

Some state agencies fail to perform audits

Two state agencies — Oregon's Housing and Community Services and the state's Higher Education Coordinating Commission — have year after year failed to perform internal audits.

Imagine you were in charge of a business to ensure Oregonians with low incomes get stable and affordable housing. Or imagine if it was a business to ensure students — especially those who are underserved — can go on to success in higher education.

Maybe the business generally does a good job. But year after year, it failed to perform a requirement under state law to determine if the business is doing the best it can to meet its objectives and spends taxpayer money wisely. Shouldn't the state do something about it?

The answer requires some nuance. First of all, there are ways around the requirement — it can be waived. And sometimes, it's not only the agency's fault.

Oregon Housing and Community Services, known as OHCS, is the state's agency to ensure Oregonians with low incomes get stable and affordable housing. Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission, or HECC, works to ensure students have paths to postsecondary success.

State government has many lines of defense to ensure programs work and money is spent carefully. There are the managers at the agency, the employees, reviews by state legislators and sometimes audits by the auditors in the Secretary of State's Office.

One additional state requirement for larger state agencies is for an internal audit function. Those are essentially people who work in an agency and are supposed to inde-

pendently evaluate it and ensure it is functioning properly. Agencies can also contract out for the work.

State agencies that are big enough are supposed to do a risk assessment to identify problem areas and then perform at least one internal audit per calendar year. And, as we said, agencies can be granted waivers from the requirement. But repeatedly granting waivers is like not having a requirement.

The state puts out a report at the end of every year looking back to see how agencies did. The new report came out Monday. OHCS and HECC weren't the only agencies that did not perform the auditing functions. But they have repeatedly failed to do so. They both got waivers.

OHCS also did hire an external firm to do internal audit work in 2020 and hired an internal auditor. So, it is making progress.

HECC is a relatively new agency, formed in 2013, though it didn't come together until 2015. And the reason it hasn't gotten around to its internal audit functions? It asked for funding for the position in 2017 and 2019. Legislators didn't fund it until the 2019 session. The auditor is working with HECC's management to now live up to its auditing requirements.

Those explanations are somewhat encouraging. But if legislators continue to not fund positions or allow the requirement to be waived, the requirement can become meaningless and problems that could be caught may not be caught.

More needed to track education performance

Measure 98 put money in two places where Oregon needed it. The November 2016 ballot promised to send education dollars to dropout prevention and career and technical education.

The Bulletin's editorial board endorsed it. Voters approved it.

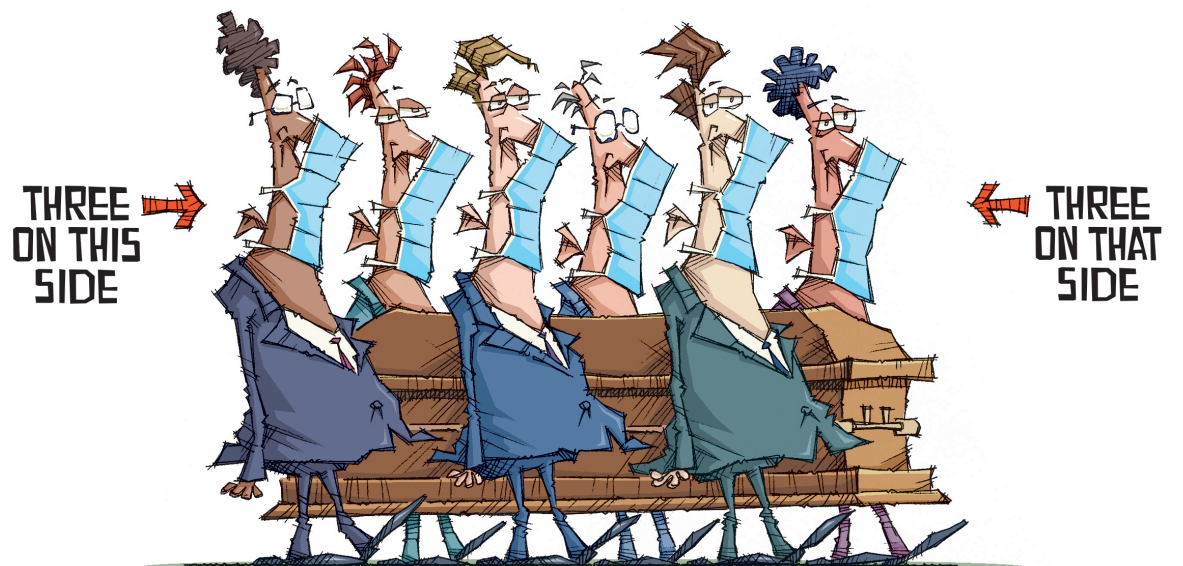
A critical component of the measure was that the Oregon Department of Education is supposed to hold district's accountable for their performance with the dollars. An Oregon Secretary of State audit recently called on the department to do a bit more to ensure that happens.

