

Transparency, accountability require public meetings

A good opportunity to debate and seek solutions regarding the impact of Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 restrictions in Eastern Oregon was missed last week when top elected leaders from seven counties staged an unannounced meeting in Prairie City.

Ostensibly, the meeting was labeled an "information seminar" and was organized by Lake County Commissioner Mark Albertson. At its base, the aim of the meeting — to discuss what is perceived as a disconnect between Brown's administration, the state health care authority and rural residents — was a good one. Clearly there does exist a chasm of misunderstanding between the governor's actions regarding COVID-19 and how those decisions impacted rural communities. Elected lawmakers should, indeed, convene to discuss and debate the concerns of their constituents.

The problem — and make no mistake, it is a problem — is the session was essentially planned and, initially, executed in secret. The meeting was not announced to the public. There was no agenda released through area newspapers informing voters of the purpose of the meeting. That means, then, that duly elected leaders — regardless of their motives — thought it proper to meet and discuss important issues without allowing their bosses — the voters — know about it.

For most on the lunatic fringe of the political spectrum across our nation — and in Eastern Oregon — such niceties are not that big a deal. Who cares, the thinking may go, if a group of elected leaders meet in secret and discuss issues that are pertinent? If the problem gets solved, it doesn't matter.

The challenge to that type of thinking is it doesn't fit the philosophy of a democratic government. Regardless of the issue, despite what may or may not splash across the front pages or the television screen, democracy and its rules endure. Democracy does not pardon secrecy with elected officials.

The two members of the Grant County Court at the meeting constituted a quorum, and they were deliberating on matters of county business. Oregon law is clear: "All meetings of the governing body of a public body shall be open to the public ... (and) a quorum of a governing body may not meet in private for the purpose of deciding on or deliberating toward a decision on any matter..."

For the Grant County commissioners, this private meeting follows other missteps regarding public meetings in response to COVID-19. The commissioners approved a budget of \$125,000 for the Emergency Operations Center with a plan to reassess in 45 days, but the EOC spent almost \$200,000 before going back to county court well after the 45 days were up. We know this because public meeting laws require minutes be kept, and this is documented in the official minutes.

The commissioners voted that EOC expenditures over \$200 would need to be brought before the county court for approval. Again, this is in the required meeting minutes. However, thousands of dollars in expenses over \$200 were authorized without approval by the county court. The public missed the opportunity to hear deliberations about these expenditures.

The commissioners said it was an emergency, but that does not negate the need to follow public meeting laws.

