

Should journalists get a discount on public records?

When The Bulletin requests access to information from government, it sometimes hits a wall of No.

Bulletin reporter Jackson Hogan asked in 2018 the Bend-La Pine Schools for a list and price of all apps and textbooks bought for student iPads, specifically those in use. About a month later, the district told him the cost of providing the information would be \$2,000. Eight district staffers would apparently have to work a total of 18.5 hours to pull the information. Then a lawyer with the High Desert Education Service District would have to work six hours at \$115 an hour to review the information and redact anything necessary. The district offered to give The Bulletin 50% off or charge \$1,000. Still, prohibitively pricey for The Bulletin.

House Bill 2485 seeks to enshrine 50% off for journalists in law. It requires state agencies to reduce public records request fees by 50% if the request is made in the public interest. It requires state agencies to entirely waive fees if a public records request is in the public interest and narrowly tailored. And it requires requests made by members of the news media to be treated as in public interest.

The bill is sponsored by state Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie. She introduced it on behalf of the Society for Professional Journalists.

We certainly appreciate the sentiment. But sometimes 50% is no deal. The cost can still be a wall of No.

News media is not defined in the bill. That can be tricky. Maybe The

Bulletin would easily qualify. What about a person who diligently tracks and regularly writes about education policy on a blog? Is that person a member of the news media? Are they acting in the public interest?

As much as we like the idea of getting 50% off, Oregon's public records law is Oregon's "public" records law. The news media can play a critical watchdog role and help spread information. It just seems unfair that a member of the public could be charged double for the same record as a journalist. The member of the public has just as much right to it under Oregon law, not just as much right at twice the cost. And by charging journalists half the cost, the costs of providing information to other members of the public would presumably go up, because they would be subsidizing the work of journalists.

More than 40 bills in play this legislative session aim to change Oregon's public records laws. Some seek to block disclosure of information to the public. Some seek to make disclosure easier. We are flattered that the intent of HB 2285 is to help journalists tear down the Wall of No. But all Oregonians are entitled to the right to know what their government is doing.

HB 2485 is scheduled for a public hearing on Thursday in the House Rules Committee.

Eliminating student debt might benefit the wealthy the most

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley are backing a plan to cancel up to \$50,000 for federal student loan borrowers.

"It's ridiculous that so many students are forced to take on back-breaking amounts of debt to go to school—especially as the coronavirus continues to upend our economy," Merkley said in a statement. "It's time to cancel student loan debts so we can free up Americans burdened by student debt to chase their dreams, contribute to their communities, and help us pave the way to economic recovery."

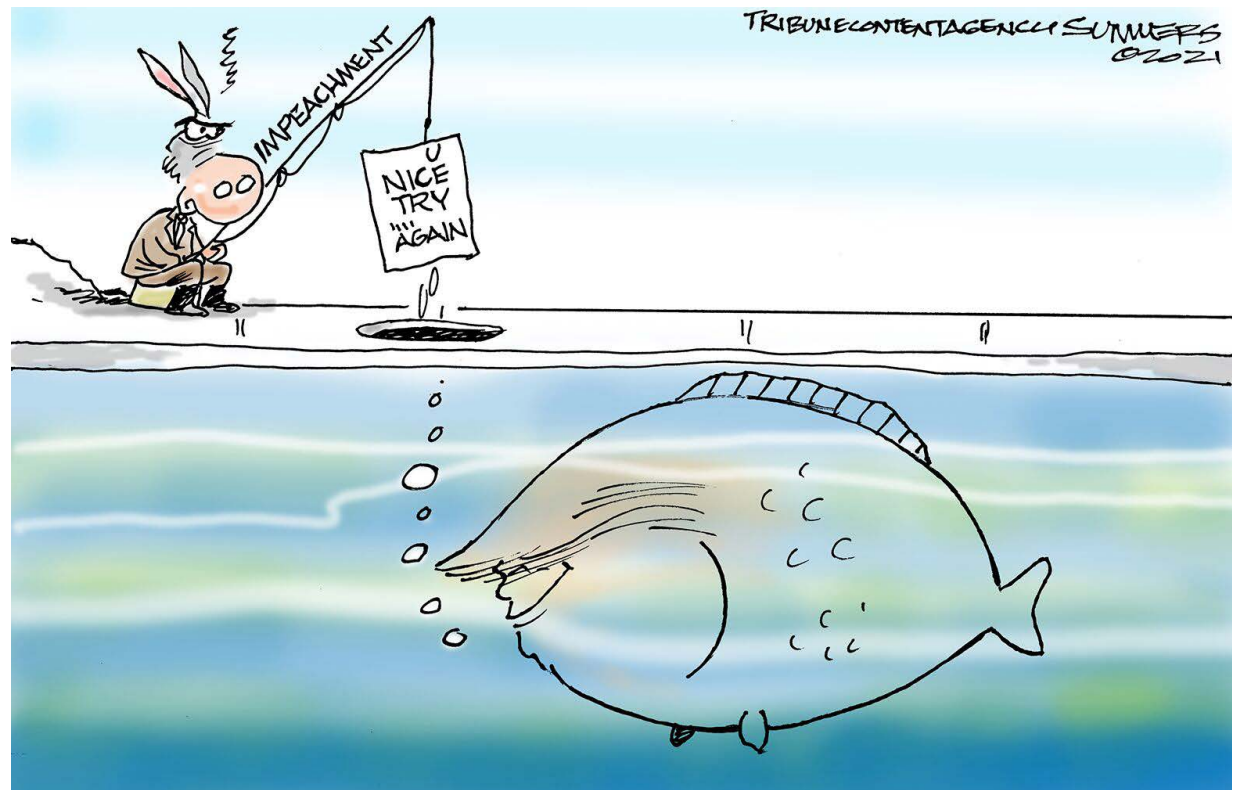
The idea supported by Democrats is also to eliminate any tax liability from having the debt wiped out.

