

County's public records policy keeps the public in the dark

Grant County's public records policy is problematic on several levels, and it certainly seems as if county officials are trying to make it more difficult for the public to see these public records.

The policy is not only unnecessary in most situations, it is also causing confusion and delays among county staff. Worst of all, county officials have routinely — and illegally — ignored records requests that were submitted following this policy, which is supposed to ensure county officials obey public records laws and treat everyone fairly.

The policy adopted late last year requires approval from the county court, or the county judge, before any county department can release any documents.

If you want to see a list of people who filed to run for office, the county clerk will now need approval from the court before she can give that out. If you need information about a Planning Commission decision, the planning director is going to have to ask before delivering it. If you want to see the county budget — you get the picture.

The problem isn't that the county has a defined policy. The problem is that the county court is inserting itself between the public and public officials, even when it is unnecessary.

For years, the county clerk and treasurer have provided documents directly to the public without having to ask for permission. They are public records, after all.

If these public officials had a question about whether or not a document could be released, they could easily ask for guidance from the court or county counsel in that situation — while continuing to provide routine records they don't have questions about directly to the public on their own without interference.

Now, however, they must be considered about retribution if they violate the county court's policy, simply by providing public records to the public.

During a recent interview, a county official told us they could not answer questions we had because it might violate the public records policy. We pointed out that we already had the records and were merely trying to get an explanation of what they meant, and after some thought, the official agreed with us and answered the questions.

But the fear is real. County officials are afraid to discuss public business and answer questions, which has nothing to do with records requests, because of the county's public records policy.

This should concern everyone. These public officials are doing public business, your business.

They should be able to explain to anyone who asks how they are conducting business on behalf of the public — how they are spending your tax dollars. And when public officials won't talk, or are afraid to talk, there is a serious breakdown in our system of open government.

Beyond that, though, these public records are your records. Oregon law states "every person has a right to inspect any public record of a public body in this state" except for certain, limited exceptions.

The county's public records policy seems to ignore the underlying importance of public access to information about what government officials are doing. Instead, it seems as if they are purposely putting up red tape — more hoops to jump through — to make it more difficult for the public to stay informed.

If they don't have anything to hide, why make access to records more difficult?

The worst part about the policy is that, after county officials have required us to fill out a form and wait for court approval, they haven't been following through to fulfill those requests, as required by law.

Since May, the Eagle has submitted only three records requests to the county, and none have been fulfilled. Legally, the county is supposed to provide the documents or an explanation within 15 days. We're still waiting on a credit card statement requested May 15; documentation related to COVID-19 county court labor expenses requested July 16; and tort claim notices requested Aug. 14.

By forcing the public to jump through hoops to request records and then by ignoring the law about fulfilling them, county officials are keeping public records from the public. By implementing a policy that causes county employees to fear explaining county business, the public is being further kept in the dark.

The county court members should remember they represent the public. More importantly, they should recognize that county records belong to the public.

Grant County should revise its unnecessary public records policy to make clear that county officials can provide nonexempt records directly to the public without delay or interference — unless they have a question about releasing the record.

The county court should make it very clear that answering questions does not, and cannot, violate the records policy so county employees can explain what is going on.

And the county should actually follow Oregon's public records law.

Unless, that is, they have something to hide.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'The biggest landslide in the country's history'

To the Editor:

The upcoming election cannot be over soon enough. While supporters of the president hold huge patriotic rallies including motorcycle rallies and boat rallies, supporters of the Democratic nominee riot, burn down cities and loot stores.

I supported the once great Democratic party for many years, but no more! Today's party has become controlled by radicals who have turned the party into something ugly, dangerous and destructive to America. The party has presented no viable presidential candidates with the exception of Tulsi Gabbard who was too smart, patriotic, a military officer and an independent thinker who the radicals could not control so the party shunned her like a rattlesnake.

The current panic by the Democrats is another example of lunacy. President Trump will nominate a new Supreme Court justice, whether before the election or after, doesn't really make any difference.

The great American silent majority has been watching the unbelievable lunacy by the Democratic party and is not happy. President Trump will not only be reelected, but we wouldn't be surprised if he is reelected by the biggest landslide in the country's history.

Frank C. Gardner
Fernley, Nevada

'Talk about poetic justice'

To the Editor:

Talk about poetic justice! I wonder if that self-centered moron many Grant County residents helped elect president has swallowed "a light bulb and chased it with a cocktail of bleach and Lysol?"

Terry Steele
Ritter

Non-masking complaints

To the Editor:

Does a complaint exist if the filer is anonymous, or the accused is not allowed to face the complainant?

The Sixth Amendment provides that a person accused of a crime has the right to confront a witness against him or her in a criminal action. (Cornell Law School).

The Oregon Health Authorities clearly defines "People with a disability or medical condition may request accommodation from the business if they cannot wear one." Did the complainants stop to think that the people not wearing a mask had a disability or medical condition?

