

Hermiston Herald

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JESSICA KELLER
EDITOR
jkeller@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4533



MAEGAN MURRAY
REPORTER
mmurray@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4532



SEAN HART
REPORTER
smhart@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4534



SAM BARBEE
SPORTS REPORTER
sbarbee@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4542



JEANNE JEWETT
MULTI-MEDIA CONSULTANT
jjewett@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4531



STEPHANIE BURKENBINE
MULTI-MEDIA CONSULTANT
sburkenbine@hermistonherald.com
541-564-4538

To contact the Hermiston Herald for news, advertising or subscription information:

- call 541-567-6457
- e-mail info@hermistonherald.com
- stop by our offices at 333 E. Main St.
- visit us online at: www.hermistonherald.com

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Cause and effect

“YOU SHOULD WRITE SOMETHING ABOUT CAUSE AND EFFECT:” my editor told me. Regular readers will note that she reads differently now; apparently using brackets to indicate Editorspeak causes the words to disappear on the internet. This was not a problem back in the quill and parchment days of my youth, but I can adapt.

“Cause and effect” is an interesting topic, in theory simple to understand but in practice, not so much. Hold a pencil over the floor. Let go. The pencil drops and hits the floor. The cause of the drop is gravity. The effect is a dropping pencil hitting the floor. Simple, right? So what kind of problems could possibly arise with something so easy?

The first problem is that the human brain is wired to find patterns, even where patterns do not exist. See further examples at “that cloud looks like a bunny” or “those cracks in the lava flow are identical to a road map of Hermiston, except for the lack of Beebe and Grouse.” This wiring can be useful at times, but it also leads to the logical fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc: “After this, therefore because of this,” or its close cousin, “Correlation is not causation.” In short, just because two things happen close together in time does not mean they are related. The bells here in town that ring around sundown are not causing the sun to go down. We do not need to bang drums to save the sun from a solar eclipse. Stepping on a crack does not hurt your mother’s back — that effect was caused when she slipped on the Matchbox cars you left laying in the living room. Don’t ask me how I know that last one.

There are entire classes of people who do not grasp the basics of cause and effect, or at least affect not to. “I was arrested for no reason!” they’ll say, ignoring the fact that they were pushing a shopping cart of unpaid-for



THOMAS CREASING
OFF THE BENCH
Herald columnist

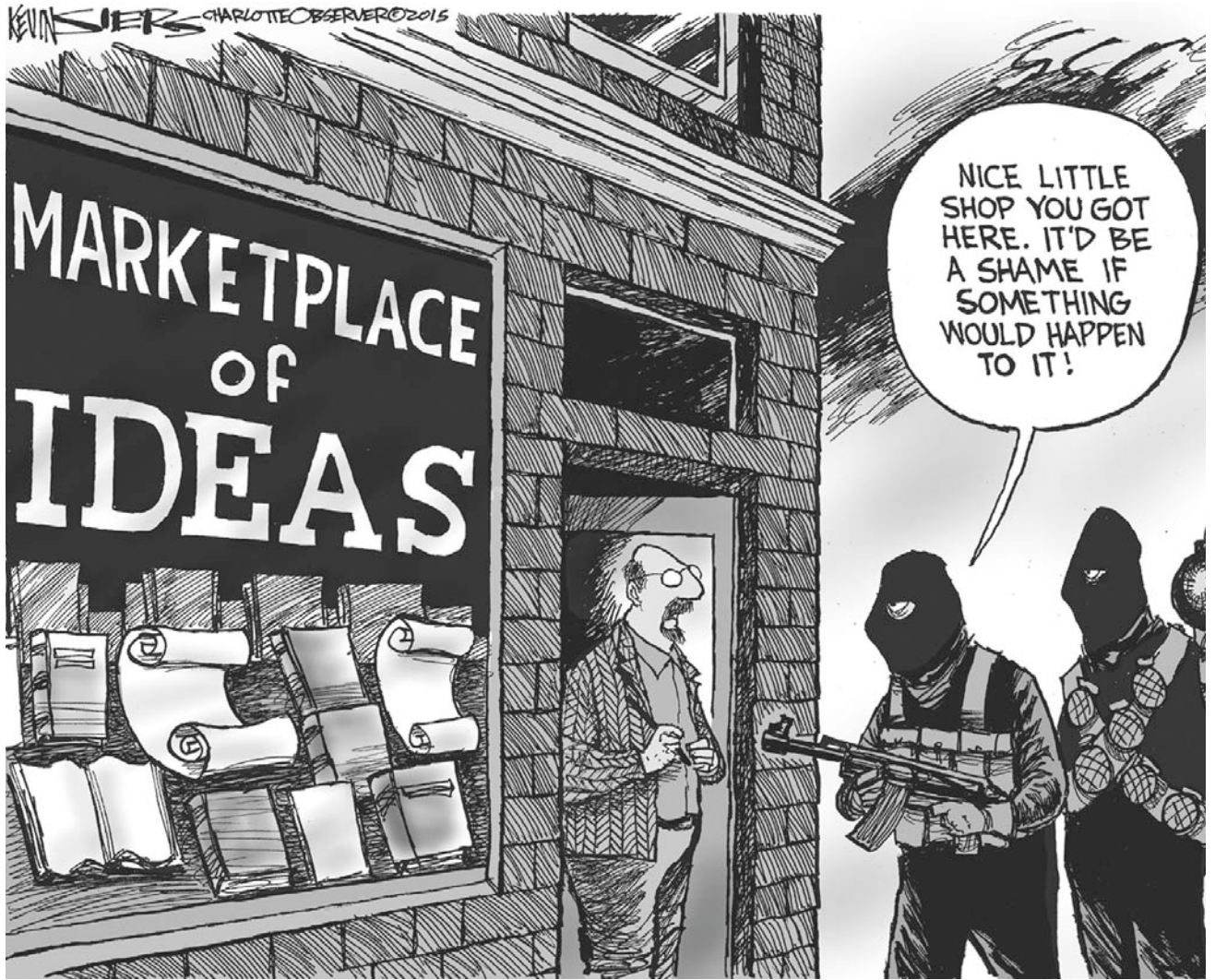
merchandise out of a local store when it happened. The problem isn’t limited to the criminal class, either — scientists used to believe that maggots spontaneously appeared on meat until Francesco Redi proved differently with an experiment. Likewise, politicians believe that jobs spontaneously appear because they give their cronies money — an experiment that has been demonstrating drastically different results for nearly the decade.

