

Capitol is cumbersome for a reason

I remember the first time I sat in a government meeting, put my head in my hands, and thought, “what is the point of this?”

I was new to reporting, and didn't want to sit until 9 p.m. on an empty stomach and listen to city councilors have the first of what would be many discussions about whether to implement a plastic bag ban in the city. To me the answer seemed obvious. All the councilors, even, seemed to already know how they wanted to vote. But still they talked, and weary audience members listened.

Surprisingly, I made it out of that meeting, and went on to report several others. But in a few years of covering various forms of government, whether school boards, port and county commissions, or city council, I've noticed that pattern endures: discussion at the local government level can seem long, and delves into minutiae of issues that don't seem relevant to the public.

I observed some of the same things at the state government level last week, when my Leadership Hermiston class took a trip to Salem. We were hosted by our State Representative, Greg Smith, and treated to an excellent tour of the statehouse by his legislative assistant, Phil Scheuers. The two-day class included meetings with the governor, speaker of the house and house minority leader. We visited the state courthouse and spoke with several lobbyists that work with Eastern Oregon businesses such as dairy farms and power companies.

We also spent about an hour on the House floor, listening to opening ceremonies and a small amount of discussion. We left, though, during the reading of an individual bill, which lasted more than an hour. As Rep. Smith told us, the senate Republican leader was opposed to the bill, which dealt with end-of-life care, and asked for it to be read in its entirety, 30-plus pages of text. This pushed back several other bills scheduled to be read on the House floor that day. Ultimately, the bill ended up passing, right along party lines.



Leadership Hermiston Class 21 visits with Oregon Governor Kate Brown at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem.

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY FRAN RICE

“If you don't engage in discussion, you become a victim of it.”

Lobbyist Craig Campbell

It took me back to the days of listening to three hours of discussion in which nobody changed their minds, but something Scheuers said after we left gave me pause.

“The reason democracy is meant to be a little cumbersome is that you want debate,” he said. “You don't want quick government. Any time you run something through, you end up spending next session doing cleanup bills, because of unintended consequences.”

He's right, of course, that the process does, and should take time. It's easy to get annoyed when you end up writing what feels like the same story for months, as legislators debate and discuss minor changes that don't seem to have any obvious impact.

But that discourse can mean the difference between good legislation and disastrous legislation. And the fact that we can be privy to those discussions is an under-utilized privilege.

What I'd like to see, both as a reporter and a citizen, is making sure that long debate is worth

it. Are constituents going to be better or worse off as a result of your long-term consideration of an issue? I maintain those councilors could have made up their minds about those plastic bags in two months, rather than the six or seven it took. Something like the gun control bill that passed through the Oregon House last week warrants careful and serious discussion — but I would hope that, too, is important enough to decide in a relatively short time.

It's incumbent on citizens, too, to familiarize themselves with the process. My understanding of state legislative procedures was fuzzy at best prior to this trip, but there's no reason for it to be. If you have a representative like Smith, who makes himself readily available to his constituents, it's your responsibility to take advantage of it. Visit the statehouse, listen in on a committee meeting, learn how local and state government work, and ask questions of your legislators. That's why they're there.

When lobbyist Craig Campbell came to speak to our class, he said: “If you don't engage in discussion, you become a victim of it.”

As citizens of a government in which we're all supposed to have a say, we would do well to remember that.

Jayati Ramakrishnan is a reporter for the Hermiston Herald and East Oregonian.

Flying high with Olympic fever

I'm a Winter Olympics junkie, but several things connected with things happening in PyeongChang have me scratching my head.

Reminiscent of “the artist formerly known as Prince,” the Russian competitors are being referred to as Olympic Athletes from Russia. This is the International Olympic Committee's way of allowing Russian athletes a chance to compete despite the misdeeds of their fellow countrymen and widespread cheating through a government doping program.

They can't be referred to as the Russian team, they aren't allowed to wear their country's colors, they can't carry the Russian flag or play the national anthem and medals won won't go toward the Russian medal count total in history books. But, evidently, they can still use banned substances.

Even with the vetting process, an Olympic curler from Russia tested positive in a preliminary test for a banned substance over the weekend. Seriously, though, curling?

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy watching grown men and women slide around on ice while using a Swiffer to clear the way. But I question why a curling athlete would even need a performance-enhancing drug.

Over the weekend, I was impressed with a seemingly profound statement by Cammi Granato regarding the United States women's hockey team. A former Olympian — she's a 1998 gold medal and 2002 silver medal winner in hockey — she's qualified to give an insider's view. I said seemingly, however, because when a Folgers commercial came on, I realized she pretty much stole the statement from the coffee company.

However, that's not the biggest theft that has occurred

during the 2018 Olympics — that honor (or dishonor) goes to Elizabeth Swaney, a U.S. citizen who represented Hungary in the women's freeski halfpipe.

It seems she manipulated her way into the Olympics by grabbing onto her grandparent's Hungarian heritage and then traveling around the world to compete in low-attended competitions. She “earned” an Olympic berth by

placing in the top 30 of the required number of competitions, which wasn't hard since some contests didn't even draw 15 athletes. She did all this without so much as performing what competitors consider tricks. The key was to stay upright and finish.

I'm not even bragging when I say I could do better than her. However, I know I don't possess the skills of an Olympic athlete — that's why I'm at home watching from my daybed rather than strapping skis on and pretending to be an elite athlete.

My favorite part of the Olympics is short track speed skating. And its relay event — they call it organized chaos — is the bomb. My co-workers seem to think that statement resembles the condition of my desk area.

The thing with short track is I have to wait four years to see it. Unlike many other Olympic events, short track competitions held throughout the year aren't televised.

When my head felt like it would explode last Tuesday, I decided to stay home. When I discovered that short track was being televised, it made the decision that much easier. I feel a relapse coming on this Thursday.

Tammy Malgesini is the community editor. Her column, Inside My Shoes, includes musings about life. Contact her at tmalgesini@eastoregonian.com



Tammy Malgesini INSIDE MY SHOES

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