

Consolidation may hinder quality of education



PORTLAND (AP) — The consolidation of small Oregon school districts under pressure from Measure 5 budget cuts may also be hurting educational quality.

The property tax limit passed by Oregon voters in 1990 was followed in 1991 by a law passed by the Legislature ordering all independent elementary and high school districts to consolidate by 1996.

As a result, at least 11 elementary schools closed in the last year, most because of money problems. The number of school districts have declined from 297 in 1991 to an estimated 251 by next year.

In rural Gilliam County, the Olex Elementary School District probably will merge with Arlington sometime this fall, said Judy A. Galvin, the part-time clerk who serves as the district's sole employee.

Only about 100 people live in the town of Olex, and they felt they could not operate the school with the merger and money problems. They began sending their

25 students to neighboring schools this year, Galvin said. The town has no store, no church, no town hall — just its yellow schoolhouse.

"We will lose our community more or less with the closing of our school," Galvin said. "Once it's gone, it is pretty well dead. We'll just become part of Arlington or Condon."

State school superintendent Normal Paulus supports the consolidation law because it saves administrative costs and ensures uniform education.

At the same time, Oregon's new school reform law promotes teaching practices more typical of small schools. The law urges districts to place elementary students in mixed-age classrooms, to group middle-school students within schools, and to enlist older students to tutor younger ones.

The two goals appear to be at cross purposes.

Educators say there are advantages to large schools, such as additional course offerings, particularly in math and science. Statewide math scores are slightly higher in

Oregon high schools with more than 600 students.

But surveys show students tend to take about the same range of courses in small and large high schools, said Ray E. Smith, director of the Rural Education Center at Washington State University in Pullman.

Consolidation doesn't always save money. Larger districts and schools often require additional transportation and administrative costs that offset savings in pooled resources.

The district eliminated 11 professional staff positions and seven support jobs. It cut spending on all middle and high school sports except for high school coaches. It closed Shedd and Brownsville elementary schools.

About 420 elementary students were moved to the middle school in Halsey. To make room, seventh- and eighth-graders were moved to the high school nearby.

Because the district had to cut so many teaching positions, teachers have more duties. Classes are bigger, space is smaller. Time is limited.

Disabled employee travels delivery route in three-wheeler

(AP) — It takes some extra preparation to begin his bicycle delivery route, but Randy Nowell has it down to a system.

He rolls his wheelchair alongside his bike, tilts forward and drops into the three-wheeler's recumbent seat with a practiced ease. He picks up his paralyzed legs one at a time and fits them into specially designed brackets on either side of the bike.

The last thing he does is tie a rag to one leg; that keeps grease from the bicycle chain from ruining yet another pair of pants.

"I'm ready," he announces. On the street, cranking with his hands, he leans into the first curve like there's a checkered flag waiting at the next intersection.

Nowell, 46, is the newest employee of Pedaler's Express, a Eugene bicycle deliv-

ery service that handles everything from legal documents to auto parts. He's the first to do the job on arm power alone.

Established two years ago by bicycle activist Dan Long-Coogan, "Ped Ex" is a business with a message: bikes do it cheaper and faster than cars. With Nowell on the staff, another lesson comes across.

"It's a very powerful thing to see this person with a disability going out and doing things most people can't do themselves," Long-Coogan says.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Nowell covers a route that takes him across the Ferry Street Bridge into north Eugene, over to Springfield and back again to west Eugene. He estimates the distance at 35 miles. He starts just after noon and on a good day he's finished his deliveries by 4 p.m.

"Not bad," Nowell says, "considering my arms are about half the size of your legs."

The accomplishment is the result of an elegant marriage of man and machine.

With help from Eugene bike builder Jan VanderTuin, Nowell designed and built his bike himself. He patterned it after the "Freedom Rider" made by Brike International Ltd., a Tualatin company that makes specialty bikes for the disabled.

Using the same technology that transformed the frumpy 10-speed into a jet-age sport machine, manufacturers like Brike have begun turning out custom bikes that vastly improve the mobility of paraplegics.

The new vehicles feature designs and lightweight components taken from the best racing and mountain bikes, but they have been adapted for people with limit-

ed or no use of their legs.

"We're offering disabled people a chance to get into the sport of cycling," said Brian Stewart, co-owner of Brike.

Wheelchairs have improved dramatically over the past few years too, but users still find them limiting when they want to do something more than tool around town, Stewart said. Hand-powered bicycles are becoming increasingly popular as secondary, "sport" vehicles for the disabled.

"That's why we call them Freedom Riders," Stewart said. "People who buy them tell us it's about getting out on the road, the wind blowing through your hair, the trees flying by."

"They feel they've entered the realm of the able-bodied by getting out of their chairs."

Logging restrictions halted to re-evaluate spotted owl

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Fish and Wildlife Service is postponing proposed logging restrictions on private lands in the Northwest while it takes another look at the status of the northern spotted owl, the agency's director said Tuesday.

The first formal step toward implementing the restrictions, expected two months ago, will be postponed indefinitely in Oregon and delayed at least until this fall in Washington and California, Director Mollie Beattie said.

Several Oregon lawmakers had complained that owners of private forest lands in their state would suffer more severe economic impact from the rules than their counterparts to the south and north.

"It is our hope that in the weeks and months ahead, the state (of Oregon) and private landowners could assist in the development of a new and broader consensus for a more active approach to the 4-D rule," Beattie said Tuesday in a letter to Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore.

Meanwhile, she wrote, current restrictions on timber harvesting would remain in effect in the state. Hatfield said Tuesday that Beattie's announcement was "a step forward."

Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore., said the rule "as originally proposed by the administration, was absolute confusion and totally unworkable."

"By agreeing to leave Oregon out, the administration will have a chance to perform badly needed further analysis and receive additional public input," he said.

The rule is known by its listing in Section 4 of the Endangered Species Act, which prohibits the killing or harming of protected species on all lands, public or private. The owl is con-

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Senator

sidered a threatened species.

A preliminary version of the 4-D rule, unveiled in December, sought to free up some private lands for logging while concentrating protection of the threatened owl on other lands.

Assistant Interior Secretary George Frampton Jr. had said the rules were expected to be formally proposed in March.

But Beattie said Tuesday the agency does not expect to complete a draft environmental impact statement or the draft 4-D rule until September at the earliest, partly because of new data on the owl.

Since the administration adopted its Northwest forest plan, new studies have indicated that the spotted owl's overall population is declining more quickly than had been expected, though owls in California may be faring better than was once thought.

"In light of the final adoption of a new federal forest plan, and given the development of new computer models on owl persistence that were unavailable during the past recovery planning effort, the service has decided that it would be useful to conduct a reassessment of key owl-conservation assumptions for non-federal lands" before issuing the 4-D rule, Beattie said.

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