One of the biggest problems people have in dealing with cause and effect is the combination of not knowing, or not considering, what effects their actions will have. In fairness, sometimes it’s just the first pebble of the avalanche — Gavrilo Princip could not possibly have had any idea that his shots would be the first of World War I. On the other hand, only the willfully blind could have truly believed that destroying Iraq under Hussein would somehow have led to a calmer and better Middle East. Sometimes the Butterfly Effect involves a butterfly the size of Mothra, after all.

Just what would be the point of all this, you ask? Well, in part it’s because when the editor says ::JUMP:: you respond with “how high?” Unless, of course, the response is, “Well, you know, the ceiling’s sort of low and my knees are acting up and my feet hurt...” More likely it’s to get some discussion on the table in regard to an upcoming column on “what were they thinking?” But that’s going to be 600 words for a different day.

That’s just the caused opinion of an opinionated guy. You can cause an effect here by sharing your opinions in response! Letters to the editor or by email to hermistonherald.offthebench@gmail.com. Names of the terminally shy will be withheld on request.

— *Thomas Creasing is a Herald columnist and municipal court judge*



Don’t brush off judge issue

The question of whether the Hermiston municipal court judge should be elected by voters or appointed by the City Council should not be casually disregarded as just a minor, insignificant part of the proposed city charter and deserves closer consideration by residents and city officials, alike.

For the past 50 years, Hermiston residents have elected their municipal court judge, before whom people appear when they receive traffic or other misdemeanor citations. The City Council is seeking to change that in the proposed new city charter.

One question Hermiston residents should be asking, however, and one to which they deserve a thoughtful, concise response, is why? Why would the community be better served by having an appointed municipal court as opposed to an elected one? Why is this in the community’s best interests, and how will this benefit the community as a whole? Why are do City Council members think they are better suited to decide who should be municipal court just than residents?

Right now, the matter of who will select the municipal court judge is being presented as part of the whole city charter package, after the City Council elected to not have voters decide on the issue separately. Even if Hermiston residents are largely ambivalent about the issue, how the municipal



JESSICA KELLER
HERMISTON HERALD
Editor

court judge will be selected will impact them, and community members need to know, when city officials are making decisions, they are making them with the residents’ best interests in mind and not arbitrarily. And city officials always need to be able to justify their decisions.

Thus far, city officials have not been able to justify why this change is necessary, and the reasons behind why the municipal court judge should be appointed, rather than elected, have been largely unsatisfactory and the benefits vague or minimal.

