

Public records belong to all of us

When the Blue Mountain Eagle and other newspapers request access to information from the government, it sometimes hits the “Wall of No.”

Public records are part of the regular diet of newsrooms. But some public bodies throw up tall hurdles — usually in the form of big expenses — to block access to those records. Records that took public money to produce.

Back in 2018, for example, reporter Jackson Hogan with the Bend Bulletin, now a sister paper to the Eagle, asked 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 and charge \$1,000. Still, prohibitively pricey for The Bulletin and other newspapers.

Oregon 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 the public interest.

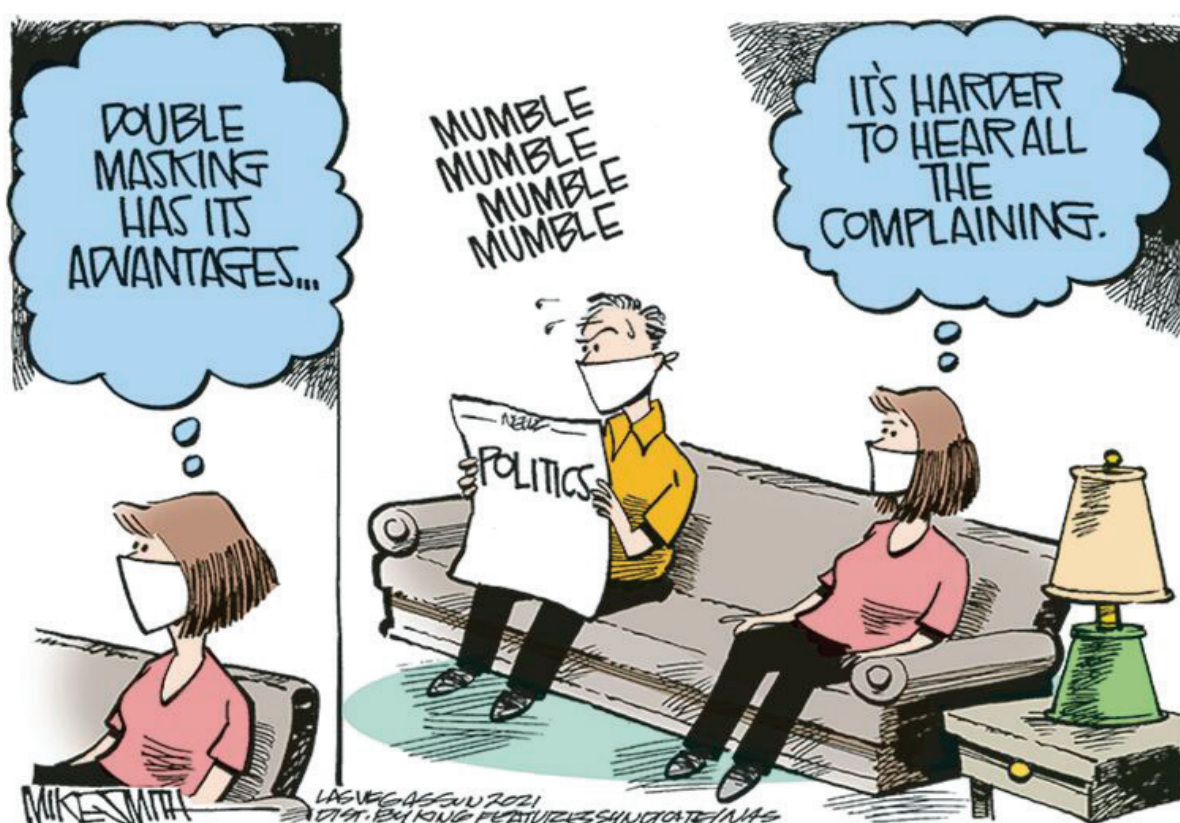
State Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie, is sponsoring the bill. She introduced it on behalf of the Society for Professional Journalists.

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

News media is not defined in the bill. That can be tricky. Maybe the Eagle, East Oregonian or Bend 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 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 the intent of HB 2485 is to help journalists tear down the “Wall of No.” But all Oregonians have the right to know what their government is doing.



