

Silly Bills

Facing serious work, Oregon legislature goes soft

By Lisa Baker

This was to be the year of credibility, a year when Oregon lawmakers proved their worthiness to serve, their usefulness in the wake of scandals involving unreported lobbyist-paid junkets to Israel and Hawaii that snared members of both parties.

Appropriately, the session began with policy discussions on ethics and then waded into controversial but substantive issues such as corporate minimum tax, estate taxes and rainy day funds.

The subject matter guaranteed lively debate, even verbal combat. But at least Oregonians could be assured of the diligence and seriousness of their elected representatives.

Then the mood wore off, and in its place lawmakers brought their constituents dogs in restaurants, hookers in school, and a celebration of dirt.

We kid you not.

Let's begin with dogs in eateries (not as meals but as guests).

The bill, sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans, called for restaurants to welcome dogs — escorted by actual paying customers, of course, if they so chose. Current law states that animals, aside from service dogs, are *verboden* in eateries. There are several reasons for the restriction, officials said. Primary among them are sanitary concerns: Dogs often carry parasites, including fleas and worms. One might add: They also shed, drool and lick themselves in inappropriate places. To boot: Some people are allergic to them.

As news of the bill circulated around the state, some Oregonians reacted with astonishment that there was such a bill, that Oregon lawmakers actually typed it up, talked it up and set a *hearing* for it.

Steve Foltz, a Tigard resident, couldn't believe it. In a letter to the *Oregonian*, Foltz chastised the two main sponsors of the bill, Brian Clem, D-Salem, and Diane Rosenbaum, D-Portland, for spending taxpayer time on trifling things while real problems remained unresolved. "I wonder whether Clem or Rosenbaum think for a second what this may look or sound like to someone with real problems," he wrote. "Maybe they should actually work on bills that will help the people."

But for Clem, the bill was serious — especially for two particular cafes, the Iron Mutt and the Lucky Lab, which cater to pet owners by allowing them at outdoor tables. "This is not a small issue to small businesses or to dog owners. They're what I'm here for," Clem said. "There are plenty of bills that seem (trivial) until you get into a hearing and you see their importance to people."

Kim Thatcher, a Republican from Keizer who signed onto the bill, portrayed it as a pro-business issue that nevertheless took very little of the legislature's time. "It's a free market thing. Have you seen how many businesses are dedicated to dog lovers? There are tons of websites and guides with lists of (dog-friendly) hotels, motels and restaurants. It's a huge market."

As for the argument that misbehaving canines might cause chaos, Thatcher responded: "There are certain animals, because of their behavior, that shouldn't be allowed in restaurants just like there are certain people I wouldn't take to restaurants."

The bill didn't make it out of committee.

Not to be outdone in the silly department, a small cadre of senate Democrats, Margaret Carter and Ginny Burdick among them, introduced a bill that would clear the way for former sex workers to become classroom teachers — at a time when sex abuse of children at the hands of those entrusted to supervise and teach them has become a major issue.

Carter said she had heard from "several" former hookers about a desire to become teachers of children and called the bill a "forgiveness" issue for those convicted of prostitution who have heretofore been barred from the teaching profession.

Otto Schell, spokesman for Oregon's Parent Teacher Association, says the organization did not believe the bill was important enough to come up with a position on it. "We're not even really following it. Quality education and healthcare are our principle focus," he says.

At the same time, he says the bill would require teacher wannabes to "go through a number of hoops" to be considered classroom material. "I think there is a wide range of opinion among parents, just as there would be in the community, about something like this. We want to be careful about who can be a teacher, but at the same time we also understand the issue of rehabilitation."

Are schools the proper place for rehabilitating former sex workers? Schell sidestepped the question, stressing that only those who've sworn off prostitution for a length of time would be considered. "I think there's a period of time before the person would be able to be eligible for consideration. They would have to meet or exceed certain requirements."

An anonymous writer to *localnewsdaily.com* reacted this way: "We have truly lost our collective mind."

The bill passed the Senate and was enroute to the House at press time.

And then there was the dirt bill, the one that called for Jory soil — the kind vintners say is particularly suited to the growing of the Pinot Noir grape being produced so successfully in Oregon — to be designated the State Soil. At press time, the bill had not moved since its public hearing.

Some proponents adopted a “Why not?” approach to the issue, pointing out that Oregon has a state song, state flower, state motto, and state gem. Why not have a state soil, too?

Sponsors Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, and Kevin Cameron, R-Salem, waxed nearly poetic in their proposal, emphasizing the critical importance of dirt in Oregon: “... soils produce food and fiber, recycle water, support lush forests, yield bountiful grain and nut harvests, provide range forage, sustain wildlife and foster urban development,” according to their bill.

Nut harvests, indeed.

The presentation was apparently so effective that even skeptical lawmakers who initially thought it was silly, began to like the idea.

Clem, author of the dogs-in-restaurants bill, conceded he thought the bill rather frivolous initially. “At first blush, it seems like a waste of time, but in the hearing, you begin to see how important soils are for agriculture.”