People who are low income or who are racial minorities would cer-

tainly benefit, but the benefit would accrue mostly to wealthier families. They hold most of the federal education debt. A simple policy of eliminating \$50,000 in federal student loan debt would be a regressive policy, not a progressive one. It would be a policy that would give more benefits to people who need it less.

Wyden and Merkley say they want to ensure that debt cancellation "helps close racial wealth gaps and avoids the bulk of federal student debt cancellation benefits accruing to the wealthiest borrowers."

OK how is that going to be done? By race? By race and income? And is this only a one-time deal or can colleges start escalating their costs and advertising: Don't worry, your first \$50,000 in college debt is now free.



GUEST COLUMN

Parking reform will help us create a sustainable future for the city

BY MELANIE KEBLER

Let's talk about how parking reform can help create a sustainable future for Bend. Our city is growing rapidly and faces challenges of affordability, traffic congestion, and equitable economic recovery. How we use our streets and land for parking has a meaningful impact on housing, transportation, and the environment our economy depends on. As a city that loves to innovate, it's time to evolve the way we think about parking in Bend.



Kebler

Parking reform is only one component of a much larger plan that your City Council can build for Bend's future. Council's upcoming proposed two-year goals cover a wide range of issues, including how we can become a more connected city that is truly welcoming to everyone. We must plan effectively for new neighbors and improve how everyone gets around town. Smarter parking policy can help us do that.

Bend residents interact with our streets, roads and parking lots every day. How we use that public space has a direct impact on everyone's quality of life. The city has a duty to responsibly manage space on our streets in a way that is equitable, financially sound, and environmentally responsible. And in fact, one way to do this is to start thinking of our streets as public spaces for people, not just cars.

More than 2,500 people in Bend don't own a car, and more than 5,000 people live in households that either have no car or multiple adults sharing a car. Some choose to walk, bike or ride transit instead, but the vast majority are economically disadvantaged, disabled or elderly. Those folks still pay, indirectly, for the cost of "free" parking, and that's not fair.

Just like a "free" lunch, there's no such thing as a "free" parking space. Parking seems free to the driver who gets there first, but every resident of our city pays a cost in maintenance, loss of other more productive uses of that public space, and increased carbon emissions. A recent study reported on by Sightline Institute found that building more parking led to more driving, less transit use, and less walking. Free parking is paid for by all of us in the prices of almost everything we buy and the tax dollars spent to subsidize driving. That includes taxes on those who can't, or don't choose to drive.

Housing affordability and availability are hurt by "free" parking mandated by our city code. Our local builders and contractors are forced to sacrifice valuable land area to create storage for cars, whether or not that much space is actually needed at a particular site. That means higher prices and rents. Again, lower-income residents pay more to subsidize

drivers. And removing parking minimums doesn't mean no new parking spaces will be built. It just allows market demand to direct the amount of parking built.

Combined with investment in making it easier to walk, bike, roll, take transit, or even park further out and hop on a downtown shuttle, parking reforms can help us create more neighborhoods where the personal cost of owning a car isn't a prerequisite to living in Bend.

Eliminating unfair subsidies for parking also creates revenue we can do other great things with. Parking benefit districts take fees generated by a neighborhood's streets and put them back into improving that neighborhood, like street improvements that will benefit everyone who works in or visits our downtown. And technology can help us to build a dynamic, equitable parking system.

