

EDITORIAL

Ensuring public meetings are kept public

Oregon's Public Meetings Law, which has been in place since 1973, is pretty straightforward as laws go.

And its purpose could hardly be more clear.

Groups of elected or appointed officials who conduct the public's business, and spend the public's money, should do so in venues that are open to the public. The law applies to meetings when a quorum of the body is present.

Public bodies subject to the law include those most people would probably expect — city councils, county commissions, school boards. But the law also applies to many that don't generally get as much attention, or publicity, such as the various boards and commissions, some elected and some appointed, that most cities and counties have.

The law, as laws so often are, is littered with exceptions.

Public bodies can legally meet in private (although journalists, in most instances, can attend) to discuss certain topics such as real estate negotiations or to consult with an attorney.

But during these "executive sessions," public bodies are not allowed to make final decisions.

For instance, a city council could meet in an executive session to discuss buying property. But councilors couldn't actually decide to purchase the parcel until they reconvene in a public session that has been announced so that people who wish to attend can do so.

To reiterate — the law isn't complicated.

Most discussions by a quorum of a public body — and all final decisions — must take place in public.

But inevitably, some public bodies violate the law, some intentionally, some inadvertently.

The problem is that people who believe such violations have happened are on their own in most cases — in terms of money as well as time — in filing a legal challenge. Citizens' main recourse is to file a complaint in circuit court. The exception is in the case of a public official who might have violated the executive session provisions of the public meetings law. In that case a resident can file a complaint with the Oregon Government Ethics Commission, the agency that enforces ethics laws which, among other things, deal with conflicts of interest and instances of public officials using their office for personal gain.

House Bill 4140 would make it much easier for the public to enforce the public meetings law, and create a much more effective deterrent for officials who might violate it.

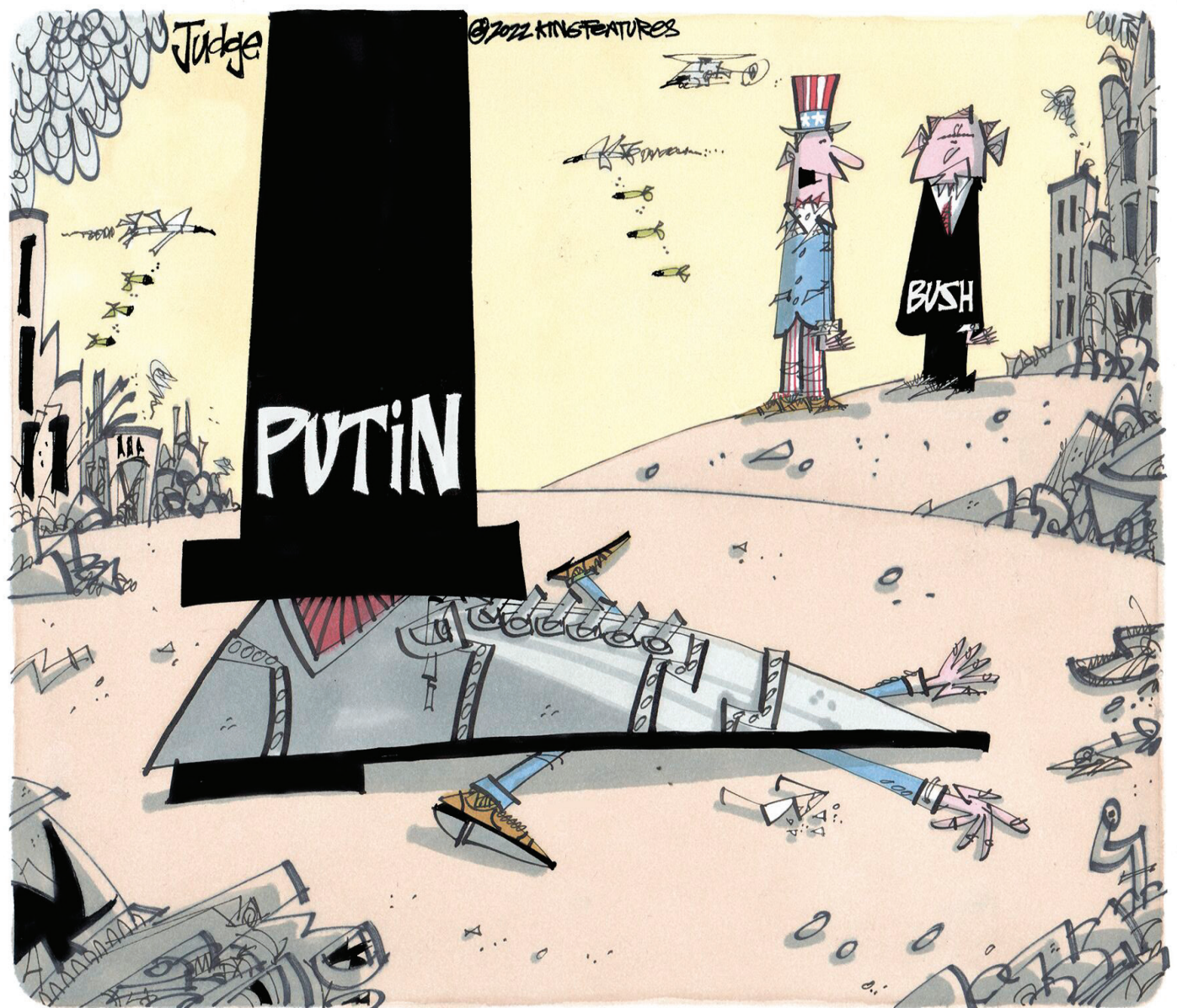
The bill, which appears unlikely to pass during the current legislative session, would allow the Government Ethics Commission to investigate alleged violations of the law, and to fine each public official involved in a violation up to \$1,000. Importantly, the law would prohibit officials from passing off fines to the agency — a city or school board, for instance — that the officials represent.

