

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

State keeps public in the dark

Nothing has put stress and hardship on Oregonians and their government quite like COVID-19. The public needs to understand the policy choices their government is considering and the debate about those policies.

That debate should be public. Substantial parts of it were not.

Gov. Brown held dozens of daily teleconference meetings to brief up to all 90 lawmakers about the coronavirus. Legislators were allowed to ask questions and get answers from leading state officials. The public was not allowed to listen.

We made a public records request from Gov. Kate Brown's office, seeking more information about these briefings. We requested all written records prepared for or shared during these meetings by the governor's office. We received 26 pages. We got some notes of policy-related questions about health equity, masks, metrics, how legislators should respond to questions and other matters such as: Should Oregon require people coming into the state from some areas go into quarantine?

We also know other policy matters were discussed during these briefings from reporting by The Oregonian. For instance, the Employment Department discussed handling of employment claims.

Legislators were then able to ask questions. In another example, Oregon's Department of Human Services briefed legislators weekly early on about the dangers of infections in nursing homes.

So why couldn't Oregonians listen in? Why couldn't Oregonians waiting for unemployment claims be allowed to listen? Why couldn't residents of nursing homes or families with relatives in nursing homes hear those discussions?

We are not saying that some of the information from those meetings was never eventually shared with the larger public. It surely was. Some legislators took it upon themselves to spread the word. Gov. Brown and state staff have held regular briefings with the public. Legislators have also held open committee meetings on some topics.

But consider the intent of Oregon law. "The Oregon form of government requires an informed public aware of the deliberations and decisions of governing bodies and the information upon which such decisions were made. It is the intent of (the Public Meetings law) that decisions of governing bodies be arrived at openly." That is a quote from Oregon statute.

The argument from the governor's office and legislators is that requirement was not met by these legislative briefings. Legislators were not preparing to make decisions, the argument goes. They were getting information about decisions made by the governor and state agencies. The governor's office also made the point that these briefings were really no different than other briefings between legislators and the governor's staff when COVID-19 was not an issue.

