

GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE GAZETTE-TIMES

State voters helped dig budget hole

The recent release of a surprisingly sober budget from the three chairs of the Legislature's powerful Ways and Means Committee helped to put some of that problem in perspective.

You already know the general outlines of the issue: The proposed budget for the 2019-21 budget cycle features a record amount of revenue, some \$23.2 billion. It's a 10 percent increase over the 2017-19 budget, fueled in part by the state's economic recovery (a recovery that's showing signs of slowing).

But even that big bump in available revenue isn't enough to cover the anticipated increase in costs, and two areas in particular are playing a major role in driving those: the increasing premiums associated with the state's underfunded public pension system and spending associated with the Oregon Health Plan, the state's Medicaid program. (The proposed budget makes no cuts in eligibility or benefits for the Oregon Health Plan.)

In both of those cases, we're still trying to figure out how to pay for decisions state officials and legislators made years ago — a cautionary note today's lawmakers should keep in mind. We knew back then that eventually the state would need to pick up more of the load for Medicaid. We also knew, or should have known, how decisions about pension benefits would play out decades down the road.

But state officials and legislators aren't alone in helping to dig this state budget hole. Voters have picked up a shovel from time to time.

A popular way to do that is through the initiative process, and a good example of that is Measure 98, the initiative mandating that school districts spend additional dough on career and technical education classes.

We have no objection whatsoever to these classes, and evidence continues to show that participants in those classes graduate from high school at a higher rate than students who haven't taken those offerings. (In addition, these career and technical classes often can lead to well-paying jobs that don't necessarily require a four-year college degree.) Our objection was that the measure came with no funding source. Nevertheless, voters easily approved the measure, and that budget hole got a little bit bigger.

The proposed legislative budget allocates about \$170 million for Measure 98 programs, less than the \$300 million that would be spent if the programs were funded at the level called for in the initiative. Measure 98 advocates were steamed and vowed to lobby for the full amount.

But in a budget that generally calls for a 5 percent reduction in state services, the question has to be asked: Where will the money come from to do that?

Rep. Dan Rayfield of Corvallis, one of the co-chairs of the Ways & Means Committee and one of the architects of that budget proposal, noted in a recent interview that every legislator in the Capitol comes to Salem with a couple of pet projects in mind.

And it's not that these pet projects are necessarily bad; in fact, some of them certainly would be valuable. But Rayfield urged his colleagues to keep the price tag of these projects in mind over the next four months of the legislative session: "People are going to have to make difficult decisions like that."

Voters, of course, don't need to ask questions about what an initiative will cost or how the state will pay for it when they're casting their ballots. But they should.



Missed opportunity if Oregon falls behind on clean energy

Two qualities that make our communities strong are personal responsibility and neighborly cooperation. We do what we can to contribute. We take responsibility for our piece of what needs to be done. We clean up our own mess. Some problems are too big or we hit a rough patch. Our neighbors step in to help. We're stronger for working together.

I was born and raised in Gilliam County, where I'm proud to serve my community as Road Master and as a commissioner at the Port of Arlington. In my lifetime, I've seen a lot of changes.

My wife's family had a ranch, 26,000 acres where they grazed cattle. The wildfires, which have gotten worse, damaged so much rangeland. Every blade of grass burned means less acreage for the cattle. You're forced to overgraze in other areas to keep up the herd. Wildfires are making things worse for our economy, land and health. Scientists predicted this would happen and now it's coming true.

We're facing a once-in-a-generation challenge and it's going to take responsibility and cooperation to solve. For previous generations it

was fighting dictators in Europe. For us, it's combatting a warming climate. I believe this is a global problem. I'm pleased to hear things about China and Europe starting to pull some of the weight. But if the U.S.A. really kicks in with renewable energy, no country in the world can beat us. We have economic freedom here. The world would see us as an example.

Oregon is a prime place to show others how it's done, while boosting our home-grown economy.

Now's the time for more investment in renewable power, in making buildings and homes use less energy, and to think about how we can use better fuels, made here at home. I'm following this cap-and-invest legislation in Salem called "Clean Energy Jobs."

The idea is Oregon will put a "cap" on climate pollution from the largest sources in our state, about 100 of them. We'll ask those industrial polluters to take responsibility for what they're putting into our air by paying a fair price for it. Those funds will be invested in communities all around the state — in clean energy like upgrades to homes and businesses

My Voice

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to save on energy bills, and projects to prevent wildfires.

Like with the wind farms, all this new work requires people to do it. It's the kind of work that can't be outsourced — construction workers, electricians, engineers and more. A project means hiring local truckers, more business for the hardware stores and restaurants. This legislation could mean more funding to jumpstart those projects.

Long term, if we're using energy made closer to home, it's going to be cheaper and more reliable. I hear the other side of this debate too. Folks worried about "will this be a burden on the economy?" and the like. I plan a budget at the road department. I know prices for energy go up and down, mostly out of our control. You plan for those as best you can. We need to set ourselves up for the future.

I'll be watching closely.

This bill needs to invest in all communities, not just the Portland area. I hope to see guarantees that rural counties will get our fair share, and some help because we don't always have the staff to do the paperwork. I want to see protections for large businesses under the cap to stay competitive. And we should join up with other states, so it doesn't create a new bureaucracy.

Oregon needs to do its part. We might not grow enough wheat to feed the whole world, but we grow wheat in Oregon anyway because we contribute to the market. The Clean Energy Jobs bill is an economically smart way to create jobs, reduce pollution and save money on energy while we become more independent. For our community to thrive, we need new industries and protection against the changing climate. This is a balanced solution.

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