

Is biennium meeting needs?

Today marks the beginning of the Legislature's second special session in two years to balance the state budget.

With more budget problems lurking in the future, a question of increasing importance concerns Oregon's every-other-year regular session: is a biennial Legislature meeting the state's needs?

Some say it isn't.

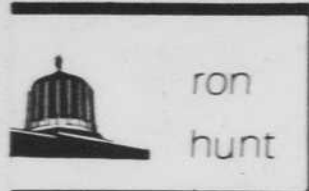
For example, the City Club of Portland — after studying this question last year — recommends an annual session of limited length. Chris Tobkin, the group's executive secretary, says they'd prefer annual sessions which last no longer than half the time of recent biennial sessions. Recent sessions have taken about six months.

The City Club's plan would have legislators address general and fiscal matters each year, although separately. Having the entire Legislature decide budget issues every year would prevent a minority of legislators from having too much power on fiscal decisions, she says.

She is referring to the Emergency Board, 17 legislators who watch over the state budget during the interim. Not only are they an unrepresentative group, she says, but an increasing number of items are being considered "emergency" business.

Challenges to the biennial structure should be expected; Oregon's is one of only six state legislatures that (in practice as well as name) meet every two years.

"Most states, to get their business done, meet every year," says Cindy Simon of the National Conference of State Legislatures head-



ron hunt

quartered in Denver.

Each state is different, Simon adds, and as long as a legislature can call itself into special session, meet the needs of the state, and have budgetary safeguards during the interim, then a biennial plan is fine.

Oregon's Legislature can call itself into special session, by a majority vote in each house. And the budgetary powers of Oregon's Emergency Board are unique, Simon points out.

But can a biennial structure meet the increasing needs of our state?

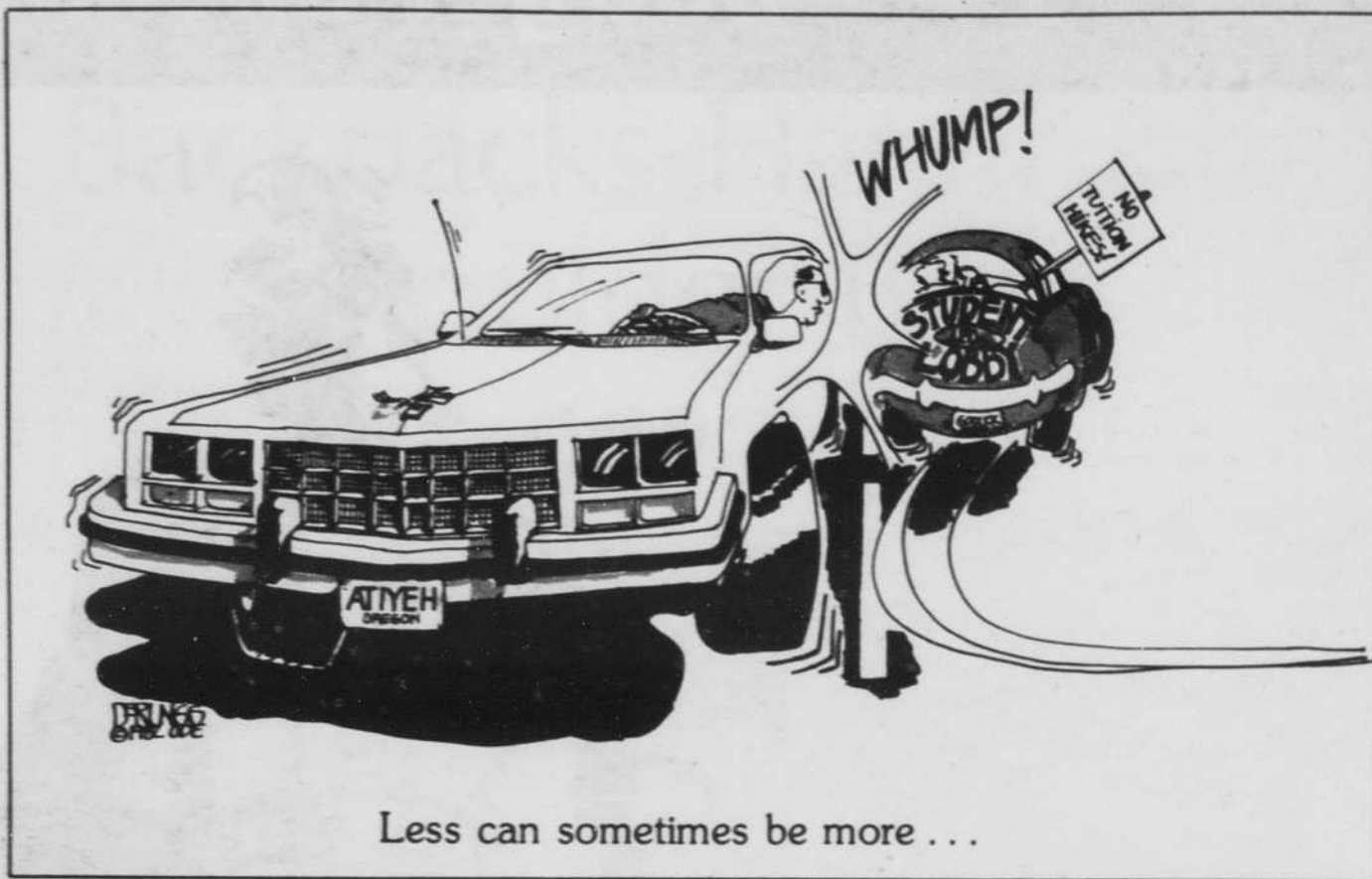
Yes, it can. Although the "minority" aspect of the Emergency Board is open for debate (since its members comprise 20 percent of the legislature), we should remember what state we're in. California, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts have definite full-time legislatures; but this is Oregon.

