

MALHEUR ENTERPRISE

The Voice of Malheur County

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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HOUSE BILL 2431

Oregon House Committee on Judiciary

No problem can be solved until its scope and nature can be defined, and that is true with the challenges facing those who use or must comply with the Oregon Public Records Law. I support House Bill 2431 to provide long needed data about how Oregon state agencies are dealing with the law and to assess how either the law or processes for complying with the law can be modified in ways to bring more efficiency and transparency to government operations.

As a journalist for more than 45 years in Oregon, I have used the Oregon Public Records Law for decades to serve the public interest in reporting on government. Agencies vary widely in their performance under the law, with some showing great willingness to follow the principle of open government embodied in the law and others seemingly searching for any way to obstruct access. Delay is a common tool of the latter. So are high fees charged for access to public records. Those fees, particularly for a small news outfit such as the weekly Malheur Enterprise, can be too much to overcome.

This proposal would provide quantitative information that would help bring focus to issues of the burden of public records requests on agencies, their practice in providing “reasonable” access to their records, and to fees being charged. We would no longer be trapped with anecdotal information over which to ponder reforms to Oregon’s law.

I anticipate that some agencies might raise a cost issue as an objection to providing the required information. Under this legislation, they would only have to track what it is they are already doing, such as the Oregon Department of Transportation tracks how many miles of highway it repaves or the Oregon Department of Human Services tracks the numbers of people volunteering to become foster parents. The information yielded by tracking public records requests would be information on which everyone can act to the benefit of improving the public’s access to its records.

Respectfully,

Les Zaitz, editor and publisher
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