

Oregon officials quit over ethics rules; About 150 civic leaders, including volunteers, object to new disclosure requirements. Los Angeles Times April 27, 2008 Sunday

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HEADLINE: Oregon officials quit over ethics rules;
About 150 civic leaders, including volunteers, object to new disclosure requirements.

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BODY:

Help wanted: public servants willing to disclose major sources of income, business interests, real estate holdings and the names of their adult relatives.

Sayonara and good luck with that, said some 150 elected and appointed Oregon officeholders who walked away from their public service gigs this month rather than disclose personal data. Many said they were particularly disturbed by the new requirement -- apparently unique to Oregon -- that they name so many family members.

Resignations struck dozens of cities.

In rural eastern Oregon, the revolt against the state's new conflict-of-interest disclosure law obliterated some city governments.

In Elgin, the mayor, all six City Council members and all five planning commissioners opted to quit rather than file. Lexington lost its entire council, Enterprise its five-member Planning Commission. Banks lost four council members, North Powder three; Rogue River, Umatilla and Stanfield lost two each.

Roger Stover, a 14-year Elgin councilman, cited privacy as his reason for resigning. The required forms, he said, would have tied his "whole family together" in one place like no other easily available public record.

Triggering the upheaval is this change in Oregon law: For nearly 35 years, many public

officials had to file Statements of Economic Interest that disclosed officeholders' sources of income, property holdings and business interests. But 97 communities had been exempt from it. Last year, the Legislature voted to end those exemptions -- and expanded the law to include a provision calling for the naming of all adult relatives.

The law now applies to about 5,000 officeholders -- mayors, city council members, planning commissioners, school district superintendents and financial officers -- said Ron Bersin, executive director of the Oregon Government Ethics Commission. The deadline for submitting information was April 15, and 150 officials had not filed, in effect notifying the agency that they were resigning, Bersin said.

"This law reflects the public's concern for transparency and accountability in government," he said. "The public wants to know if decisions you are making benefit you personally."

Still, no other state's disclosure laws sweep as broadly, said Peggy Kerns, director of the National Conference of State Legislatures' Ethics Center in Denver.

"The purpose of these financial disclosure laws is so the public knows where a lawmaker's income comes from," Kerns said. "Every locale has to decide how deep it goes into a family. Some states require just the lawmaker. Others require the lawmaker and spouse. In comparison to what other states do, [Oregon's] is broader."

Robert Stern, co-author of California's Political Reform Act and president of the Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles, also said Oregon's requirement to name family members reaches further than other states.

Stern said that California requires the same degree of financial disclosure that Oregon does, but not the naming of relatives. "You have to disclose assets of one's spouse and dependent children, but you don't have to name them," Stern said.

By far, those officials who resigned objected most stringently to being asked to list their adult relatives, said Scott Winkels, an intergovernmental relations associate at the League of Oregon Cities.

"We support a strong ethics policy, but our concern is that the requirement to report names of family members is simply intrusive," Winkels said.

No one anticipated the widespread resignations, he said. Oregon law designed to maintain local governments during emergencies is being tested for the first time, he said.

"Business in some cities has ground to a halt," Winkels said

His organization is working with the governor and the Legislature to "ameliorate some of the unintended consequence of ethics reforms," he said.

Bersin thinks it's still too soon to judge.

"It's premature to say how long the effect [of the vacancies] is going to be," Bersin said. "There may be several applicants standing in line to take the positions."

Basic city services -- water, power, police, and fire -- are being managed as usual, but no new decisions can be made until council majorities are formed. To fill voids, county commissioners will appoint enough council members to make quorums.

New public servants are needed all over the state -- from the coast to the Cascades to eastern farm and logging communities. Public officials resigned over the disclosure forms in Canyon City, Keizer, Sweet Home, Harrisburg, Monmouth, Tangent, Pilot Rock, Prairie City and Summerville.

Officials are scrambling. City managers are circulating ads for replacements.

In Summerville, 226 miles east of Portland, four City Council members gave up their posts instead of their personal details. One longtime resident and former mayor called it a heartbreaking day for local government.

"It will be hard to fill these positions," said Ron Caswell. "I would not serve under these new rules, absolutely not. They don't need to know who my children are, who my parents are."

Top state officials pledged to revisit the rules.

Oregon Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski put together a work group to recommend improvements.

In a letter to public officials, he acknowledged the resignations were "especially pronounced" among the officials who were volunteers.

"Oregonians are entitled to an open government," he wrote. "All Oregonians deserve assurance that their representatives are making decisions based on the public's best interest, rather than for personal gain. I agree, however, that there must be balance between a public official's public responsibility and their private life."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: OUT OF OFFICE: Elgin City Council members Suzanne Hanson, Willie Williams and John Stover resigned along with the rest of the council -- and the mayor, and the entire Planning Commission -- over the new requirements. State law now calls for public officials to disclose the names of their family members; many of those who resigned were concerned about privacy. PHOTOGRAPHER: Dick Mason Observer

of La Grande, Ore.

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