OPINION

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Public education, private price tag

OPINION

Sonja Sherwood

The way Oregon tax reform is going, Nike University may not be far off

Last Friday, the University administration invited several hundred of its favorite alumni to a special banquet. On the menu for the evening were steak fillets wading in a peppercorn glacé followed by slivers of Italian trufflecake, speeches, toasts and singing children.

At the center of each table, propped among sprigs of tinsel and foliage, stood a gold replica of a track baton. The University selected the baton to represent the race it began three years ago; the race to raise $150 million by 1997 — the largest money-drumming effort in the state's history.

The University launched its five-year fund-raising drive shortly after voters passed Measure 5, the infamous 1990 tax revolt initiative that ultimately raised the University's tuition and fees by 80 percent, dropped enrollment figures by 6,000 students and eliminated entire programs. When Oregon voters passed the measure they were tacitly rejecting responsibility for the state of our schools. They were saying, in effect: Go privatize yourself. And that's more or less what's happening, one phony gold baton at a time.

The men and women invited to Friday's banquet were trustees, deans, directors, members of the president's cabinet, prospective donors and any of the loaded alumni who contributed $25,000 or more to the school.

Their names would be recognizable to any University student: Thomas Autzen, Earle Chiles, Paul Brainerd, Jewel Hult, just to name a few. People remarkable not merely for the property they own, but for the property they've named. The food and venue was supplied by the Valley River Inn, one of the +$25 donors. The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir circulating the room came from Hinman Vineyards, owned by trustee Carolyn Silva Chambers.

One could see Charles H. Lundquist bumping up against the bar and scholarship sponsors strolling past the piano. Focus in and one might see classroom buildings shaking hands with sports centers and computer labs talking to concert halls. Look a little closer and what you'll see are the people who've a greater stake in the decisions and finances of this University than any single student or citizen.

Funding cuts similar to Measure 5 are transforming public universities all over the country into quasi-private colleges. The average tuition at state universities is rising nearly twice as fast as that of Ivy League schools, according to *Harper's Magazine*. More and more schools are forming partnerships with local businesses as part of a fiscal survival strategy they call "sponsored schooling." Higher mandatory fees also compensate for shrinking state subsidies, but it's the support from private investors that is keeping universities like this one "on track."

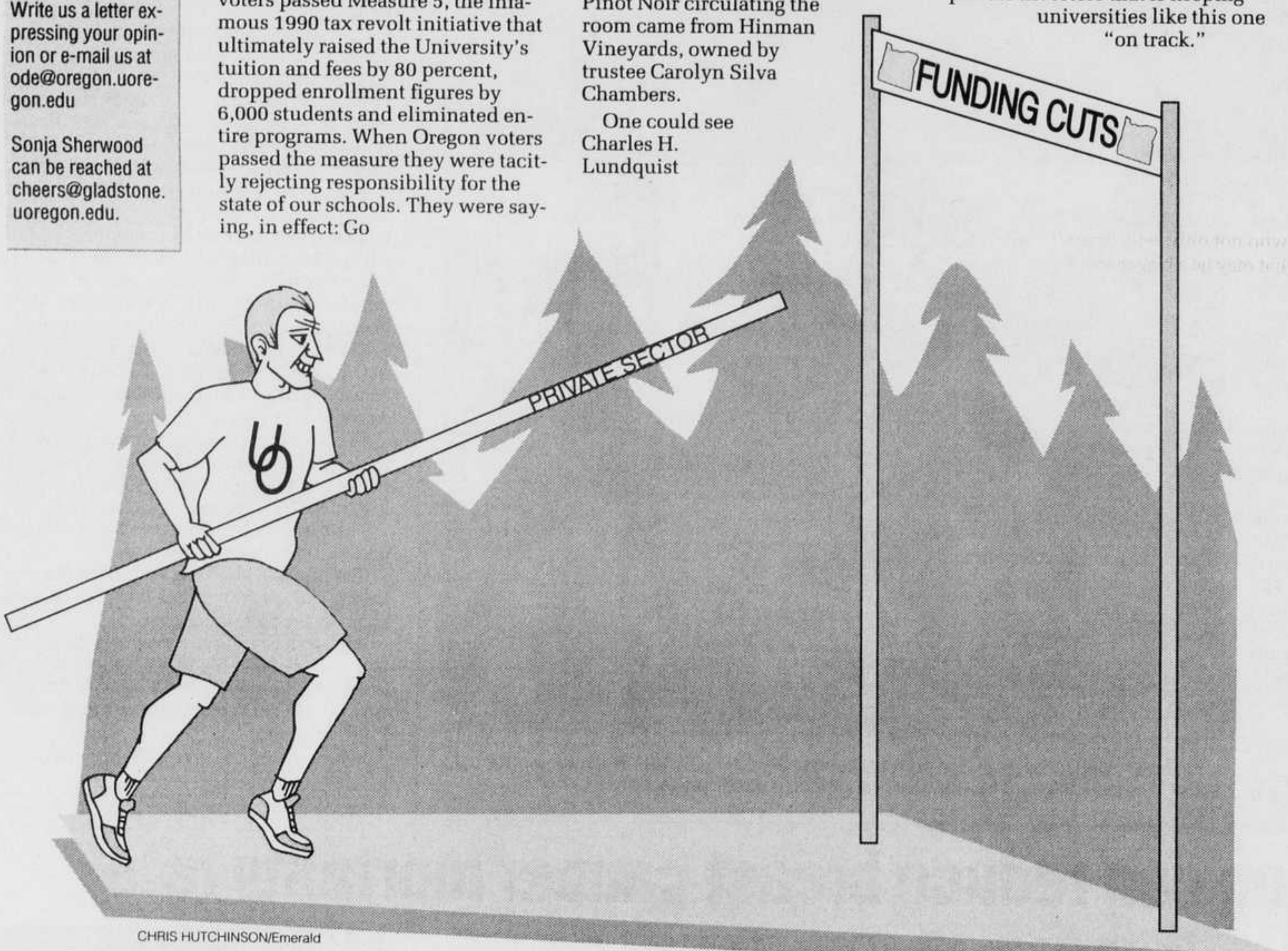
That's more or less what University President Dave Frohnmayer told his guests at Friday's banquet. Last-minute donors were still coming up to scratch when the president announced that the $150 million goal had been reached two years ahead of schedule. But the implicit addendum to his message hints at what's in store for public schools: More private money is needed.