For instance, ODE annually receives student-level enrollment data, such as basic demographic information, from school districts and charter schools, but the agency cannot

see how students have performed in their courses," the audits says. "Because some data is held by individual districts and schools, the team also cannot easily aggregate that information across participants. In addition, as was noted in a previous audit, basic information about alternative schools and programs continues to be limited. Alternative and online schools accounted for about 10% of Oregon's public high school enrollment in the 2015-16 school year, but nearly half of the state's high school dropouts."

Room for improvement? Yes. And it's another example why the money spent to fund the Secretary of State's audit division can be some of the most important money the state spends. It's one thing to fund a program. It's something else to ensure it is working right.

POSSIBLE "SIDE" EFFECTS FROM REFUSING THE COVID VACCINE



Movie theaters need our help to survive

BY ALAN LIGHTMAN

Special to The Washington Post

In 1915, my 24-year-old grandfather, M.A. Lightman, was looking out a hotel window in Colbert County, Alabama, when he saw a long line of people waiting to get into a movie theater. In those early days of film, many cinemas were simply converted storefronts outfitted with a projector and folding chairs for the audience. Moving pictures were more than photographs and different from books. They transmitted romance, danger and comedy straight into your emotional bloodstream, with no need for translation and no intermediaries.

My grandfather, the son of Hungarian immigrants, had been trained as an engineer. But he always fancied himself a showman. Looking out the window, he decided to try out the movie business.

In 1916, M.A. opened his first theater, the Liberty, where he played the original, silent version of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." In 1931, he was elected president of the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America, the forerunner of today's National Association of Theatre Owners.

As a child in the late 1950s, I sometimes ventured into the projection booths of my grandfather's movie theaters, claustrophobic rooms containing two movie projectors, each mounted with a giant reel of celluloid film. Like a fish tank, the front wall of the booth was all glass. I can still feel the heat from the intensely bright "carbon arc lamps," which shined a powerful light through the film. The light then traveled through a focusing lens, then through the glass wall and out into the theater, finally landing on the movie screen 200 feet away.

Even at that age, I knew that something magical was at work. We were creating another world out there on the screen, a world of joy and sadness, laughter, romance, places far away in space and in time, heroes and heroines and ordinary people — a world that moviegoers could enter and live other lives. We were giving our audience a common culture.

Movies are the principal medium by which we tell and preserve stories. Think of "Doctor Zhivago," telling the story of the Russian Revolution; or "Schindler's List," helping to define our understanding of the Holocaust; or "The Big Short," making the numbers behind the 2008 financial crash legible for lay audiences.

Over the decades, movies and movie theaters have survived many competing technologies that threatened their extinction, among them television, VHS tapes, DVDs, Blu-rays, and streaming. Through all of these worthwhile advances, people continued to leave their homes to watch movies in theaters. From 2010, just after streaming became prominent, to the beginning of 2020, the number of movie theaters nationwide remained nearly constant, going from 5,773 to 5,798. Annual ticket sales dropped by only 7%, from about 1.33 billion to about 1.24 billion.

Seeing a movie in a public theater on a giant screen, surrounded by other people, is not only entertainment. It is an experience, a communal activity, a night out of the house almost everyone can afford.

Then came the coronavirus pandemic. Few industries have suffered more than movie theaters. The small number of theaters that remain open have seen attendance decline drastically. National Association of Theatre Own-

ers chief John Fithian recently begged for federal aid, calling relief "the ONLY solution that will provide the bridge that theaters need to see them into next year." Although movies will undoubtedly still be made and streamed into private homes, if theaters do not survive, something irreplaceable will have been lost.