The fines are the stick in the law. Its carrot is a requirement that the Government Ethics Commission offer training to public bodies affected by the public meetings law. This training need not be complex, given how easy it is to understand the requirements of the public meetings law, and how easy it is to comply with them.

If House Bill 4140 doesn't make it out of the current session, legislators need to bring it back in 2023.

It's vital that the public's business be conducted, and its money spent, transparently. That's why Oregon has had a law defining public meetings for almost half a century. But without a reasonable method for ensuring that the law is enforced, its well-intentioned provisions ring hollow.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



"LOOKS LIKE THE UKRAINIANS ARE ALSO GETTING A SENSE OF HIS SOLE."

COLUMN

Big Tech promoting a big lie

BY STEVEN BUCCI

As Big Tech gatekeepers like Google and Amazon face long-overdue scrutiny in Washington for anti-competitive practices that limit choice and reduce quality online, they have resorted to a national-security defense: Breaking us up, they claim, will only help China.

It's an ironic move. These tech giants have extensive, well-documented ties to Beijing, doing high-volume business in China's marketplace, while capitulating to the whims of its government for fear of losing access and status.

Their arguments are an insult to the spirit of American ingenuity, which is driven by innovation unleashed through competition, not by condoning a chokepoint of five global corporations that have become ever more complacent as their market power grows. Innovation comes from all corners, not from a handful of gatekeepers that keep new ideas and services from coming to market. These dominant tech companies are the largest barrier to entry for companies that may have technological concepts critical to solving some of our biggest challenges.

Some bipartisan ideas are moving through Congress that could help prevent dominant platforms such as Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Google from favoring their own products and services to the detriment of small businesses, innovators and consumers.

The bipartisan effort saw five Republicans vote with Democrats to move legislation out of committee, reflecting the overall

bipartisan momentum around reining in Big Tech inside the beltway and across the country. According to Gallup, 57 percent of Americans believe the government should increase regulation of Big Tech, and a Vox poll found that 65 percent of Americans think its economic power is a problem facing the U.S. economy.

To be clear, the legislative efforts are not about punishing the Big Five because they're big. It's about addressing harmful behavior that allows them to keep their thumb on the scales to further monopoly status. Big Tech can argue that these initiatives could jeopardize U.S. leadership over China and compromise user data all they want, but that's nonsense. There are clear national-security provisions being considered to prevent the transfer of data to businesses affiliated with the government of China or other governments of foreign adversaries.

Let us not forget that these Big Tech platforms are some of the worst violators of privacy and data security in human history. Facebook paid a \$5 billion fine for using deceptive practices and sharing its users' personal information without permission with third-party apps. Google was fined for violating children's privacy laws, and has been accused of secretly tracking users.

Moreover, Big Tech relies heavily on exploiting China's cheap labor and production. In particular, Apple benefits from cheap labor for its products, stores troves of Chinese consumer data on servers owned by state-owned firms, and censors apps in its app store to appease Chinese government demands.

