

# Should Deschutes commissioners be nonpartisan?

The most important place that Oregonians shouldn't see partisanship may be from the secretary of state.

Imagine someone in that office trying to help out his or her political allies by tilting the balance in decisions regarding voting or redistricting. It would be ugly.

That office is actually a partisan position, though Oregonians have been lucky that secretaries of state don't regularly act like it.

Deschutes County Commissioner Phil Chang is looking at partisanship locally. He wants county residents to consider moving commissioners away from partisanship by making the commissioners nonpartisan. It was part of his campaign and he is seeing it through.

"We can all see that we need less partisan division in our country right now than more, and I believe that Deschutes County can do its part to help de-escalate the partisan division in our country by joining the 26 other counties in Oregon that have nonpartisan commission seats," Chang said, as reported by The Bulletin's Brenna Visser.

Would a nonpartisan position be an improvement? Maybe.

Commissioners in Deschutes County are not administrators. They are policymakers. Should their decisions be determined by partisanship or colored by partisanship?

For instance, the local public health authority is actually the Board of County Commissioners. The operational duties are delegated to Deschutes County Health Services — the public health staff. Should the commissioners make policy decisions about how to respond to COVID-19 based on partisan leanings? That's easy. No.

If commissioners were nonpartisan would they make different decisions? Would there be more

cooperation between people of different political persuasions? That's not easy. The best argument you can make is that over time nonpartisanship might reshape the nature of the office so partisanship was less important in campaigns and perhaps less a factor in any decision. But the Bend City Council has been nonpartisan for years. It still has had fairly clear partisan divides.

Another factor is disenfranchisement. Some people in Deschutes County are now effectively disenfranchised from narrowing the candidates for commission down because unaffiliated voters cannot vote in party primaries. There actually have been more unaffiliated voters in Deschutes County than Republicans. In December 2020, there were 47,341 registered Democrats, 45,990 nonaffiliated and 45,888 Republicans in Deschutes County.

Another argument made about nonpartisan positions is what it would mean for some voters. It might make it harder to pick a candidate. Party affiliation can be a useful shorthand for knowing something about a candidate, if a voter knows nothing else about them.

In the end, though, commissioners should not be functioning as party operatives. They should be functioning as operatives for Deschutes County residents. Nonpartisan commissioners would not guarantee nonpartisanship. It could help.

Commissioners would have to vote to approve putting such a measure on the ballot. Any change would have to be approved by voters. You can tell commissioners what you think by emailing them at board@deschutes.org.

# Voters helped Bend schools fight COVID-19

No matter what happens in the ongoing debate over reopening Bend schools in the middle of the pandemic, there has been a bit of good news.

The district has been able to update its heating and cooling systems and install better air filters. That could help reduce the danger of transmission of airborne particles for any virus.