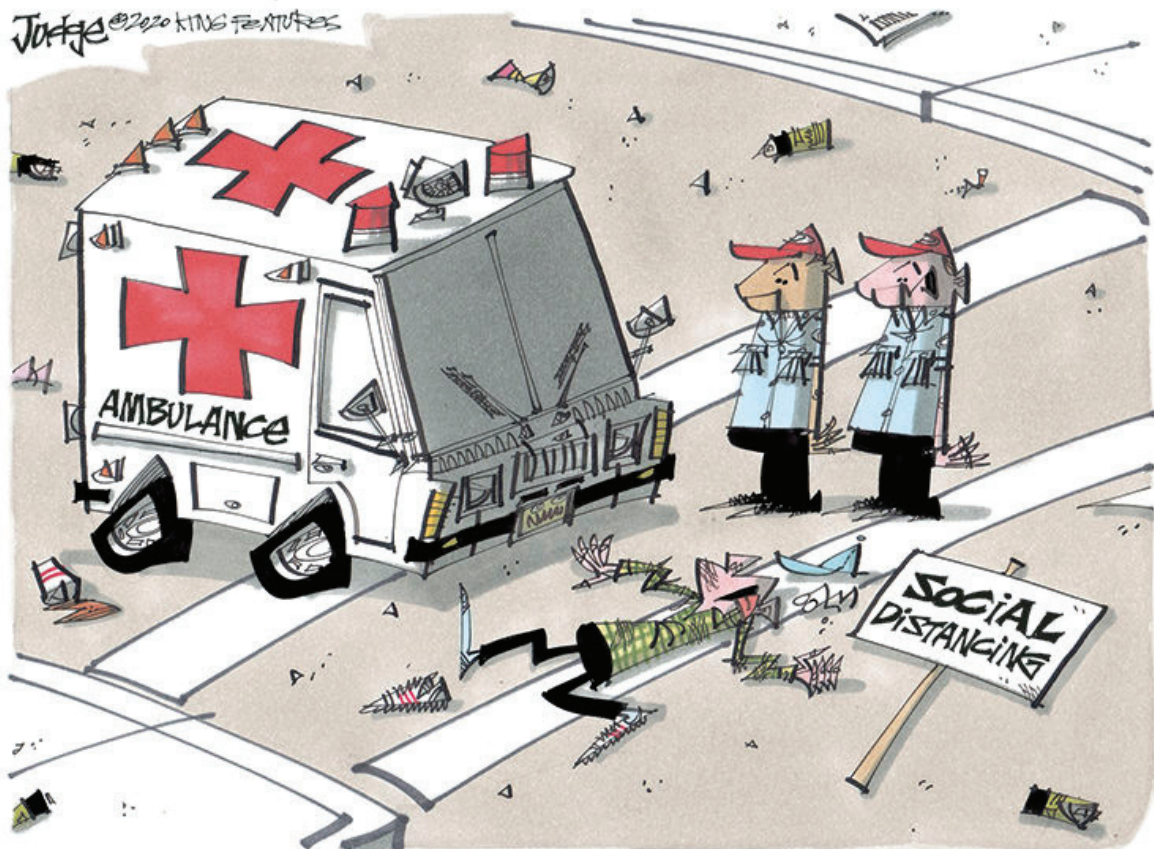
The law addresses emergency situations and allows emergency meetings, but it still requires a good faith effort to provide notice. It specifies that minutes must still be taken at an emergency meeting, and if one is held with less than 24 hours notice, the minutes must "describe the emergency justifying less than 24 hours' notice."

The law outlines that telephone or online meetings can also be held, but they must follow all of the other public meeting requirements, and the public must be given a place where they can listen to the meeting at the time it occurs.

When Oregon's public meeting laws were drafted, the legislators knew the governing bodies would face emergencies, and they allowed flexibility to deal with them. Given that the laws address emergencies, citing an emergency is not a great excuse for ignoring these important laws that ensure public access.

For transparency in government actions for the public, and for holding government officials accountable, public meetings are absolutely essential. Public meeting laws ensure the public can be informed and participate in their government.

As the foundation of democracy, we hope our public officials will remember the public when planning future meetings.



"APPARENTLY HE GOT TRAMPLED BY THE CROWD."

FARMER'S FATE

In the Stinky Room

(Sung to the tune of The Tiki Room.)

All the bears share squares
 With a delightful perfume
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 Cha chagachuka, cha chagachuka
 Cha chagachuka, cha chagachuka
 Welcome to our outdoor hideaway
 You lucky people, you
 There's plenty of paper, so wipe away
 In our own little blue canoe
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 All the bears share squares with a delightful perfume
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 This corona pandemic is like a dirty word
 makes a sneeze something better not seen or heard.
 Normally we'd grab a tissue and sneeze away
 enjoying spring pollen in a pretty bouquet,
 But in the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 The Charmin bears may share squares with Cottenelle



Brianna Walker

But you won't have enough for show and tell. It's a two-holer Kholer with a delightful view. They're six feet apart, don't let that worry you. A wee bit of distance makes for good social pals when you're dealing with such private locales. In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room
 Where the yellow jackets are attracted to
 In the stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky room.
 It's a happy place, and I think you'll agree.