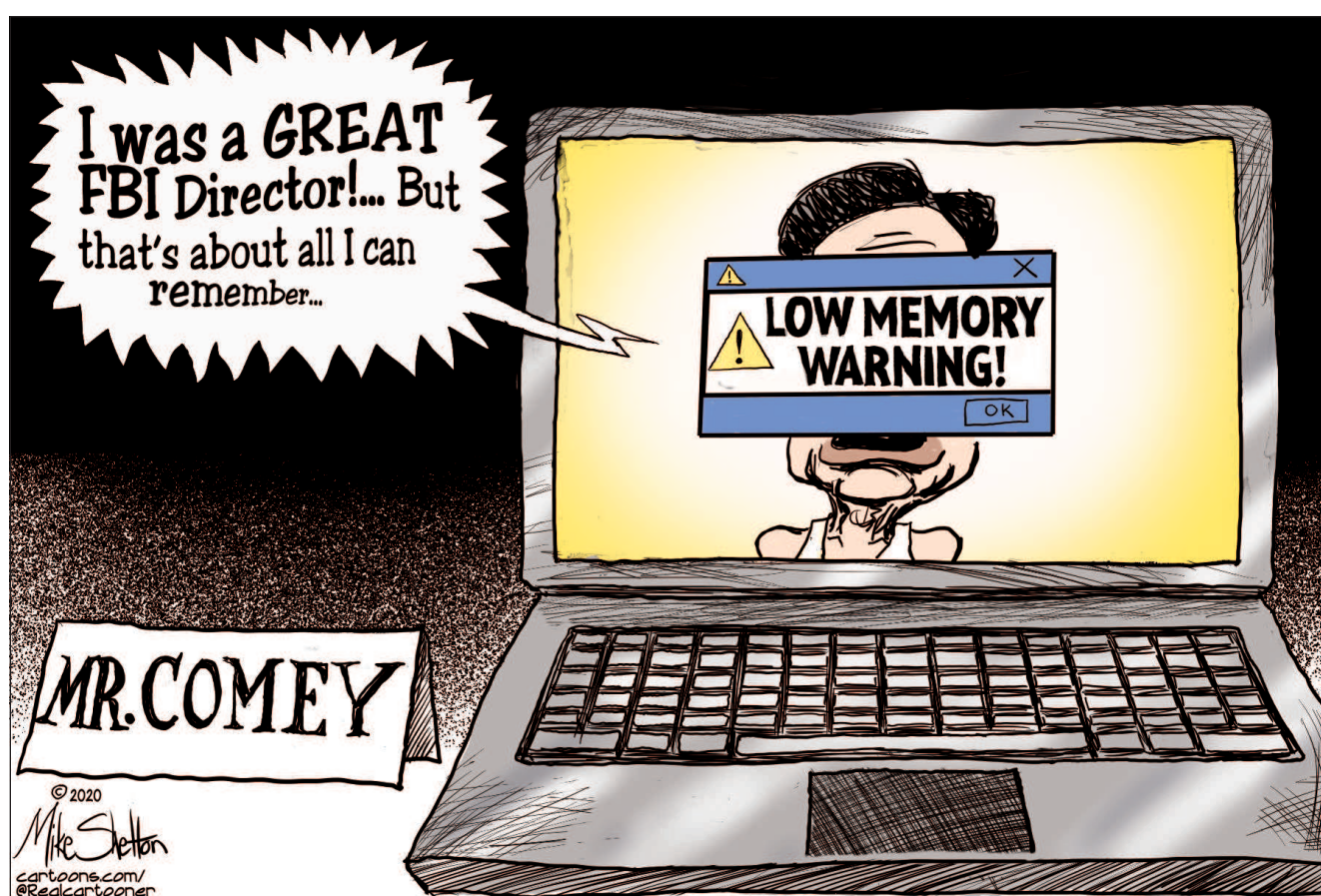
More than 50 of these closed door briefings occurred and they don't have any impact on policy? That's baloney.

Legislators cannot wall off and isolate information they learned in these meetings. They cannot somehow not use the information to make decisions about funding state policy for COVID-19, the Employment Department or anything else.

Look, we get it. Gov. Brown and state legislators were scrambling in the early months of this crisis to understand it and understand how to respond. These briefings were held to keep legislators in the loop. That was a smart step to take.

What about the public? Meetings to brief all 90 legislators and the governor's office on COVID-19 don't trigger any requirement for openness? That was the argument of your governor.

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Your views

Kerry McQuisten a perfect candidate for City Council

I am writing a letter in response to the news that my friend, Kerry McQuisten, is running for Baker City Council. We were Baker High School Bulldogs together, where Kerry earned her spot at the top of our class and never let up. She has been a valuable employee, run her own businesses, worked in the political arena and answers to the name "Mom" — among other great accomplishments you can find listed on her Facebook page.

While these qualifications give her the groundwork she needs to understand and succeed in the City Council position, I am most excited to know how much Kerry loves Baker City. She

is enthusiastic about our people, our businesses, our stunning surroundings and our rich heritage. It means a lot to me that while she is a quick learner and interested in new ideas, she also has deep regard for the folks that put their blood, sweat and tears into building this town into the amazing place we all call home. She is a perfect candidate to bridge that gap between doing things because they are old habits, or the other extreme of buying into every new thing in the name of progress.

After the upheaval of these last few months, it would be a relief to put anger and distrust aside, take the time to listen to one another in a respectful way, and work together to move into the future. I've known Kerry long

enough to trust her with bringing a servant leader mentality to the table, combined with the important qualifications of being firmly grounded in law, political procedure and business.

Whether you are here from generations back, or freshly relocated, it is time to fully enjoy the fruits of living in a caring and unique little place with its very own heartbeat, and I believe Kerry can help us do that.

Thanks to Kerry and to all the candidates who put their name in the hat for these positions. After all, "It is not the critic who counts ... the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena ..." — Theodore Roosevelt.