Only 24 of the 90 legislators here list their occupation as "legislator." There appears to be a spirit of "let's get the job done and go home" among the less "career-minded" lawmakers.

Even in an economic quagmire there is a danger in becoming too "professional."

By continuing the biennial calendar — including concise special sessions when necessary — Oregon would be better served than by adopting an annual schedule that would encourage self-seeking "professionals."

One legislative analyst sums it up by asking, "If we had a general annual session do you think the Legislature could do it (decide on budget cuts) in three weeks and go home?"



Less can sometimes be more . . .

It's all just a guessing-game

Predictions are second only to rumors as the most common form of conversation in Salem.

Correct predictions are worthless, of course, except for the modest satisfaction they offer the few who are consistently on target.

One of the few, a Ways and Means Committee member, took a few minutes between a hearing and a Democratic caucus to predict what the Legislature is going to do.

A likely outcome is that they will trim state agency budgets by five percent, he says. The rest of the state's projected deficit will be made up from the property tax relief fund.

Otherwise he thinks Gov. Vic Atiyeh's 10 percent, across-the-board cut in agency budgets would be implemented.

Although observers say no new taxes will be levied, Salem is a virtual tax scheme deli these days. But of the thirty or so money-raising plans published by the Legislative Revenue office, only one is being seriously considered.

The plan for speeding collection of employer's withholding taxes (with an additional collection made this fiscal year) seems most palatable to legislators. It is not an increase, but simply an adjustment in bookkeeping procedure.

And it will net the state a one-time, \$72 million windfall. To recover the other \$165 million of the state's projected deficit, legislators will have to — as in the first scenario — trim agency budgets by five percent and dip into property tax relief funds.

Now that we have the answer, it begs the obvious question: how did the state get into this mess?

The prescient senator puts it succinctly. The Legislature should never have instituted an on-going property tax relief program based on a freak surplus in funds, he says.

The program was implemented in 1979. Proposition 13 had just devastated California. Public sentiment was strongly critical of the state collecting more money than it spent, as indeed had happened. To avoid a similar initiative referendum here (the fearsome Ballot Measure 6), legislators took their cue and passed a property tax relief plan.

The state can no longer afford it, but people have come to expect that refund check.

Atiyeh has repeatedly stated he would not impose new taxes. Reducing the amount of tax relief is technically not a new tax, but Atiyeh does not consider that an alternative.

"If people are expecting a certain amount back on their taxes and they get less, that's just the same as raising taxes," Miles says.

Already the Legislature has lowered the maximum property tax relief refund from \$800, the 1979 level, to \$425. Sources say this could drop to \$200 or \$300 this special session.

The one appropriation Atiyeh is requesting includes a \$2 million line item for an economic recovery program. Democrats, predictably, are coming up with a program of their own.

"They've been in their ivory tower too long," says one senator. No longer can higher education be considered inviolate. "We have yet to see what programs can be consolidated or abolished without bringing down the whole system. There's no reason we have to have a college of education at every state institution except one."

As of Friday, the Ways and Means subcommittee discussing the higher education budget had decided to recommend about an \$11 million, or five percent, cut.

Dick Zita, a higher education spokesman, says that translates into losing 420 faculty, 85 staff, and 5,000 students.

By Jennifer Ulum

letters

Fiscal fiasco

How can any one segment of Oregon's population be expected to shoulder the burden of correcting the State's financial difficulties when, in fact, the current fiscal fiasco can only have originated in the State Legislature and in the Governor's office.

Therefore, the State Legislators, and the Governor, should (and ought to be) bold, brave, and daring in taking the lead and sharing the responsibilities for alleviating the current crisis.

If any one segment of Oregon's populace is to be affected by whatever measures

you decide to adopt, all Oregonians should be affected equally, including those people most responsible, the Governor and the Legislature.

One possible emergency measure that takes this condition of equal sharing into account is an emergency-sales-tax. This may sound unpleasant, but all our options sound unpleasant at the moment. Three or four percent might be all that would be necessary, and the bill authorizing the emergency tax should contain a specific time limitation for the tax (such as when the economy rebounds to certain levels).

This emergency tax would affect everyone in Oregon equal-

ly: the lawmakers, the businessmen, the workers, the farmers, the students, and the tourists.

This emergency tax would help alleviate the current fiscal predicament while equitably allowing all Oregonians to help. This standard of sharing should be kept in mind whatever you decide to do.

Rod Schaffer
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Cut the top

Why is it that all the emergency plans for Oregon's System of Higher Education never mention cuts in administration? So far, the plans call for overall salary cuts for faculty and civil

service, eliminating faculty and civil service positions, raising tuition, lowering enrollment, but never one word about administration!

For years the University has had an across-the-board percentage raise system whereby those with the most get the most and those with the least get the least. An attempt to install a fairer system was completely squashed by a faculty vote not long ago. It is now time to let the across-the-board percentage system work in reverse and to make sure that administration takes its share of cuts.

Further, a long, hard look should be taken at the administrations of all the colleges and

universities in Oregon's system in terms of eliminating unnecessary positions and getting overinflated administrative salaries in line with the rest of the salaries in our schools. There will be shrieks of anguish at such a proposal and it will be loudly maintained that we need high administrative salaries in order to "competitive."

Competitive with what? I think the real truth is that administrations have always controlled the money pipelines. Now that a real emergency is upon us, school administrations must take their fair share of these proposed cuts.

Edmund F. Soule
Professor Emeritus, Library
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