

GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

Budget woes may sidetrack suicide efforts

At the time, it was difficult to even find basic data to help illuminate the issue: It was simply a topic that people didn't talk much about, and when they did, it was in whispers.

Gelser's bill mandated the creation of a five-year Youth Suicide Intervention and Prevention Plan. It created the position of youth suicide and prevention coordinator. It also mandated the creation of an annual report on the issue from the Oregon Health Authority.

Five years later, the number of Oregonians aged 10 to 24 who die by suicide still is much too high: The annual report from the Health Authority puts the number for 2017 at 107, including four in Linn and Benton counties. The number in 2016 was 98; in 2015, 90; in 2014, 97. (Our hunch is that the increased number for 2017 reflects both the fact that suicide rates for all ages in Oregon continues to rise and the likelihood that we're getting better reporting of youth suicides.)

But this year's annual report also trumpets real progress: a variety of programs in place across Oregon intended to get help to people who need it and to help vulnerable young people access the resources and the connections they need to navigate through a period of crisis.

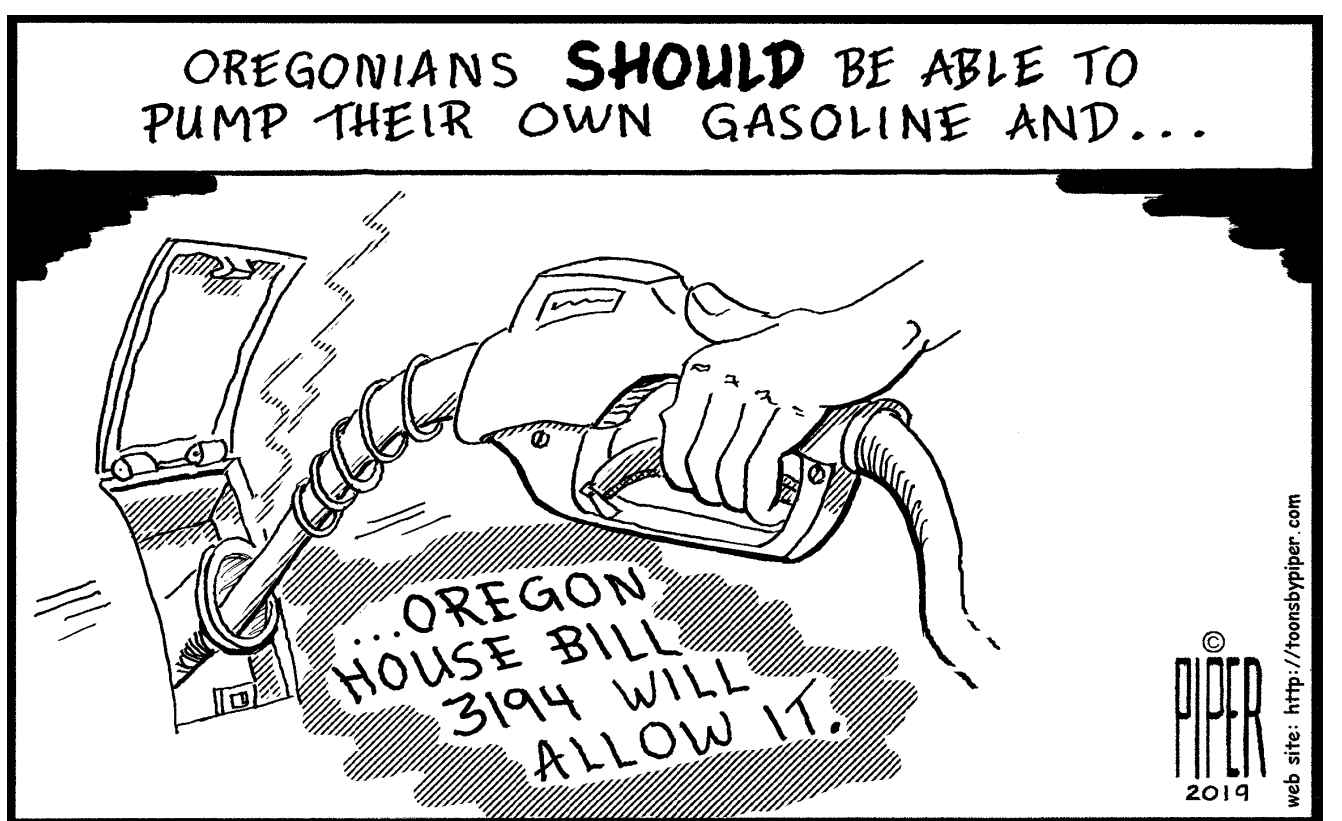
And, five years after the passage of Gelser's House Bill 4124, the issue of suicide in general is back before the Legislature in a big way. Legislators face budget challenges in this session, with state revenues not keeping pace with rising costs. But their actions also will mean the difference between continuing to make progress in the battle against youth suicide — or allowing the issue to slide back into the shadows.