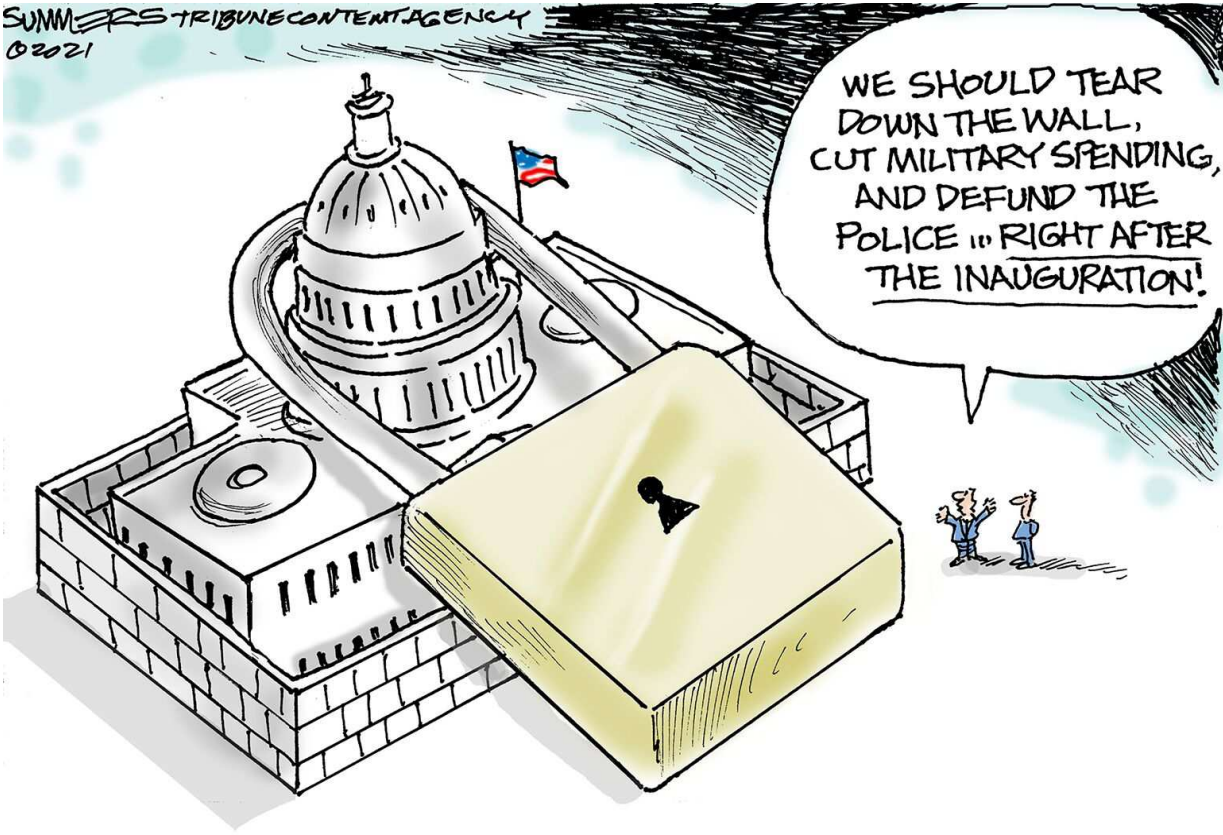
Air filters in HVAC systems get ratings. The higher the number the better the level of filtration. Something called MERV 13 is medical

grade and now those filters are in place in school buildings at Bend-La Pine.

That district has been able to accomplish that because voters approved Bend's school bonds. The bonds enabled the district not only to build new schools but also to make improvements and repairs in existing schools.

So if you voted for Bend school bonds, pat yourself on the back. It's because of you that the air in the schools is better and there may be less risk of COVID-19.

Editorials reflect the views of The Bulletin's editorial board, Publisher Heidi Wright, Editor Gerry O'Brien and Editorial Page Editor Richard Coe. They are written by Richard Coe.



# An open letter from a teacher in Oregon to anyone who will listen

BY MAKAELA THOMPSON

To those it concerns, and to those who should be concerned,

After 10 months of no COVID-19 exposures, and not getting sick, I was required to attend an in-person safety training on school pandemic safety. The next day, I received a call from the district contact tracing team that I needed to quarantine for 14 days due an exposure.

I understand that families and students are struggling. The past year has been hard on everyone in different ways. Please know that teachers are busting their butts to make something meaningful out of distance learning. I've made hundreds of phone calls this year, far more than a usual school year, trying to connect with families and get students engaged. I know for many, distance learning has posed major challenges to learning and wellbeing. Some I've made really meaningful connections with. In fact, some are thriving now that they don't have to deal with the anxieties involved with in-person learning and get to wake up at a decent time for the teenage body.

The governor's decision to do away with metric requirements and push all students into school at this time is sure to be catastrophic. I know it's



Thompson

## GUEST COLUMN

hard to be patient, but we have waited 10 months for a vaccine that was supposed to put an end to all this. It is around the corner, yet we are being asked to put our lives on the line because students can't learn from home anymore after 10 months of doing so? How about supporting the families who are hurt most by their kids not going to school, rather than putting entire communities at risk?

I have been intensely careful since the COVID pandemic began. I followed health guidelines, did not gather with anyone indoors, masked, sanitized, stayed home. When I was told I was required to come to work, I came prepared. I wore double masks, carried my hand sanitizer and used it frequently. Still, that was potentially not enough to protect me.

