

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Bring back public records bill

Many bills failed in the 2020 legislative session because Republican legislators walked out and Democrats decided that the cap -and -trade bill needed to move before other bills did.

Ask what bills should have passed, and you will get different answers. For instance, we have highlighted how Oregon State University-Cascades failed to receive money for a student success center. Deschutes County failed to get money for badly needed additional judges. And there are many more.

It’s perhaps no surprise that a bill that would better ensure the public has access to information from the government also failed. Sure, there are laws on the books regarding public records and open meetings. But time and time again those laws are interpreted in a way to rig the rules against the public.

The Legislature has made improvements. There are now timelines in place for how long a government entity is supposed to take before responding to a records request. But if the record that a member of the public is after is something that would make somebody or a program look bad, what do you think happens? Delays and high attorney fees for reviewing the records before release effectively build a wall around the records so the public can’t get access.

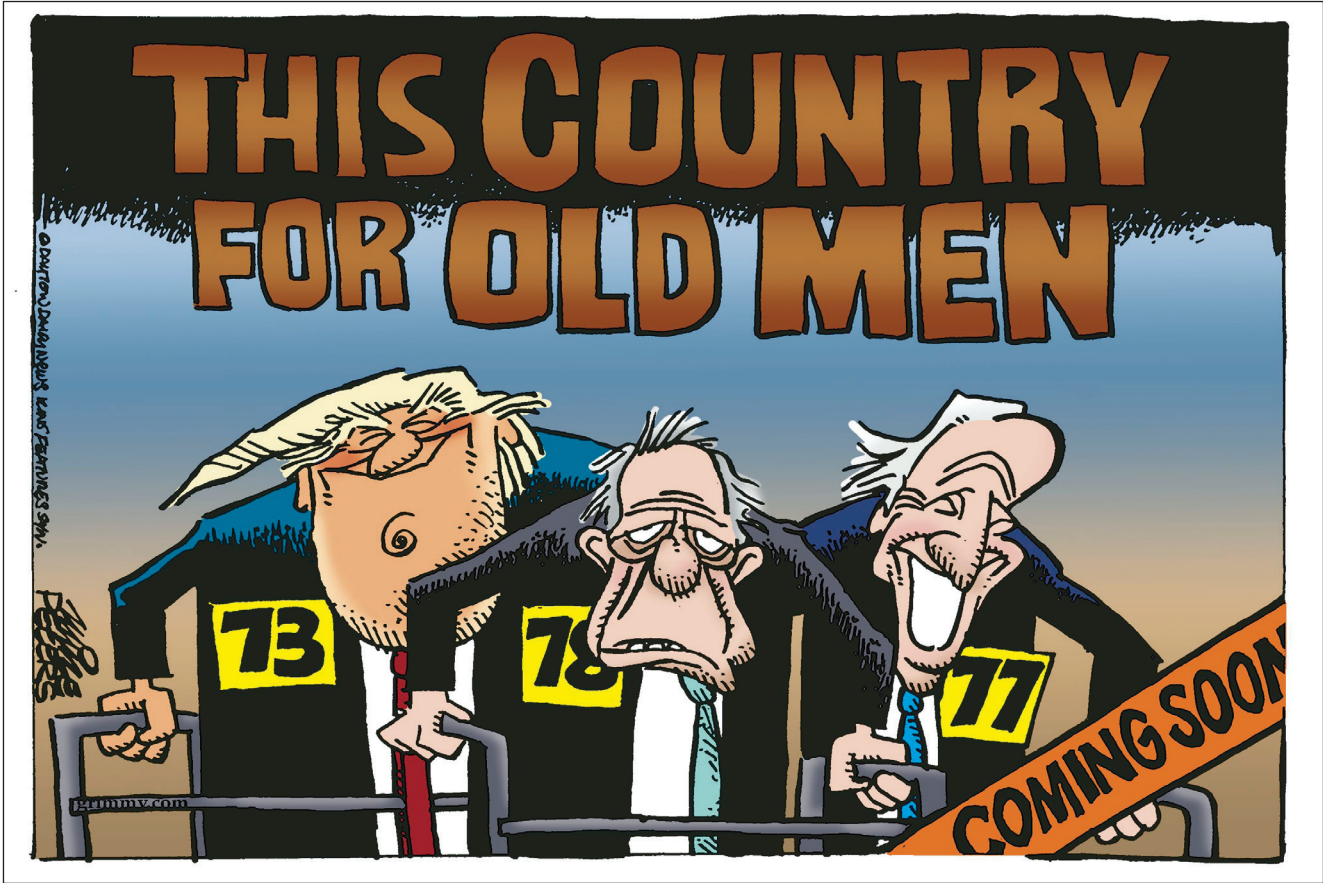
The creation of the public records advocate position in Oregon was a very positive step. That office can mediate records disputes and provide free training to the public and government on how the law works.