Gelser's in the state Senate now, but she's still working on the issue. One of her bills, co-sponsored by Sen. Rob Wagner, would require school districts, colleges and universities to notify the Health Authority when a student dies by suicide. The state agency then would provide assistance to schools as needed. The bill, which Gelser said clarifies reporting responsibilities, unanimously passed the Senate and now is before the House. Gelser and Wagner also want to require county and tribal governments to notify schools and other local programs and agencies about the suicide of a person under the age of 25 who has had contact with them.

Another bill from Gelser, Senate Bill 707, would form a state advisory committee to look at ways to reduce the suicide rate among Oregon youth. The committee, which Gelser sees as a continuation of the Alliance to Prevent Suicide, would work with the Oregon Health Authority and make recommendations.

Another bill that easily passed the Senate is Senate Bill 52 — often referred to as Adi's Act, after Adi Staub, a transgender Portland teen who died by suicide in 2017. The legislation would require every public school district in the state to develop a suicide prevention plan for students in every grade level, from kindergarten through 12th grade. The plans would have to account for what the bill terms "high-risk groups" — including LGBTQ students, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities and mentally ill students — as well as addressing suicide within the general student population.

Since those bills require little or no additional spending, they seem likely to move ahead in the session. Bills that require additional investment may face tougher sledding. As they sharpen their budget pencils, though, legislators may want to keep this in mind: These are bills that have the potential to save lives.



Changes to PERS can be made by moving forward

A career in education offers a unique opportunity to positively impact the future of our state. Working with our youth is a truly rewarding experience. It is particularly satisfying to be a part of young people reaching their dreams.

However, teaching can be very stressful. Public officials demand higher graduation rates and test scores, while parents expect lower class sizes and comprehensive elective programs. More students are arriving at our doors less prepared to learn, requiring significant resources to address behavioral challenges. These factors cause stress and anxiety, often resulting in fewer people pursuing and maintaining careers in education.

There is an answer to address these concerns: We need more trained adults.

Changes like this would require a significant reinvestment in education. Although Governor Brown and the Oregon Legislature should be applauded for their current efforts to raise \$2 billion in additional revenue for education and critical services, they face a significant challenge in implement-

ing necessary cost containment measures. The primary cost driver for schools is the Public Employee Retirement System, also known as PERS. Without changes to PERS, it is possible 80 cents on every new revenue dollar will go to PERS costs over the next 10 years. Clearly, we have a major problem that has reached a crisis point.

The problems with PERS are very complex. Discussions quickly become emotional since PERS reform efforts often pit public employees against the private sector. This is counterproductive. At some point, Oregonians need to come together for the sake of our kids. We need to stop fixing blame and start fixing the problem.

A starting point is to accept the facts:

- School districts spend about 84 percent of their money on personnel costs. We are a people business. Some 20-30 percent of these costs are PERS related. This percentage will continue to grow in the coming years.
- The state, schools and local governments now owe \$26 billion to the PERS system. This

amount is the Unfunded Actuarial Liability (UAL), otherwise known as legacy costs. This is the amount public employers owe for benefits earned by public employees and retirees.

My Voice

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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- Veteran public employee costs (Tier 1 and Tier 2) consist of the majority of the UAL debt. Newer employees receive less generous pensions in a third tier, Oregon Public Service Retirement Plan (OPSRP). OPSRP employees consist of approximately 60 percent of the Oregon workforce.
- The Oregon State Supreme Court has consistently upheld the concept of honoring existing contracts. Thus, PERS changes "cannot go backward." Current retirees and employees cannot lose benefits they already earned. However, changes can be made moving forward.

Clearly, we have a situation that is untenable. It will require leadership and sacrifice for Oregonians to course correct. There are several ideas to begin the discussion. These ideas, and others, can be found on www.PERSsolutions.org:

- Transfer a portion of the UAL debt to the state rather than local municipalities. Explore bonding capacity.
- Create a "Work Back/Payback" program for employees to retire and work back with a portion of their salary and benefits redirected to pay down the UAL.
- Explore options with the employee 6 percent contribution to pay down the UAL that is fair and protects OPSRP employees.

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In closing, we encourage all Oregonians to take the first step to address our PERS crisis: listen, learn and value the perspectives of others.

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