Apple even brokered a \$275 billion deal to help develop China's economic and technological abilities, but has refused to assist U.S. law enforcement in criminal cases at home.

Similarly, Amazon relies on Chinese forced labor for production of many of its products, censors reviews and ratings to appease the Chinese Communist Party, and has even teamed up with firms that provide surveillance technology to the Chinese government's concentration camps. Google bent over backward to produce a censored search engine to comply with the strict speech prohibitions required by the Chinese Communist Party, while espousing internet freedom.

Giant tech firms such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft and Apple have had years to be overseas ambassadors for American principles. They've often done exactly the opposite, violating basic tenets of consumer privacy and security and helping a regime whose view on human rights runs directly counter to U.S. ideals and to directly assist their military with things like AI development.

Policymakers must ignore the bogus fearmongering on national security being pushed by Big Tech in an effort to evade accountability. Next time they are told that antitrust begets China's dominance, they would be wise to consider the messenger.

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OTHER VIEWS

The world is standing with Ukraine

Editorial from The Baltimore Sun:

Not since 9/11 has an unprovoked hostility been so clearly defined as good versus evil. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has, if nothing else, sidestepped the usual vagaries of who started what or who is the victim and who is the aggressor. On the one side is Ukraine, a sovereign nation, the second largest in land mass in Europe. On the other is Russia's authoritarian ruler, Vladimir Putin, with an enormous military and an unbridled desire to return his country back to the Soviet Union days.

Even his cover story for this extraordinary military action — including a claim of "peacekeeping" support for "breakaway" regions of Donetsk and Luhansk — was so flimsy one wonders why he bothered. The absurdity peaked when Putin explained in a Feb. 24 televised speech that his goal was the "denazification" of Ukraine, a country currently led by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Jewish grandson of a Holocaust survivor.

In Baltimore, as is the case across the United States, the only serious questions people are asking themselves today is how best to support Ukraine and punish Russia and whether economic sanctions announced by President Joe Biden are tough enough. The appetite for engaging in a direct military clash and putting U.S. troops in the line of fire, meanwhile, is appropriately low. And while there's certainly been some finger-pointing over whether the U.S. had done enough to support Ukraine after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014,

as both of the last two presidents withheld military aid from that country, this sort of second-guessing is like fretting over U.S. military preparedness prior to Pearl Harbor. Let the historians pass their judgment. What people really want to know is, what happens next?

Putting the economic squeeze on Russia has much appeal. The threat of sanctions may not have initially deterred Putin, but it's clear that he's made some serious miscalculations. First, that the level of resistance within Ukraine would prove as lethal as it's been to date but secondly, that NATO members and others would be willing to impose sanctions far beyond anything considered after Crimea. Surely, top of that list is kicking Russia out of the SWIFT global bank payments system which has already sent the ruble and that country's stock market into a steep decline. Even Germany, a country with an understandable post-World War II aversion to military spending and a dependence on Russian energy, has decided to toss at least 100 billion euros at its armed forces.

But make no mistake, imposing sanctions against Russia will not be painless for the rest of the world. It will not be as simple as pouring Russian vodka down the drain or bemoaning recent vandalism at the St. Michael Ukrainian Catholic Cemetery in Dundalk, as heinous as the topping of 49 headstones last week might have been. And certainly it will require more than posting on social media blue and yellow messages of support that symbolize Ukraine's flag. Isolating Russia

means harming the buyer of Russian goods as well. And that could include oil and gas, a major Russian export.

Certain Republicans, including the 45th president, would have Americans believe that the U.S. could pump the world out of harm on the energy front. But the reality is far more complicated. While U.S. energy production, particularly natural gas, has certainly increased over time, this dream of energy "independence" is largely a mirage. And draining U.S. resources to the last drop as quickly as possible isn't much of a long-term solution to anything, especially given the threat of climate change. Better to do exactly what President Biden seeks to do: inflict the most harm possible on the Russian economy and on Putin and his allies while sparing other nations the most collateral damage possible; support peace talks but do not be intimidated by Putin's nuclear saber-rattling.

Symbolic actions have their place (and cemetery vandals richly deserve prosecution). Americans might also donate to the various charities that are helping Ukrainians (the International Committee of the Red Cross, Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services and Save the Children among them). But what may be needed most is to reflect the sort of determination that Ukrainians are demonstrating each day in fighting this invasion. If it means higher prices at the pump, worsening inflation or an economic slowdown, so be it. We are all Ukrainians now.