But then Ginger McCall, the public records advocate, resigned. She said she was pressured by the members of the governor’s office to secretly represent the governor’s political interests on the state’s Public Records Advisory Council, “even to the point of undermining the Council’s proposals,” she wrote.

Senate Bill 1506 would have made it clear that the public records advocate was an independent office. It clarified that the advisory council could support or oppose legislation about the public records law, introduce public records legislation and recruit and appoint the public records advocate.

Those are important changes. They need to be made. The bill did not deserve to die. Bring it back next session.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.



OTHER VIEWS

Hoping for different outcome in Afghanistan

Minneapolis StarTribune Editorial Board

On Feb. 29, U.S. and Taliban envoys signed an agreement. Only time will tell if it’s actually a peace deal.

There’s uncertainty because America’s accord with the nihilistic, violent group that’s bedeviled Afghanistan for decades seemed mostly focused not on bringing peace to a nation that’s endured decades of war, but on the shared American and Taliban objective of withdrawing U.S. troops.

The Taliban’s motivation is evident: It looks to increase its malevolent presence beyond the broad portion of Afghanistan it already controls.

And the motivation has been evident ever since then-candidate Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Indeed, a drawdown will likely be a feature in his 2020 reelection effort.

That is if the pact holds. By Wednesday, just five days after the deal was signed, the Taliban had carried out at least 76 attacks spanning 24 provinces, sparking a retaliatory U.S. airstrike. The “reduction-in-violence period is over,” a Taliban spokesman said after the brief respite from the carnage.

Pentagon officials seem resigned to that fact. “This is going to be a long, windy, bumpy road,” Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper said on Monday. He was referring to the accord, but could have been referencing a generation of warfare that’s seen

about 800,000 U.S. troops serve in Afghanistan.

The initial mission was to topple the Taliban, which sheltered al-Qaida as it planned its 9/11 attack. But over time that clarity of purpose clouded so completely that even Pentagon officials had a hard time identifying, let alone justifying, the mission (as the Washington Post’s “Afghanistan Papers” so vividly exposed).

During the Obama-era “surge,” about 100,000 U.S. troops were in Afghanistan _ backed, it should never be forgotten, by thousands of forces from NATO nations who had America’s back when the U.S. became the first and only nation to ever invoke Article 5.

Currently, there about 12,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and the deal calls for a reduction of about 5,000 within 135 days if the Taliban meet certain conditions. The eventual objective is to withdraw all U.S. troops over the next 14 months. But that timetable is dependent on diplomatic progress. And yet the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan central government that were slated to start on Tuesday are already in dispute over a negotiated prisoner swap, which the Taliban insist happen immediately, a condition the Afghan central government is rightly resisting.

These and other conditions fall far short of the original U.S. objectives, however. After an initial rout, the Taliban regrouped and mounted a fero-

cious insurgency that’s killed scores of Afghans and been among the factors resulting in nearly 3,000 allied casualties. The result was a stalemate that has not been solved militarily, leading the U.S. to sign the deal without the guarantees of peace between the Taliban and an Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani, who was recently reelected in a deeply disputed election.