The logic behind appointing, as opposed to electing, a judge, is a little flimsy, and the few arguments presented to the public thus far in support of the move have not been much better.

One argument for appointing the judge that has been presented in the past is, by doing so, the city will have more control over the position. The reasons why additional control is needed, however, are vague and have not been adequately addressed. First, the city already sets the budget for the municipal court. As well, the Hermiston Municipal Court’s existence is entirely at the discretion of city officials, who long ago decided the city should have one.

City Manager Byron Smith also pointed out

recently, apparently as an argument in support of appointment, of the cities that have municipal court judges in Oregon, only five have judges that are elected. The rest are appointed.

But not all cities in Oregon have municipal courts. Many are in counties that have justice courts, which are created at the discretion of county commissioners and are presided over by justices of the peace. In Oregon, justices of the peace duties include presiding over traffic and misdemeanor court cases, exactly the same Hermiston’s municipal court judge. And all justices of the peace in Oregon are elected, as are all state judges.

In terms of what Hermiston should do, the fact that most city municipal court judges are appointed and all justices of the peace are elected do not carry much value on their own when presented as arguments in support of election or appointment.

Parents have long said to their children, “Just because your friends are doing something doesn’t mean you have to do it. If your friends all decided to jump off a bridge, would you jump, too?” The same principle applies in this case.

Smith’s argument that municipal court judge elections are just popularity contests, which suggests voters are not electing the candidates best suited for the job and are voting based on sentiment, is also questionable, if not a gross disservice to

Hermiston residents’ intelligence. Following his logic, if the new charter passes as proposed, City Council members will be appointing the judge. But city councilors are elected, and doesn’t it stand to reason that if municipal court judge elections are popularity contests, so, too, are City Council elections? Why would City Council members be better suited to choose a judge than the public if they, too, are elected based on popularity and not qualification?

But let’s say the popularity-contest argument is justified. How can residents be sure the judge appointed by City Council members were chosen based on qualifications and not because that person is a friend, a former classmate, a neighbor, a member of the same church or someone who owes them a favor? Cronyism and corruption is certainly a possibility, if not a guarantee.

Many questions remain unanswered regarding the municipal court judge issue that deserve attention. We encourage residents to ask them at the next city charter public meeting Tuesday. If nothing else, we encourage City Council members to answer them before moving ahead with any city charter plan. Hermiston residents deserve nothing less.

— *Jessica Keller is the editor of the Hermiston Herald. She can be reached at jkeller@hermistonherald.com*

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Ideas on what should be done

Editor,
Two comments: Please show the Port of Morrow financial figures again along side those for the Port of Umatilla. A heavy line around the “You can GROW

here” logo on the water tower would make it look less like graffiti. A watermelon beneath the logo would catch the eye of visitors to Hermiston.

MIKE MEHRENS
HERMISTON

ELECTED OFFICIALS

STATE

District 29: Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Umatilla Co., 900 Court St. N.E., S-423, Salem, OR 97301, 503-986-1729. 101 S.W. Third St., Pendleton, OR 97801 (541) 278-1396. E-mail: ssen.billhansell@state.or.us.

District 30: Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day; 900 Court St. N.E., S-223 Salem, OR 97301, 503-986-1950. 750 W. Main, John Day, OR 97845, (541) 575-2321. E-mail: ferriolisen@state.or.us.

District 58: Rep. Bob Jenson, R-Pendleton; 900 Court St. N.E., H-480, Salem, OR 97301, 503-986-

1458. 2126 N.W. 21st., Pendleton, OR 97801, (541) 276-2707. E-mail: rep.bobjenson@state.or.us.

District 57: Rep. Greg Smith, R-Morrow, 900 Court St. N.E., H-280, Salem, OR 97301, 503-986-1457. P.O. Box 215, Heppner, OR 97836, (541) 676-5154. E-mail: smith.g.rep@state.or.us.

FEDERAL

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden
Sac Annex Building, 105 Fir St., No. 201, La Grande, OR 97850; (541) 962-7691. E-mail: kathleen_cathey@wyden.senate.gov; (Kathleen Cathey, community repre-

sentative); 717 Hart Building, Washington, D.C. 20510, (202) 224-5244.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley
One World Trade Center, 121 SW Salmon Street, Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; (503) 326-3386; Dirksen Senate Office Building, SDB-40B, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-3753.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (2nd District)
843 E. Main St., Suite 400, Medford, OR 97504, (541) 776-4646, (800) 533-3303; 2352 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515, (202) 225-6730

Letters Policy

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