A public records request has been filed for copies of the complaints that were submitted against Chester's Thriftway, the response so far has been:

"Please let me know what your relationship is with this company. Please note if the complainant requests to be confidential that information is never released.

"The complaints you are requesting are still in process and several are anonymous. Until the complaints are closed and our Administrator approves the request they cannot be released."

We all have a right to know the nature of the complaints filed against one of the two grocery stores that keep our county going. Chester's, Huffman's Market and the Mountain Mart deserve better

than this. This looks like a veiled attempt to coerce the people of Grant County into complying with something most do not agree with, which is low ball, even for the more progressive-minded in the county.

Again, the question is simple, if an American is not allowed to face their accuser, is the complaint valid? I would argue no, but some are fighting hard to gain your compliance. Are you willing to comply?

Maybe if you get hungry enough, or it becomes too expensive to shop out of town, you will.

Billie Jo George
Bates

Rob Raschio for judge

To the Editor:

Having worked for the Law Office of Robert Raschio for five years prior to retiring, I can tell you that I believe Rob will be a great circuit court judge for Grant and Harney counties. Rob totally believes in our justice system and takes it very seriously. He has, and endorses, integrity practicing law. Having extensive experience in child dependency cases, he is adamant about keeping our kids safe in our communities. He believes that everyone is entitled to the same constitutional rights and is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law, and that the punishment should fit the crime.

Rob Raschio has compassion and understanding for those who come from socio-economic disadvantaged environments and believes there are programs available for life-changing education if a person chooses to better themselves and their situation. Rob would work hard to create a positive relationship between the public and the courts.

Rob is a family man and loves living and raising his kids in Grant County. His wife's family is from Harney County — point being, they are very invested in these two counties and are in it for the long run. At the Law Office of Robert Raschio, we often sponsored community events and youth sports teams.

Rob will work hard on behalf of our communities, and I hope that you will join me in voting for Rob Raschio as our next circuit court judge.

Kerry L. Allen
Mt. Vernon

'Rob Raschio will make an excellent judge'

To the Editor:

Supporting Rob Raschio for circuit court judge is an easy choice for me. I love the feeling of community in Grant County, and I know that this is something Rob will continue to uphold. He will do his absolute best to protect our community and those in it. The people here are eagerly willing to help one another out, whether it's with work, family or anything else they could possibly need, and Rob is no exception to that.

As a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children, I have worked with Rob through dependency proceedings in Grant and Harney counties since 2015. He has demonstrated his legal knowledge and dedication to advocating for his clients consistently over the years we've worked together. Rob is a skilled planning partner and will increase accountability in our dependency court proceedings.

His law firm sponsors local events and youth organizations, and Rob often volunteers his personal time to give to the most vulnerable

people in our community through his church and charitable events. At work and in the community, Rob is a caring and generous guy. You can often find him out and about with a big smile on his face.

I know that Rob Raschio will make an excellent judge for the circuit court in Grant and Harney counties, and he certainly has my vote. I hope that you will join me in voting for him this November. He is the right man for the job, no doubt in my mind.

Tracey Blood
Canyon City

'Who will apologize to the dedicated EOC staffers?'

To the Editor:

Where to start? Sex talk and the continuing saga of the Emergency Management Center (EOC)? I don't even try to follow the sex talk because it is just meandering smut stirred up just in time for elections. Go figure. The EOC story runs on with no end in sight. The EOC staff resigned, but no one asked why. The decision was made to move EOC out of the airport, although that location alone met the dictates of the Federal Emergency Management Act (FEMA) in effect at that time, which was based primarily on such emergencies and recoveries as Katrina. The FEMA directives changed daily and required many "do-overs." A security breach by identified airport staff was witnessed and security violated again by person or persons unknown. Equipment, keys, supplies, and receipts "disappear." The EOC continues to be disparaged by those who have never dealt with a pandemic but reap the rewards of the successful pioneering actions of others that lent a platform for them to brag from. Amazingly, the elusive keys, supplies, equipment and receipts sprang forth. Now, where were they hiding? In plain sight? Intentional? But, wait, another document is missing, and the media has another target to pounce on. Have they missed anyone from the original EOC staff for their smear tactics? All the reporting thus far has been based on assumed accurate information from the incompetent and uninformed, which, if you consider it, can be easily traced back to the source. In my opinion, journalism standards are deteriorating, and it only seeks out a target to vilify. Does smut have more value than the truth? William Shakespeare is quoted, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." Who will apologize to the dedicated EOC staffers who assured Grant County was adequately represented and enabled CARES and the county to move to Level 2 opening? You might give a thought as to the 75% reimbursement of FEMA expenses before you blindly believe the county is in dire straits.

Judy Kerr
Canyon City

Editor's note: Former COVID-19 Emergency Operations Center staffer Jodi Cook thanked the Eagle for providing her the documentation from our investigation that states she provided "no backup" for county court labor costs. "I hadn't seen that detailed form with notes before, so thanks for sharing," she said. Cook said there is backup. The Eagle will continue investigating.



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