I'm asking you to please stop this experiment with our lives. Through the ages, kids have missed school in times of crisis. Most of them have turned out all right. Is the risk of killing school staff really worth this to you? The chances that we have to close school again due to lack of personnel is so high that it will be more disruptive to families when it hap-

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pens. It isn't fair to the students who are making progress to repeatedly disrupt the way they are receiving instruction. By going to school, we are also putting students and their families at higher risk. The students who choose to stay home and not take that risk are basically being left without any of the personal support they have right now.

Please delay the start of in-person school until all staff are able to receive both doses of the vaccine and have ample time to build immunity to the virus.

■ Makaela Thompson is a teacher and lives in Redmond.

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# How to rein in Big Tech, after the Capitol riot? Tax the behemoths

BY STEWART BAKER

Special to the Washington Post

No matter what your politics, there are reasons to be uneasy about Silicon Valley's swift and brutal exercise of power after the violence at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Not only was a head of state silenced but large numbers of his followers were, as well. Most disturbing, Parler, the only service that still welcomed some Trump supporters, was summarily driven out of business by Apple, Google and Amazon's web-hosting services.

Even if you think that President Donald Trump had it coming, this demonstration of corporate power is troubling, especially if you believe our country's divisions are deepened by social media business models. In this view, the platforms' ad revenue depends on user engagement, and engagement is driven by anger, so social media serves up content calculated to leave users angry. If that's true, the violence-marred protests over the summer and at the Capitol are powerful

arguments for forcing a fundamental change in how U.S. social media companies make money.

Faced with such a threat to their business, those companies are highly likely to use their substantial power to tilt the debate against such reforms.

Many on the left and right are appalled by the tech giants' power, but they are reluctant to rely on the intervention of a government that could change hands completely over any four-year period. That dilemma undercuts the two most common proposals to trim Big Tech's reach: revising Section 230 or enforcing antitrust laws.

Section 230, a segment of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, seems ripe for reform. Both presidential candidates questioned it, but Trump wanted changes that would discourage the suppression of conservative voices, while many on the left think the platforms don't do enough to suppress right-leaning speech. Using Section 230 to drive speech-moderation standards would transform the

law into a regulatory regime that could force Silicon Valley to curry favor with whoever holds power in Washington. Both the right and the left should fear such a result, unless they think they can keep the other side from ever controlling the regulatory levers.

What about the antitrust laws already on the books? The Trump administration kicked off litigation against Google and Facebook, almost certainly with a view toward spurring more competition, and thus more diversity, in social media. But that's not the most likely outcome. Instead, the Justice Department would be lucky to win a few new rules preventing the platforms from favoring their own interests in third-party transactions or to force the divestment of a few subsidiaries. Either way, antitrust enforcers would essentially create a regulatory regime tailored to a specific company.

What is needed is a more dramatic and less politically tinged solution. Across the Atlantic, Germany and the European Union have recently pro-

posed legislation that sets competition rules for digital "gatekeepers" such as social networks and cloud computing companies. This is another regulatory scheme and, therefore, of dubious value, but the notion of digital gatekeepers aptly summarizes what's most troubling about Silicon Valley's new role in our discourse. So why not combine that concept with the 3% tax France imposes on the gross revenue of large digital companies — but in the service of structural reform rather than regulation?

What if the federal government imposed a 40% tax on the gross revenue of gatekeeper social media companies that have more than, say, 30 million active users in the United States? Instead of fighting antitrust authorities in the trenches for years, companies faced with such a harsh tax rate would rush to break themselves up. Efforts to avoid the tax would surely spur a proliferation of mainstream social media companies, each serving a broad audience.

There are plenty of details to fill in.

Among them: making sure that this wouldn't simply allow Chinese social media platforms to use their domestic scale to seize the U.S. market; limiting application to companies that claim a right to control their customers' speech; and, as with all tax measures, staying alert for unanticipated consequences. Still, the basic concept of a high tax rate to force decentralization has something for everyone. For those on the left, it constrains the clout of big business. For those on the right, it offers the possibility of new platforms that are both responsible and open to conservative voices.

This has at least a chance of attracting majorities from both the Republican and Democratic caucuses. And any legislative proposal that could do that in these times is worth serious consideration — and more than a little effort.

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