

## IN BRIEF

**Priests share concerns about church's future**

PORTLAND — Recruiting more priests to halt the national decline in their ranks is among the toughest challenges the Roman Catholic Church will face in the 21st century, church leaders say.

About 250 priests from around the country are attending a conference in Portland this week to talk about some

of the top issues affecting their work at the parish level.

Rev. Bob Silva, president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, urged them to "promote the vocation of the priesthood" and demonstrate that "priests are strong in their faith and courageous leaders" who care about the integrity of a church that has suffered through debilitating sex-abuse scandals and is under increasing pressure to ordain women.

"We don't claim to be knights in shining armor," Silva said, but a renewal of commitment to the church

is needed at a time when "there's a strong and growing suspicion of institutions of any kind."

The total population of Catholics increased 29 percent nationally from 1978 to 2005 while the number of priests has declined 26 percent, according to federation figures.

By comparison, when the Catholic population more than doubled in the United States from 1900-1950, the number of priests more than tripled.

— The Associated Press

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# Lawmakers debate raising high school class requirements

BY JULIA SILVERMAN  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND — During a Washington, D.C., meeting of 34 of the nation's governors last February, Gov. Ted Kulongoski proclaimed Oregon one of 13 states newly committed to raising its high school standards.

But back at home, with a legislature that's preoccupied with bickering over how much money to set aside for schools in the next two years, that lofty goal has proved tougher to jump-start.

Most people agree that the state needs to raise its requirements for high school graduation. Current requirements — three years of English and two years of general math — are among the lowest in the nation.

But there are looming questions over how to structure the new requirements and how to pay for them.

Rep. John Lim, R-Gresham, is sponsoring a bill to add an extra year of both English and math, with the extra year of English to begin by 2007 and the math to follow a year later. Lim said that means Oregon students would have to rack up 24 credits to graduate from high school, up from the current 22.

The bill has drawn widespread support, including critical backing from the chairs of the House and Senate Education committees, Lim said.

State education officials are on board too, although they are concerned about how much it might cost to implement such a plan and are anxious to avoid putting another unfunded mandate on school districts already coping with stringent new federal requirements.

"We need to understand what the cost will be and what the state will need to invest to make that opportunity real for students in Oregon," said James Sager, an education policy adviser to Kulongoski.

Deputy Schools Superintendent Pat Burk said the state estimates that 64 percent of Oregon students would need to take an additional

year of math.

Assuming an average class size of 40 students per room, the state would have to hire about 109 new math teachers at a cost of \$5.4 million, Burk said.

State estimates of how many students would need to add another year of English are slightly higher, Burk said — about 68 percent — and could cost at least \$5.7 million for about 115 new teachers.

Those numbers, based on questionnaires given to Oregon students who took the SAT last year, are preliminary and need to be refined, Burk said. Individual school districts could be asked to pitch in and to report exactly how many courses students are taking, he and others said.

Lim said he's not persuaded that adding requirements would be prohibitively costly, pointing to states such as Arkansas and Kentucky that spend less per pupil than Oregon does but have higher graduation requirements.

But he called the state education agency's cost estimates "reasonable" and said he hoped to pass his bill this session, then work the cost into the education appropriation lawmakers agree upon during the 2007 legislative session.

"I don't like mandates and requirements, but this is something we have to do," Lim said.

Education officials have also warned about the difficulty of recruiting qualified math teachers for advanced courses, particularly in rural regions of the state.

Still, some districts have already plunged ahead with raising the graduation requirements on their own, including Portland, where school board members are considering a proposal to have the new standards in place for the class of 2009.

Currently, in order to gain admission to one of Oregon's seven public universities, students must have taken four years of English courses and three years of math.

## IN BRIEF

**U.S. Forest Service looks for sites to close down**

PORTLAND — The cash-strapped U.S. Forest Service can no longer afford to maintain several campgrounds and trailheads and has started ranking recreational sites for possible closure.

Oregon's Deschutes and Winema national forests are among the first to go up for review, The Oregonian reported.

Forest Service officials say the crunch is partly a result of President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative, a push to thin flammable Western forests that has diverted money away from the upkeep of forest facilities.

The Forest Service is also trying to sell offices and compounds that bustled during the logging heyday but now sit idle.

The move underlines the hard choices facing the Forest Service in the agency's centennial year.

"Trade-offs were made to keep the priority on hazardous fuels," said Hank Kashdan, Forest Service budget chief. "The budget is tight, and we had to make tough calls."

The public may not notice sales of scattered ranger housing, offices and warehouses around the West.

But there may be more obvious changes in the 2,635 campgrounds, boat ramps, picnic areas and other

recreation sites in Oregon and Washington national forests.

None will be sold. But all national forests have been directed to put those sites through a rating system by 2007 that will assess their costs, popularity and how closely they match what each forest designates as its "niche" audience.

Those ranking lowest may be shut down, have their seasons trimmed or have services, such as garbage collection, cut back to bring spending in line with budgets dropping by millions of dollars per year.

"It is likely that most forests will have to make tough decisions to close some sites, curtail operations at other sites and decommission some sites in order to define a sustainable program," former Deputy Chief Tom Thompson wrote to regional foresters last month.

Others see darker motives. Starving the agency of cash forces it to keep only the most lucrative sites and run public lands like a commercial enterprise, they say.

"They will close those sites the public has always enjoyed but which they cannot afford because they are not profitable," said Scott Silver of the Bend group Wild Wilderness. "It's the complete perversion of the meaning of public lands."

— The Associated Press