It can be hard to see the bigger picture when even small parking policy changes spark strong reactions and tightly focused conversations. But each step we take toward responsibly managing public parking space helps us to build a better future for Bend's environment, housing market, and transportation system. I'm confident that as part of this council's overall vision and policy goals, parking reform will make Bend a safer, fairer and more pleasant place to live.

■ Melanie Kebler was elected to the Bend City Council in November 2020. Views expressed are her own.

Letters policy

We welcome your letters. Letters should be limited to one issue, contain no more than 250 words and include the writer's signature, phone number and address for verification. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject poetry, personal attacks, form letters, letters submitted elsewhere and those appropriate for other sections of The Bulletin. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

Guest columns

Your submissions should be between 550 and 650 words; they must be signed; and they must include the writer's phone number and address for verification. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those submitted elsewhere. Locally submitted columns alternate with national columnists and commentaries. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

How to submit

Please address your submission to either My Nickel's Worth or Guest Column and mail, fax or email it to The Bulletin. Email submissions are preferred.

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Write: My Nickel's Worth/Guest Column
P.O. Box 6020
Bend, OR 97708

Fax: 541-385-5804

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The coronavirus may not be able to mutate beyond control

BY FAYE FLAM

Bloomberg
It's been about a year since the early coronavirus alarms were raised, and despite a decline in infections, new fears are rising up. New COVID-19 variants are making pessimists worry that an even bigger next wave may be coming.

It's true that the virus is mutating in ways more profound than biologists anticipated last summer. But new research also suggests that there may be limits to how many tricks the coronavirus has up its sleeve — and that may make it easier for vaccines to keep up.

If scientists have been somewhat blindsided by the variants, it's because they hadn't fully realized the way the coronavirus tends to mutate — in a way that's distinct from influenza or HIV. This virus has a talent for shape-shifting by dropping pieces of its genetic code.

Early on, a few scientists observed

these so-called deletion mutations by studying virus samples from patients with compromised immune systems. Such patients can be crucibles for viral evolution because the virus survives in their cells for months, making copies of itself all the while.

The mutations that scientists were observing in individual patients were essentially the same as those now seen in the new variants. Molecular biologist Kevin McCarthy of the University of Pittsburgh, who analyzed mutations in immune-compromised patients, found this eye-opening. "Evolution in that patient, in some ways, foreshadowed what the virus was going to do all over the world," he said.

McCarthy's group published its findings earlier this month in *Science*. Another group of researchers published a similar comparison in December in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Last spring and summer, scientists

had considered SARS-CoV-2 to be somewhat mutation-averse, because it contains a molecular proofreading mechanism. When a mutated virus replicates, this mechanism corrects it. Human cells and those of other animals have various such proofreading systems to allow them to replicate without too many errors. Influenza viruses and HIV do not — which is one reason those viruses continue to evolve too fast for a single vaccine.

However, it turns out that the coronavirus' proofreader lets one type of mutation through: a section of missing genetic code. So the virus is able to eject sections of code and still replicate — and still get transmitted to other people.

McCarthy says he came to appreciate this in the early fall when he was asked about some of the deletions found in a patient. "I started looking at all these genomic sequences of SARS-CoV-2 that had been deposited

from all over the world in a public database," he said. "And I started finding additional examples."

The deletions can allow viral proteins to change their shapes in ways that could evade both the proofreading mechanism and the human immune system. That's what people are worried about, McCarthy explained. The first new variant that made big news — the B.1.1.7 variant that spread so fast in the U.K. — has two of these deletions.

B.1.1.7's big advantage seems to be an increased ability to transmit between people. It's also a basic principle of evolution that the more that humans produce antibodies to a virus — because they've been infected before or because they've been vaccinated — the greater will be the advantage for any new variant that can elude those antibodies.

Penn State University evolutionary biologist Andrew Read likens this to

the introduction of new predators on an island. The animals already there either die or adapt — by growing shells, by climbing or burrowing, or by acquiring the ability to fight back.

If the coronavirus develops an anti-vaccine strategy, we will need a counter strategy.

That could mean upgrading the existing vaccines so that they induce a broader range of antibodies. It also might help to give people different vaccines for their first and second doses — an approach that needs to be tested in clinical trials.

A year ago, some people thought the course of the pandemic could be foretold according to simple formulas. As the complexities of the coronavirus have become apparent, scientists have grown less confident in their predictions. But that also means there's no reason to assume the pandemic will never go away.

■ Faye Flam is a Bloomberg columnist.