

**Speech to Clatsop County Commission regarding Media policy - by John Wallpe –**  
**May 14, 2008**

Mr. Hazen, at last month's meeting, proposed restricting media access at executive sessions to "approved" news outlets.

At the beginning of next year, the nation will switch to all digital stations. It appears that many in the area do not realize that one effect this will have is that most areas of this county will no longer receive ANY broadcast stations. As bad as the reception in this area is now, the government is not expecting a single station's signal to reach most of our county.

As we are reduced to no broadcast television, a couple of small newspapers, and a small, largely underutilized local radio presence, our county should be finding any way possible to increase the access of whatever alternative media that we do have in this county to the county government. Clearly, the trend is toward internet-based media, and we as a county should be exploiting this new trend in order to reach and include as many people as possible.

With this in mind, I was floored by Mr. Hazen's proposal to limit media access to the executive sessions to a couple hand picked news outlets. In the very same meeting when the commission was claiming to be trying to address openness in their proceedings, this proposal came out of nowhere.

As it stands, people in this county are largely kept in the dark about what happens in county government. Everyone on this commission should be doing everything in their power to increase access to their government, to ensure transparency and openness, and to encourage the broadest possible discussion and debate.

As an example, at the last meeting, after a bitter ballot referendum and public fight over the DA's stipend issue, this board voted to reinstate the stipend over the express objection of the voters. I am not trying to reopen the stipend issue. Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing is up to debate, however the point is that THERE WAS NO DEBATE in the days leading to the vote, or at the meeting itself. Why? Because in the weeks preceding the vote, not a single mention was made in this county's main news outlet, that it would be coming up! I ask you to question why, after such a bitter fight, not a single person came to testify on this issue at the last meeting. Not one! It is clear that no one knew about it. The Daily Astorian, the news outlet that will incidentally benefit most from this proposed media access policy, declined to alert the public that the stipend issue was coming up for reconsideration.

The Daily Astorian was also the main proponent of the stipend ballot measure. Their coverage of the issue was notoriously biased in favor of the reinstatement of the stipend. Therefore in hindsight it was certainly of no surprise to see that when they thought they would get their way, they chose to bury the story of the upcoming vote rather than giving the issue the front page as they did when their position needed advancement. They didn't

want the issue debated, or even considered by the public, because the citizens of this county had already spoken, in the form of a countywide referendum. The county voted against the Astorian and the stipend, and since debate was not in the paper's best interests, the Daily Astorian chose to stifle any mention of the upcoming vote.

And now you are honestly attempting to make this same newspaper the "de facto" official news outlet of Clatsop County. This is despite the fact the newspaper has shown not only that they possess a clear agenda of their own and will withhold vital public information when it advances said agenda, but also that they cannot be trusted to maintain their responsibility toward objective journalism,

Implementation of this policy will further take valuable resources from the county at a time when the county can least afford it. The question of whether to use these resources to fund local non-profits, or new jail facilities will be rendered moot when the bulk of the county budget is instead diverted to hiring lawyers to defend the policy against the inevitable onslaught of litigation. If this policy is adopted, it will subject the County to the distinct possibility of lawsuits, not only by those individuals that you are attempting to exclude, but also by such associations as the EFF and ACLU.

This attempt is not only bad for the lofty ideals of free discussion and debate of the issues facing Clatsop County. It is not only in direct violation of Oregon's open records law. Most importantly, it is in direct conflict with the Freedom of the Press embodied in the first amendment to the Constitution.

It is absolutely unfathomable that you could take the position that it is in any way appropriate to establish and endorse what amounts to a propaganda machine for this county. To suggest that you have the right to pick and choose who or what you think constitutes a newspaper or news media is offensive to the very nature of both free speech and free press.

This is hardly a novel approach. It has been successfully used throughout world history as a tactic of third world repressive regimes and dictators. The tactic is currently being used in Zimbabwe, Burma, China, and Sudan. This type of arrogance has no place in Clatsop county, this nation, or anywhere else in this world.

On the agenda this week is a proposal to reword the oath taken by the County commissioners. I ask the commissioners to take a second look at what you have sworn to uphold with an eye to the proposed media access policy.