November's ballot will include two measures likely to result in further budget cuts for Oregon schools. Measure 47 would slash property taxes by three times as much as Measure 5, except that this time there would be no relief provisions for state institutions. And Measure 46 requires that any new tax or revenue increase be approved by 50 percent of all voters registered, regardless of whether or not they attend the polls. This would prevent the state from counteracting the effects of Measure 47 by raising property values, a controversial tactic well-used against Measure 5.

Preliminary polls suggest that these measures will pass, despite warnings from financial analysts both at Standard & Poor's and Moody's that say the measures may threaten the state's ability to meet its infrastructure needs and maintain credit quality. (If Oregon's credit rating is down-graded it stands to lose millions of dollars on bonds on top of the revenue that will be lost by strapping another limit on property taxes.)

As of last Friday, the University's new fund-raising target is $200 million. Chances are good that the extra $50 million will come from the same people who drank too much at that evening's banquet. Chances are also good that once the target is met the bar will be raised a little higher and then a little higher again as Oregon voters continue to sacrifice their education system to the private sector. Oregon's future was perhaps best represented by a group of singing school-girls, members of the Children's Choir Association and the symbolic class of 2005, whose role in the university of the future may well imitate the role they played at the banquet: to encourage a crowd of wealthy sponsors to give just a little more...

Sonja Sherwood is a columnist for the Emerald. *Her opinions do not necessarily represent the views of the newspaper.*



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

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What do you think? Write us a letter expressing your opinion or e-mail us at ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

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LETTERS

Vote Thompson

As a University of Oregon graduate, Seattle resident and executive in international trade, I believe we must elect well-rounded people such as Ashland City Councilman and Reform Party candidate, Brent Thompson, to represent Northwest interests in the U.S. Senate.

But due to the inequity of the two-party system in America, excellent candidates such as Brent Thompson are not allowed the exposure to Oregon citizens because they are excluded from debates and TV interviews. Hopefully, Oregon voters will have a chance to learn about Mr. Thompson, who has the knowledge to assist Northwestern states in growth management, developing international trade and exporting our products.

Also, he has the ability to balance environmental concerns with the needs of business and society. Because of his occupational background, he knows what is workable in social programs, seniors programs, tax law and law enforcement, and he will fight for campaign finance reform.

I have known Brent Thompson since kindergarten, over 45 years ago. I have seen the positive effect he has had on Ashland over the last 11 years. We need a dedicated citizen such as Brent to help save Oregon as a wonderful place to live.

William M. Ashman
Executive Vice President
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