GUEST COMMENT

‘The forest for the trees’

By George Wuerthner

The recent article “Finding Common Ground on Active Forest Management” quotes several people about restoring forest health. None of these people have expertise on forest ecology, except James Johnson from the OSU forestry school. The irony is that all these people, including Johnson, ignore the science from other scientists to promote logging the forest.

The problem with the Malheur collaborative is an inability to see the forest for the trees. The focus is on trees, not healthy forest ecosystems. Forest logging degrades, rather than restores, healthy forest ecosystems.

First, there is no scientific agreement on the past fire history of the Malheur forests. Yes, some of them likely burned frequently (10-20 years), but other studies suggest many forests, particularly at higher elevations in Eastern Oregon, burned at longer intervals and often at mixed to high severity.

The idea that “fire suppression” has led to substantial changes in forest density and conditions is overrated. It ignores the fact that the middle of the last century (1940-1980s) was moister

and cooler than in the past. This significantly reduced ignitions and fire spread. Nature was good at suppressing fires.

Second, the goal of “active” management is to remove the natural factors that shape forest ecosystems, including bark beetles, wildfire, drought and other factors to “restore” the forest to some pre-existing conditions shaped by the historical conditions at that time.

The problem is that we no longer have the same conditions. Climate change is a new influence on the forests of the West. Which trees have the right genetic makeup to survive, say drought or fight off bark beetles or even to survive fires, is unknown. I challenge any of the collaborative members to walk through the forest with me and tell me which trees have the requisite genetics to survive, say bark beetles or drought.

Furthermore, the idea that logging can “restore” forests is absurd. Forests are restored by the natural processes mentioned above, including beetles, fires, etc., since they respond to the current climatic conditions and select the trees that best adapted to the current conditions.

Part of the premise for logging

is the idea that dead trees are somehow undesirable. In reality there are many species that live in mortal fear of green forests.

Native bees increase in recent high-severity burns. And 45% of the bird species in the Northern Rockies forests (which includes the Blue Mountains) rely on dead trees for foraging, nesting and roosting. Dead trees in streams provide the bulk of habitat for aquatic species. And roads created for logging constitute a significant source of sedimentation in streams and disturb and displace species like elk.

Large trees (over 21 inches) store the bulk of carbon in forests. Even dead trees store huge amounts of carbon. Logging releases carbon, which is why active forest management is the most significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Oregon.

The single focus on restoring the forest’s physical appearance shaped by climatic conditions of a couple of hundred years ago does not restore the ecological processes that create healthy forest ecosystems.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist who has published 38 books including two dealing with fire ecology. He lives in Bend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

‘I am here to be an Oregonian, not an Idahoan’

To the Editor:

I am responding to the article in the Feb. 10 issue of the Blue Mountain Eagle regarding the petition to incorporate Eastern Oregon into Idaho. I moved to Eastern Oregon because I wanted to live in Eastern Oregon. Had I wanted to be an Idahoan, I would have moved to Idaho. If, after living here, I changed my mind about Oregon, I would have picked up stakes and moved to Idaho.

If the Idaho border were to be moved to incorporate us here, we would be the new kid on the block. Would Idahoans be happy to dilute their resources by sharing those with us? We certainly wouldn’t be taking our Oregon resources and benefits with us to Idaho. As Ross Burkhart said in that article, the process to change the border can take years, and it isn’t guaranteed. And he says the politics in Idaho can change and are changing.

Our energy would be better spent in communication with the powers that be in Salem. Lynn Findley said as much.

I am here to be an Oregonian, not an Idahoan. So don’t impose on me your dislike of Oregon and force me to move just to remain an Oregonian. I like where I am. If people feel Oregon has disappointed them and Idaho would be better, they have a choice now to be in Idaho without changing my life.

Eva Harris
Canyon City

‘The Republican party I grew up with’

To the Editor:

John Adams had no use for George Washington. He considered G.W. uneducated, unfit for political positions. Yet, when Mr. Washington was elected in 1788 and again in 1792,

Mr. Adams did not agitate for a violent revolution against Mr. Washington. Rather he trusted that the president would voluntarily step aside, which he did, peacefully. Mr. Adams was elected, peacefully, in 1796, and a great national tradition was set in motion.