Tragically, corruption has flourished and Afghan military preparation has languished despite extraordinary U.S. efforts. The geopolitical stakes of these failures have been high, of course, but the individual ones are even more profound _ especially women and girls, who suffered terribly under the Taliban’s cruel rule. A return to such conditions would be a betrayal of everything America claimed to be fighting for.

Strategic and tactical mistakes span the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations, although the biggest belong to former President George W. Bush, who turned his focus from Afghanistan toward Iraq.

But another era and U.S. president evoke echoes. After Richard Nixon agreed to a peace deal, North Vietnam accomplished its mission of overrunning Saigon and the rest of South Vietnam. For Afghans’ sake, and for the sake of all allied forces who fought so valiantly and sometimes died during America’s longest war, we hope that this outcome is different.

Mass panic more frightening than coronavirus

The coronavirus is here. But fear not. Mass panic is also here. Fear.

I’m a doctor and an infectious diseases specialist. I’ve been at this for more than 20 years seeing sick patients on a daily basis. I have worked in inner city hospitals and in the poorest slums of Africa.

HIV-AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis, SARS, measles, shingles, whooping cough, diphtheria ... there is little I haven’t been exposed to in my profession. And with notable exception of SARS, very little has left me feeling vulnerable, overwhelmed or downright scared.

I am not scared of COVID-19. I am concerned about the implications of a novel infectious agent that has spread the world over and continues to find new footholds in different soil. I am rightly concerned for the welfare of those who are elderly, in frail health or disenfranchised who stand to suffer mostly, and disproportionately, at the hands of this new scourge. But I am not scared of COVID-19.

What I am scared about is the loss of reason and wave of fear that has induced the masses of society into a spellbinding spiral of panic, stockpiling obscene quantities of anything that could fill a bomb shelter adequately in a postapocalyptic world.

DR. ABDU SHARKAWY

I am scared of the N95 masks that are stolen from hospitals and urgent care clinics where they are actually needed for front-line health care providers and instead are being donned in airports, malls and coffee lounges, perpetuating even more fear and suspicion of others. I am scared that our hospitals will be overwhelmed with anyone who thinks they “probably don’t have it but may as well get checked out no matter what because you just never know ...” and those

with heart failure, emphysema, pneumonia and strokes will pay the price for overfilled ER waiting rooms with only so many doctors and nurses to assess.

I am scared that travel restrictions will become so far reaching that weddings will be canceled, graduations missed and family reunions will not materialize. And well, even that big party called the Olympic Games ... that could be kyboshed, too.

Can you even imagine?

I’m scared those same epidemic fears will limit trade, harm partnerships in multiple sectors, business and otherwise, and ultimately culminate in a global recession.

But mostly, I’m scared about what message we are telling our kids when faced with a threat. Instead of reason, rationality, open-mindedness and altruism, we are telling them to panic, be fearful, suspicious, reactionary and self-interested.

COVID-19 is nowhere near over. It will be coming to a city, a hospital, a friend, even a family member near you at some

point. Expect it. Stop waiting to be surprised further. The fact is the virus itself will not likely do much harm when it arrives. But our own behaviors and “fight for yourself above all else” attitude could prove disastrous.

I implore you all. Temper fear with reason, panic with patience and uncertainty with education. We have an opportunity to learn a great deal about health hygiene and limiting the spread of innumerable transmissible diseases in our society. Let’s meet this challenge together in the best spirit of compassion for others, patience, and above all, an unflinching effort to seek truth, facts and knowledge as opposed to conjecture, speculation and catastrophizing.

Facts, not fear. Clean hands. Open hearts. Our children will thank us for it.

Dr. Abdu Sharkawy is a doctor and an infectious disease specialist at the University of Toronto in Canada. This is adapted from an article he wrote and permitted InsideSources to distribute.

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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State Rep. Lynn Findley (R-Vale): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.Lynn-Findley@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Mike Downing, Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe, Lynette Perry,

Arvid Andersen, Ken Gross and Doni Bruland.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; John Clark, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlfing, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.