The measure would allow district attorneys, the attorney general’s office and the courts to levy a \$200 fine if deadlines were not met. In addition, they could lower or eliminate fees the agencies planned to charge for records. The penalties are badly needed, and the bill should be approved.

The League of Oregon Cities is probably the most vocal opponent, arguing that firm deadlines would be used by “unscrupulous” requesters of such records as a way to make money. Too, the league argues, giving district attorneys the power to levy fines when records requests are delayed or reduce charges for fulfilling those requests would change the relationship between DAs and city officials.

Those who work for the government in this state too often find public records requests annoying, at best. They drag their feet in filling requests, despite the 2017 legislation that says they must respond to all requests within five business days and fulfill or deny them within another 10 business days.

The state’s public records law does not impose a legitimacy test on requesters. Public records are just that, available to all the public, no matter who they are or what their motive is. Too, it’s unlikely, to put it mildly, that those unscrupulous requesters are in the requesting business for the money.

As for the idea that HB 2353 would somehow harm cities’ relationships with the state’s 36 district attorneys, that’s hard to swallow. DAs are in the business of making tough calls every day. They can handle it. And this bill does not give the power to fine a city or reduce the fees it hopes to charge to DAs alone. It also allows the courts and the attorney general’s office to take on those tasks.

Cities should drop their opposition to this bill, which, finally, puts a price on the foot-dragging with which public records requests are too often met.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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Editorial from The St. Louis Post-Dispatch:
Researchers for the U.S. Department of Agriculture say the Trump administration is retaliating against them for highlighting how farmers are being hurt by President Donald Trump’s trade and tax policies. Some have resigned over it. The pattern is familiar with this White House, which also clashes with its own experts on issues like climate change and foreign policy. When did expertise become a liability?
Much of Trump’s political support comes from rural regions. Farm income has taken an especially big hit from Trump’s trade wars. Soybean exports alone are down by \$2 billion, because retaliatory tariffs imposed by China in response to Trump’s tariffs have deprived American farmers of a market that bought 60%

of their 2017 crop.
Much of the reason the nation knows all of this is because of the Agriculture Department’s Economic Research Service, a klatch of government experts who produce reports on farm income and related topics that historically have had a major impact in setting agricultural policy.
You’d think an administration would welcome that kind of reality check from its own experts. But the research service’s findings that Trump’s trade wars are devastating the very voters he needs most have reportedly infuriated the White House.
Worse, two researchers reported last year that the Republican tax cuts would benefit mostly the wealthiest farmers. This shouldn’t come as a surprise — the entire point of the tax

plan was to bestow a deficit-funded windfall upon the rich while tossing crumbs to the middle class — but having that reality voiced by the administration’s own experts had to sting.
Research service sources told Politico that anger from on high is behind a recent restructuring by Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue that will end what had been the researchers’ semi-independent status, putting them more directly under his control. The Agriculture Department also is moving the service out of Washington, D.C., to a still-undecided location, which can’t help but further diminish those researchers’ impact on policymakers.
Of course, responding dismissively to unpleasant news from experts is a familiar story for this White House. Earlier this year, just days after an alarming Pentagon assessment of the

effects of climate change on military operations, Trump was on Twitter suggesting that a cold snap meant it wasn’t happening.
Similarly, Trump’s reckless foreign policy decisions are often at odds with his own diplomatic, military and intelligence advisers who, unlike him, have years of deep knowledge in the field — most notably, former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who resigned last year after Trump announced a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria.
Whether the issue is climate change, tax policy, trade wars or real wars, an administration that rejects expertise when making policy is flying blind. Real people pay the price, as American farmers can attest. Do any experts dare warn Trump that he can’t keep hurting farmers’ livelihoods while expecting to win their votes?



War with Iran won’t help Trump

JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

join them.

That’s to some extent the consequences of the Iraq War, which has made everyone more wary of wars of choice in that part of the world, especially given that many of the same hawks from 2002, including the national security adviser, John Bolton, would be the people selling a war in Iran now.

It’s partially a consequence of Trump’s reputation, certainly among Democratic politicians, as a habitual liar. And it’s partially because Trump is so unpopular among Democratic voters that very few Democratic politicians want to back him on anything.

In all, a rally effect is certainly possible, but there are good reasons to believe it wouldn’t happen.

However, when it comes to domestic political consequences, the most important thing isn’t the immediate reaction; it’s the longer-term affect on public opinion. And for that, the prospects for Trump if he takes the nation to war are not good at all.

The problem for Trump is that if things go well, voters will have extremely short memories. That’s what George H.W. Bush found after the Gulf War. After Bush’s approval rating spiked up to then-record levels in early 1991, voters rapidly forgot all about the war and then turned on Bush when the economy slumped. A year later it was as if the war, widely seen as a major success, had never happened; soon after that, Bush was defeated for re-election. That was no fluke caused by a recession. The entire history of rally-around-the-flag effects is that they are temporary, and voters eventually care

far more about the economy and other concerns back home.
Unless, that is, the war goes poorly. A drawn-out conflict is just about the worst thing a president can do for his or her approval rating, as Harry Truman found out in Korea, Lyndon Johnson found out in Vietnam, and George W. Bush found out in Iraq. And as George W. Bush can explain, that’s true even if the war initially goes well. (I suppose deliberately tanking the economy might equally harm a president’s popularity, but no president would ever do that, right?)

Of course, if world events leave a president no choice, then initiating military action may still be the best course despite all of that history. If so, the best thing a president could do would be to work hard to earn the trust of both parties in Congress, and then to figure out how to avoid prolonged hostilities if possible. It would certainly not be a good time to clash with the out-party over oversight, for example.

I suspect this is all contrary to the conventional wisdom. But it does seem to be a case in which the conventional wisdom just isn’t supported by the data. The best-case scenario for a Trump war would be a quick public opinion boost that’s probably long gone by November 2020 — and the downside would lead to a landslide loss for the president. If the administration really thinks military action is necessary, then perhaps that shouldn’t stop them — but doing it for domestic political reasons could easily be a colossal blunder.

Jonathan Bernstein is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering politics and policy. He taught political science at the University of Texas at San Antonio and DePauw University and wrote A Plain Blog About Politics.

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