It's a palace that fills one with pleasure and glee. But while sharing is nice and a kind thing to do I'm OK without #sharing a square with you. When it comes to my TP, I'm a bit boorish. I don't want my pretty paper squares to squish. But here in our outdoor hideaway, there's no need to share, at least not right away. We've got Sears and Roebucks along with the news and we've increased the circulation for three other reviews. So while the bears shake their hiney and dance a tune Rest assured we've got you covered in the stinky room.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fix Northwest Fourth and Fifth streets

To the Editor:
 I'm a local resident here in John Day for over 40 years. I must say I'm appalled at how bad the road is on the Northwest Fourth and Fifth loop road. The potholes are huge. They've been that way for over four years. What's up with that? It's the worst road in John Day. I bet if a department of transportation worker or a council member lived on this road, it would be fixed. We pay good tax dollars, we should get nice roads to drive on. There are grants out there for these things. Heck, a dump truck full of gravel isn't costly. How about some chip sealing? It's getting costly, I'm sure, for the residents who do live on Northwest Fourth and Fifth streets. Shocks, front end alignment — heck, tires are costly. Let's pull together and get these roads fixed.

Lelan Lee
 John Day

'When it comes to protests'

To the Editor:
 I have never been, nor do I believe I will ever be, someone who would protest. I do believe we all have the right to protest, but rioting only hurts the innocent, and that is never right. I am finding our governor a bit two faced when it comes to protests. When the Malheur protest was going on to bring to light the overreach of our BLM, Gov. Kate Brown ordered it stopped by any means! She sent in the feds, the state cops, etc., to stop a protest that wasn't harming anyone. I read they were cleaning the Malheur refuge buildings up, but then I read where they created a mess too. We shall never know the truth of that, but they were not physically hurting anyone. Did I agree with

them occupying the refuge, no! I did understand they were taking a desperate measure to get attention to government overreach of ranchers. I did appreciate the fact they remained peaceful. Did they carry firearms, yes! They did not use them; you can be armed and not use your firearm. You can also be unarmed by the means of firearms and still deal destruction by arming yourself with bricks, baseball bats, explosives, etc., and deal a lot of harm to innocent people and businesses as we see happening across America right now. So why is one OK and not the other? A man was killed standing for his beliefs because Kate Brown ordered it stopped by any means, and he never once threw a brick, damaged a business or hurt a human being. Now because most of our government leaders are looking for any way to tear America apart, physically and mentally, so they can have things their way, it's all of the sudden OK to endorse the abuse going on. I watched in horror, as almost everyone has, the senseless killing of George Floyd, and I found it hard to believe those officers involved were not arrested on site. We need to stop destroying the freedoms and the America our ancestors worked so hard to gain for us. All lives matter.

Rusty Clark
 Monument

'Department heads are responsible for knowing the details of their approved budget'

To the Editor:
 Wow! \$75,000 over-budget. The Emergency Operations Center made \$75,000 of unauthorized expenditures. Department heads are responsible for knowing the details of their approved budget, and any restrictions placed on it. In this case, no purchases over \$200 were allowed without the court's

approval. Apparently the requests for these purchases never came before the court. Commissioner Sam Palmer, Sheriff Palmer's brother, is listed as the EOC public information officer. Commissioner Jim Hamsher is listed as the court liaison to the EOC. They are also members of the county Budget Committee. Were they making decisions on additional expenditures outside of court public meetings? These decisions should not be made behind closed doors.

EOC says they have applied for a grant but have not heard yet if they are going to get it. This is gambling with our tax dollars.

Eleven computers? When the pandemic is over, will these be given to the other departments that have been operating for years with antiquated equipment? Former EOC Incident Commander Dave Dobler is one of Sheriff Palmer's deputies. Will Sheriff Palmer now claim all the purchases belong to his department? And why were Jim and Sam deputized? People are usually deputized to make decisions and act on behalf of the sheriff. Jim and Sam already have authority through the county court to make decisions for the county. I thought the EOC was separate from the sheriff's department. The water here is getting mighty muddy.

We're talking your tax dollars — in a time of austerity. People are on furlough or have lost their jobs. Income tax dollars are not coming into the state coffers as anticipated. Oregon sends some of these monies back to Grant County. There are not going to be as many dollars to share. The county is going to have to make adjustments. And now the county has \$75,000 more in bills to pay that were not anticipated. Will the grant, if it comes through, cover all those? The budget of every department in the county will be impacted in one way or another. If services have to be cut, we will be impacted also.

Eva Harris
 Canyon City



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