We are social creatures. No matter how comfortable our living rooms and sophisticated our technology, we need community, we need physical contact with one another. According to the General Social Survey, since the 1970s, there has been a deterioration in participation in such communal experiences as parent-teacher associations, Lions Clubs and Rotary Clubs, even bowling leagues. It may be too late to save those institutions, but it is not too late to save movie theaters.

I vividly remember my excitement at seeing the first "Star Wars" movie, in 1977, at a downtown theater in Boston. That first image of the underside of a spaceship sailing through the galaxy, on that large screen, was so startling and innovative that you could hear everyone else in the audience gasp along with you. We were floating in outer space.

Here, writ large on the screen, was our modern version of the ancient hero's journey, dating back to the ancient Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh. Here were the enduring themes of chivalry, good vs. evil, conquest and domination, fashioned for our technological age. We moviegoers left the theater in throngs, talking to each other, sharing impressions, some of us speechless. But all of us felt that we now shared some magical bond. Lawmakers should act to save that magic.

■ Alan Lightman is a writer, physicist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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This awful year taught me things about hope

BY MONICA HESSE

The Washington Post

The first month of the pandemic was also supposed to be the month I got pregnant, but my clinic closed, and plans changed. Doctors and nurses needed personal protective equipment to tend to patients with COVID-19, not women with recurrent miscarriages.

When the clinic reopened several months later, it turned out my husband and I had only been delaying yet another loss: In late August, he obeyed the medical center's strict coronavirus protocols by waiting anxiously in the car while I trudged inside, masked and hand-sanitized, to receive a miscarriage diagnosis alone. I searched the ultrasound screen for the rhythmic beat of a heart, and then accepted that whatever had once been there was now gone.

But that was 2020 for you, consistent

only in its utter crappiness. For every inspiring video of neighbors applauding a shift change at the hospital, another video of a bone-tired nurse begging viewers to believe COVID-19 was real, it wasn't a hoax, wear a mask.

For every protest organized by activists who understood racism is also a long-term crisis, an appearance by the Proud Boys; for every GoFundMe successfully raising money for a beloved teacher's hospital bills, a bitter acknowledgment that online panhandling is our country's version of a safety net.

Millions of citizens stood in line for hours to vote for the next president and then endured weeks of legal petitions arguing that their votes should be negated. The basis for these legal actions were conspiracy theories too wild to be believed.

And that was 2020 for you, too: accepting the increasingly obvious reality

that the country was in peril, built on iffy foundations that now buckled under pressure.

What kind of delusional person would even try to get pregnant in this world? In my case, it would never be a happy accident; it would always be a herculean effort. And so it seemed I should have some answers.

I found myself asking a lot of things like this in 2020, but really they were all variations of the same question: What does it mean to have hope?

But in the middle of this, scientists worked quietly in labs all over the world. They applied the scientific method with discipline and speed. A vaccine was developed. Tens of thousands of volunteers rolled up their sleeves and said, "try it out on me."

It was approved, and a nurse from Long Island was the first American televised receiving it. Her name was Sandra

Lindsay, an immigrant from Jamaica who had come to the United States 30 years ago and who had spent the last year overseeing critical care teams in back-to-back shifts. She said she had agreed to go first to show communities of color, long abused, brushed-off or condescended to by the medical system, that the vaccine was safe.

Here was hope. And more than that, here was hope from a woman who had more reason than most to be embittered: an exhausted health care worker who knew too well America's hideous racial past and present, who nonetheless also knew there was only one way out of the tunnel. Here she was, rolling up her own sleeve, and there were the lines of hospital employees ready to go after her, and there were the truck drivers ferrying shipments of syringes.

Sometime in October, a couple of months after my last miscarriage —

when the country was riding up on eight months of lonely and stoic birthdays, graduations, deaths and weddings — I went into the bathroom and saw a faint second line on a First Response pregnancy test. I mentioned it to my husband and told him that I'd test again in a few days but that we should assume the worst would happen.

At my most recent appointment, the doctor's office was backed up in a holiday logjam. It all felt precarious. The current reality always feels precarious.

And yet there we all are together, searching for signs of life, hoping that whatever we emerge to can be better than what we had before, and that whatever we build will become our new legacy. The sonographer finally arrived and turned on the machine.

There was a heartbeat.

■ Monica Hesse is a columnist for The Washington Post's Style section