Whitney Black
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

A challenge for Trump, and the U.S.

Editorial from The New York Daily News:

We wish Donald Trump, the president of the United States, a speedy recovery from COVID-19. We wish the first lady a speedy recovery as well.

The same for Hope Hicks. And Secret Service agents now infected. And the very many people Trump interacted with the past few days as he crisscrossed the country campaigning, often in front of largely unmasked crowds. We hope Judge Amy Coney Barrett — Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, who recently stood near the president, unmasked — is COVID-negative. We are grateful Trump and Joe Biden did not shake hands or get too close to one

another in their Sept. 29 debate.

This is a gravely serious situation for the most powerful nation on Earth, one struggling with a pandemic and a deep recession, with looming international threats, in the final legs of a sprint to a November election: infections in the very seat of power, potentially enabled by a superspreader-in-chief.

Trump is 74, among the age demographic typically most harmed by the disease; one study says 9% of septuagenarians who test positive for COVID die. The president's doctors have repeatedly said he is the picture of health for a man of his years. If that is really true, we pray it pays dividends

now as he battles a disease that has claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Americans — 160,000 of them aged 65 and over.

We wonder whether Trump, who may have been an asymptomatic spreader for days, will rethink his stance on masks. In that debate, he belittled Biden's tendency to wear face coverings, as he so often has, saying, "Every time you see him, he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from him and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen." Despite debate rules telling audience members to remain masked, the president's entourage all removed their masks upon entering the venue.

In early February, Trump

told Bob Woodward the virus was "deadly stuff," "more deadly than even your strenuous flu," before he went on to liken the virus to the flu, repeatedly telling them the flu was worse and COVID would magically melt away.

At a rally of largely unmasked acolytes last week, Trump said, "It affects elderly people, elderly people with heart problems, if they have other problems, that's what it really affects," adding, "It affects virtually nobody."

We fervently wish Trump's case is quick, and that he does not end up among those he defined as "virtually nobody," both for his sake and for the sake of our nation.

Don't forget to get your flu shot

Editorial from The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

As much as we'd all like to see things return to normal as quickly as possible, the reality is that the threat of COVID-19 is going to be with us for a while. Health officials and politicians offer varying opinions on when an effective vaccine might be available, so face coverings, social distancing and frequent hand-washing remain the best bets for stopping the spread.

As if COVID-19 worries were not enough, we also have the annual flu season rapidly approaching, and the last thing health officials want to see is a double whammy of influenza cases and coronavirus infections arriving at the same time.

That's why it's more important than ever for as many Americans as possible to take one simple health precaution — get a flu shot.

Combating the flu during a pandemic has health officials worried that trying to treat both respiratory diseases at the same time could overwhelm the health care system with a surge in hospitaliza-

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. 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.

tions. During the 2019-2020 flu season, which stretched from roughly October to March, there were more than 56 million flu cases in the United States and nearly 740,000 hospitalizations.

And there's also a concern about testing capacity and shortages in the substances — called reagents — needed to run the tests. Dr. Charles Chiu, an infectious disease expert at the University of California, San Francisco, said that "the definitive tests for flu use essentially the same approach that we use for COVID-19 tests."

What's more worrisome is the possibility of some people contracting both

diseases this winter. Since both infections target the lungs, the risk for the elderly and those with underlying health conditions is substantial.

Although the overall fatality rates are low — about 0.1% for the flu and anywhere from 0.5% to 1% for COVID-19 — there were still more than 50,000 deaths attributed to the flu last season and more than 205,000 Americans have already died from COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the flu vaccine reduces the risk of getting the flu by 40% to 60%. And the CDC estimates that manufacturers will produce nearly 198 million doses of the vaccine for the upcoming flu season.

The flu vaccine is widely available from doctors or pharmacists and often for little or no charge.

While researchers continue their work on finding a safe, effective vaccine for COVID-19, we can all do our part to make sure health issues from the pandemic aren't compounded by the arrival of the seasonal flu.