



Cove High School senior Sophie Pettit, second from left, qualified for the state speech tournament last weekend at the Hap Hingston Speech and Debate Tournament at Pacific University. She is shown at a team practice in late 2018.

DIVIDE

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ment. Umatilla School District received \$4 million in state matching funds in 2016, which Sipe called integral to the passing of the 2016 bond.

“The matching dollars were essential not only to receiving the bond, but even in the decision to seek the bond,” she said.

Sipe also cited the small taxpayer base rural districts pull from to raise funds. For instance, to receive \$10.5 million from taxpayers in the 2016 school bond, property owners would be taxed at a rate of \$3.133 per \$1,000 of assessed value until 2035. When Portland Public Schools passed its \$790 million construction bond in 2017, the bond increased taxes by 68 cents per \$1,000 in property value over 30 years. Umatilla’s bond paid for the upgrade of a 100-year-old boiler room among a number of other projects, while PPS’s bond paid for the modernization of six of the district’s high schools as well as significant seismic and safety upgrades.

George Mendoza, superintendent of the La Grande School District, said he would prefer if the state offered grants to school districts that had necessary maintenance projects.

“In a perfect world, if I was able to say, ‘I don’t have enough money to get air conditioning for our school,’ the state would say, ‘Hey, air conditioning is important, so we’re going to make sure you have money for that.’ That would be nice, (but) we don’t have that,” Mendoza said.

In other states, maintenance projects are funded at both the local and state level. In Washington, the state provided more than \$312 million to school districts for

construction projects.

The state’s reliance on local taxpayers for necessary maintenance in school districts creates what Jim Green, executive director of the Oregon School Board Association, calls the state’s “next great equity issue.”

Green, who is also a Salem-Keizer school board member, said the state puts “almost nothing” into K-12 school facilities, and he believes there are times when the state should be offering more assistance to struggling school districts.

“We think the state should be stepping up to help those districts that just aren’t going to have the ability to get their taxpayers to approve what is necessary to bring (learning) environments ... up to speed,” Green said. “That’s probably going to be the next big debate, the quality of facilities and the equity of services that shouldn’t be pre-determined by your zip code.”

While there are not currently any legislative bills addressing additional funding for school maintenance projects, Green said he has heard the idea being discussed.

“(The governor’s office) knows that there is a need there,” Green said.

In her proposed budget for the 2019-2021 biennium, Gov. Kate Brown proposed \$100 million be invested into the state capitol investment program for local districts for capital costs including construction, improvement, remodeling, equipment purchase and maintenance and repair of facilities. She also proposed another \$100 million for the Seismic Rehabilitation Grant Program, a competitive grant program for the seismic rehabilitation of public buildings, particularly public schools.

In her inaugural address on Monday, Brown mentioned the need for more investment in education. “After years of underinvestment,

Cove high school senior qualifies for state debate and speech tournament

By Dick Mason
The Observer

Cove High School senior Sophie Pettit has qualified for the state speech and debate tournament for the third time in four years.

Pettit qualified for Oregon’s state speech tournament in impromptu speaking while competing Jan. 12-13 at the Hap Hingston Speech and Debate Tournament at Pacific University in Forest Grove.

Impromptu speaking tests competitors’ ability to think on their feet. Entrants are given 10 seconds to select one of three topics and then must begin speaking about it immediately for five minutes,

according Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit, who is coach of CHS’s speech team and Sophie’s father.

The senior also qualified for the state high school speech tournament her freshman and sophomore years at Monument High School. She did not compete in speech and debate her junior year because her family had moved to Cove and the high school did not yet have a speech and debate team.

At the Hap Hingston Speech and Debate Tournament, Pettit placed second in informative speaking. That second place finish did not qualify her for the state competition though because

the event had just 13 entrants. Only events with more than 15 entrants offered students a chance to qualify for state.

Pettit may be joined at the state competition by her team members. Cove High School’s speech team’s next tournament will be the District 9 championships at Hood River High School on April 9. The top two finishers at district in each event will qualify for the state tournament, which will be conducted April 18-20 at Western Oregon University in Monmouth.

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it’s going to take more than just additional funding to bring our schools back to a level we can be proud of,” Brown said. “We have failed our students of color and we have left rural Oregon behind. Now is the time to close that opportunity gap.”

A theme in education oft-repeated by school district leaders, and even by former President Barack Obama, is the idea that a “zip code should not be your destiny.” In an address mainly regarding the Fair Housing Act, Obama returned to the phrase.

“We don’t guarantee equal outcomes, but we do strive to guarantee an equal shot at opportunity — in every neighborhood, for every American,” Obama said in his July 2015 address.

In Oregon, where state funds for school construction are limited, a student’s zip code may decide if they are going to school in a brand-new building or in a building heated with a 100-year-old boiler. But that doesn’t deter school leaders like Sipe.



Funds from a bond Imbler School District voters passed in 2010 helped pay for the construction of a new elementary school, top, which opened in 2012. Demolition of the old Central Elementary School building, bottom, was completed in 2018.

“It really is important to recognize it does take more (to educate students in low-income areas). We are constantly writing grants, we are constantly asking more and more of the adults in our community,” Sipe said. “I

was proud to raise both of my kids here — pre-kindergarten through 12th grade — and both of them went on to be successful adults. I think in large part it’s because we refuse to let zip code determine destiny here.”

GREENWAY

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be spent on stream embankment work, but at \$2.69 million, is the most expensive of the proposed routes.

“With the grant, we don’t have enough money,” Howton told the commissioners.

The Island City city recorder said she is asking for the commissioners’ support.

Scarfo said he thinks the county should consult the Oregon Department of Transportation, and Beverage agreed.

“I’d like to see you finish that phase,” she told Howton. “I totally support that phase being completed, but still would like to hear from ODOT.”

The worry is the looming completion date and what happens if the project is not

finished by then.

Howton said there was no feasible way to push the date back with the state. Island City would lose the funds if its phase of the Greenway project is not completed.

The commissioners said they will try to set up a work session with ODOT to discuss the Greenway project and what the repercussions are for not finishing.

Also at Wednesday’s meeting, Alex McHaddad from the Blue Mountain Translator District said the organization, which transmits over-the-air television signals to local viewers, is pursuing two Senate bills this legislative period.

The first one, Senate Bill 393, will enable those who pay their dues to the service to serve on the BMTD board.

Currently, the translator district does not include residences within city limits. This bill would allow BMTD to annex all homeowners into the district.

The second would give the district technological upgrades to transmit emergency alerts on the channels and operate its own news channel, which would be paid through advertising, McHaddad said.

Beverage said she supports the BMTD because they bring an important service to the county.

“They provide a lot of channels for \$100 a year,” she said.

McHaddad said he’s been making presentations to the towns in the district but has yet to meet with the La Grande and Union city councils.

CHIEF

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the La Grande Rural Fire Department’s board.

Six people applied for the chief’s position — four from Eastern Oregon, one from Missouri and another from South Dakota. Each of the four finalists has been interviewed in Island City by one of two interview teams.

As part of the interview, the candidates were given a scenario involving a hypothetical fire and were asked to explain how they would respond to it.

“We want to know how they would solve problems during an actual fire,” Hohstadt said.

The scenario tests and interviews were scored by the interview teams, whose members include area firefighters and law enforcement officers. The scores will be examined by members of the fire department’s board, who will then decide whether to offer someone the position or further narrow the list of finalists and possibly have the remaining candidates interviewed a second time.

“We want the very best person we can find,” Hohstadt said.

The La Grande Rural Fire Department, which is stationed in Island City, has an assigned service area within Union County and often assists other fire departments in fires and medical emergencies.



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