The elections of 1960, 2000 and 2016 certainly could have been protested, but the losing party knew they would get another chance in four years.

In 2020, the Republican party chose to abandon this 232-year-old successful formula of a regular, four-year peaceful revolution in favor of lies and hate and violence.

The Republican party I grew up with championed honesty, fiscal responsibility, forthright politicians, citizen responsibility and a bright future for our children.

Now, not so much.

John Wolter
John Day

Health department doing ‘wonderful job’

To the Editor:

Complaining about government messes, both local and national, is something we all love to do. And there is usually plenty to complain about. So sometimes we don’t even notice when a government agency does a great job.

We noticed. The Grant County Health Department has been doing a wonderful job handling the big challenge of COVID-19 vaccinations. Both vaccination events that we attended at the fairgrounds were super well-organized and efficient. These are extraordinary challenges for a small agency, and it is remarkable when that work is done so well. And as one fairgrounds worker told us when we attended the first vaccination day for seniors, “This is the biggest event we have had here all year!”

The volunteers did a wonderful job too.

Jim and Sue Kelly
Kimberly

Oppose the River Democracy Act

To the Editor:

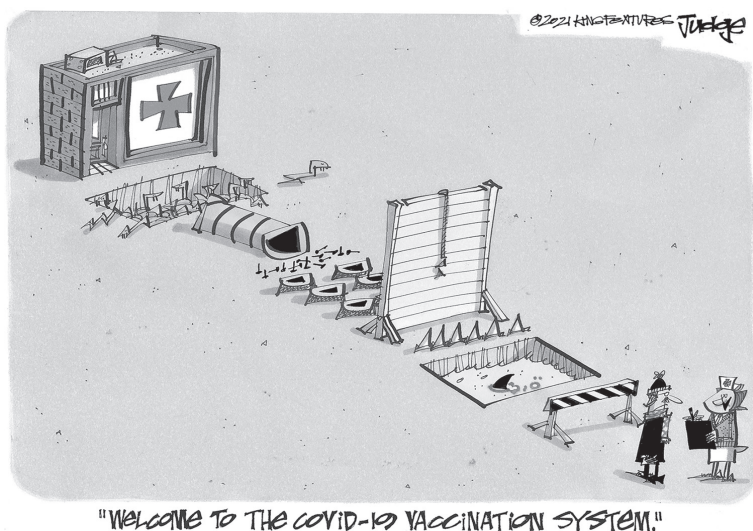
If this new bill passes, 4,700 river miles in Oregon will be included in the wild and scenic designation. Considered a “remarkable achievement” by some, while others see a monster land grab, a back door to more “Lock-Up and Lock-Out.” Increasing the buffer zone from one-quarter to one-half mile on both sides of the rivers, creates approximately 3,008,000 acres of de-facto wilderness. Baker, Union, Wallowa and Grant counties will be saddled with 700 miles. Wallowa County alone 440 miles. Management plans will be developed by the U.S. Forest Service or other agency. Presently the Forest Service is way over its head in managing the forest, so maybe the other agency that is referred to in the Feb. 13 article in the Baker City Herald can take on the chore.

Unsettling, upsetting, disturbing, this is happening under the term democracy. How and when did we lose control to a room full of politicians in Washington, D.C.? Have we become so complacent this is acceptable? Ignoring impacts and input at the local level has become standard operating procedure. Lack of coordination with the counties circumvents local input (coordination is the law). Failure to recognize local concerns was the primary factor in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision withdrawal. “Ditto,” trying it again.

No one cares more for our public lands and waterways than the residents of Eastern Oregon. Federal and state agencies use many tools to protect and preserve special places. Additional restrictions, outside those presently available, are unwarranted.

I’m urging the Eastern Oregon Counties Association to join in and support Baker County’s opposition to the River Democracy Act.

D.M. and Wanda Ballard
Baker City



“WELCOME TO THE COVID-19 VACCINATION SYSTEM.”

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