

Sitting at the virtual table

DURING SPRING 2021, I spent my final semester of law school as legal extern with Jordan Ramis PC. This gave me a chance to spend focused time working on the OAN Government Relations (GR) Team for the 2021 session of the Oregon Legislature.

For 13 weeks starting on January 11, I shadowed OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone and the other members of the OAN lobbying team as they bounced from one virtual meeting to the next. During my few months of legislative session exposure, I gained a deep appreciation for the value of relationships and the importance of being at the discussion table for significant issues.

As a legislative session rookie, I expected a steep learning curve. However, I soon found out that legislators, lobbyists, associations, and interested citizens were also jumbled together on a collective learning curve as they all tried to navigate the virtual legislative session.

A virtual session meant that almost everything of import took place in email exchanges or text exchanges, or on virtual meeting platforms. The opportunity to swing into someone's office or catch them in the hallway was all but eliminated. Everyone was bound by a common currency: the calendar invite.

While the inability to meet in person radically shifted what I understand to be the tradi-

tional dynamic in the Capitol, I noted that the digital platform increased accessibility in many instances. With everything online, folks across the state — even those in the more distant corners — had a level playing field to communicate with those in Salem (though bad wi-fi connections still proved formidable at times).

OAN members, in particular, rose to the occasion by providing compelling personal testimony before many legislative committees.

In the virtual world, OAN set a high bar when it held a virtual nursery tour for U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon) to give him a direct view of select member operations. A virtual farm tour may have seemed silly and unconventional in the past, but circumstances as they were, OAN orchestrated an effective and interesting way to showcase various nursery operations under the constraints of a virtual world.

Though this method was necessary in the pandemic world, it struck me as a good approach that might have staying power in the future, at least when it comes to communicating with individuals in more far-flung places.

OAN's water policy discussions

I spent a large portion of time in my externship thinking about water issues and sitting in on water policy discussions. Coming into the externship, I had some background in water law through my prior work as a law clerk at Jordan Ramis, and I was eager to observe the water policy con-



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versation at the legislative level.

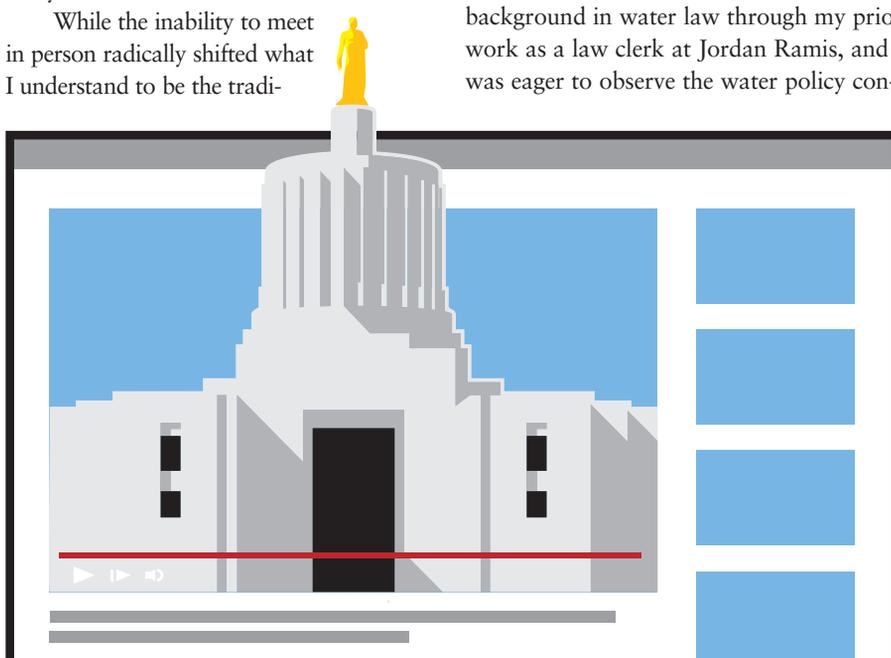
My conclusion after 13 weeks in the trenches with OAN on water policy matters is that it's often one hard-fought step forward, and 10 frustrating steps backward.

As a starting point, OAN enters water conversations with a clear understanding of water's importance to the nursery industry. Every day, emails flew between the OAN GR team and legislators, OAN members, and other lobbyists. These emails had ideas, questions, and reactions, and they sometimes became actions and plans of action for existing bills or new bills.

At the beginning of session, the conversation included some bills that appeared to be particularly beneficial for OAN members. While these bills were mixed in with various other water bills, I was excited at the possibility of this legislation making its way through session.

In my experience, agricultural operations are a great testing ground for innovation. Every day, growers are faced with the realities of water management and water shortage. They often respond by thinking outside the box, adopting new technology, or both. The bills that stood out to me were bills that recognized this reality.

In my mind, OAN had a good case for bills that would support the nursery industry. However, as session progressed, I increasingly began to feel that OAN was wedged in a defensive position, making it hard to push forward with good policy bills. The water bills that floated to the surface and stayed in play as session progressed >>



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took on forms that weren't always beneficial to nursery interests.

Municipalities, recreationalists, industries, farms, ranches, fish, wildlife, power systems, and nurseries all rely on water. When any conversation about water happens, folks representing all those interests, and various iterations of those interests, are at the table. I came to realize that as all the emails were bouncing around on OAN's end, other organizations and interested parties were engaging in the exact same exercise. This dynamic leads to a constant give-and-take process as legislative negotiations unfold over the course of the session.

After 13 weeks, I looked at the bills still in play and felt like not much large-scale progress had been made. However, in my opinion, the months of hard work that goes into the legislative session isn't necessarily embodied by shining examples of agriculture-friendly bills. By my estimation, the real testament of the work is in the subtle language changes, workshopped through countless email exchanges, that added a few more benefits or stopped a bit more overreach than would have otherwise become law.

Of course, there are also bills that simply need to be stopped entirely, which the OAN's GR team often manages to accomplish despite steep political odds.

Setting the stage for the future

My final observation from the session: I attended many meetings about water. OAN's philosophy is to be at the table for water policy discussions, even the more frustrating or complex ones. This consistency likely contributes to OAN's solid working relationships with many other parties involved in the water conversation.

Water issues will only become more critical in the future. This session was a sobering reminder to me that any water conversation will likely involve multiple perspectives and a push-pull dynamic as those different perspectives clash. But if my many, many hours in water-related meetings are any indication, the OAN will continue to be an active participant in these conversations.

As Jeff is known to say, "If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu." ©



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