

GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

School money, PERS reform joined at hip

One of the common themes you heard last week as teachers across Oregon rallied for a proposed tax on business that's projected to raise \$1 billion a year for K-12 schools was this: It's not about Oregon's Public Employees Retirement System, the state's badly underfunded pension system.

"This isn't about PERS," was a typical comment from education officials. "It's about educating the kids."

Well, now that the Legislature has passed the so-called Student Success Act (after Democratic leaders struck a deal with Republicans to lure GOP senators back to the Capitol), there's little doubt that K-12 classrooms will see an infusion of cash — assuming that the gross receipts tax at the heart of the plan survives an almost-certain attempt to refer it to voters.

But to pretend that this measure doesn't have anything to do with PERS is to continue whistling past the graveyard, as state leaders have done time and time again with the pension system.

The gross receipts tax on certain Oregon businesses has to be considered hand-in-hand with proposals to (at least temporarily) shield schools from continued increases in their PERS premiums. Otherwise, those increased pension premiums would eat away a growing chunk of the tax money earmarked for schools. In fact, by some estimates, PERS premiums would have quickly absorbed up to half of the money raised by the tax.

So that's the light in which to examine the proposals issued last week by Democratic leaders that attempt to rein in the costs of the pension system, which currently faces a staggering \$27 billion deficit. As Ted Sickinger of The Oregonian reported, the plan would provide short-term cost relief to public employers. In fact, the system's actuary reported that the proposals could hold public employers' required pension contributions flat in the two-year budget cycle that begins in July 2021. As you watch city governments and school districts in the mid-valley struggle this year to cover increased PERS costs, you can see how this could be welcome.

That's the good news.

Here's the bad news: The majority of the savings offered by the plan (about two-thirds) comes from refinancing the PERS deficit. The problem with that is it does nothing to trim that \$27 billion deficit. It merely kicks the bulk of the problem down the road. (The Democratic proposal also calls for legislators to take control of one of the system's crucial earnings assumptions, a task that currently belongs to the PERS board. This would seem to be an invitation for mischief.)

It also increases the system's vulnerability to a prolonged economic slowdown, which could be a very big deal, considering how economists now expect such an event, if not an actual recession, possibly as early as next year.

The Democratic proposals also call for redirecting a portion of public employees' required 6 percent retirement contributions to a pension stability fund instead of the supplemental defined contribution plan, where they go today.

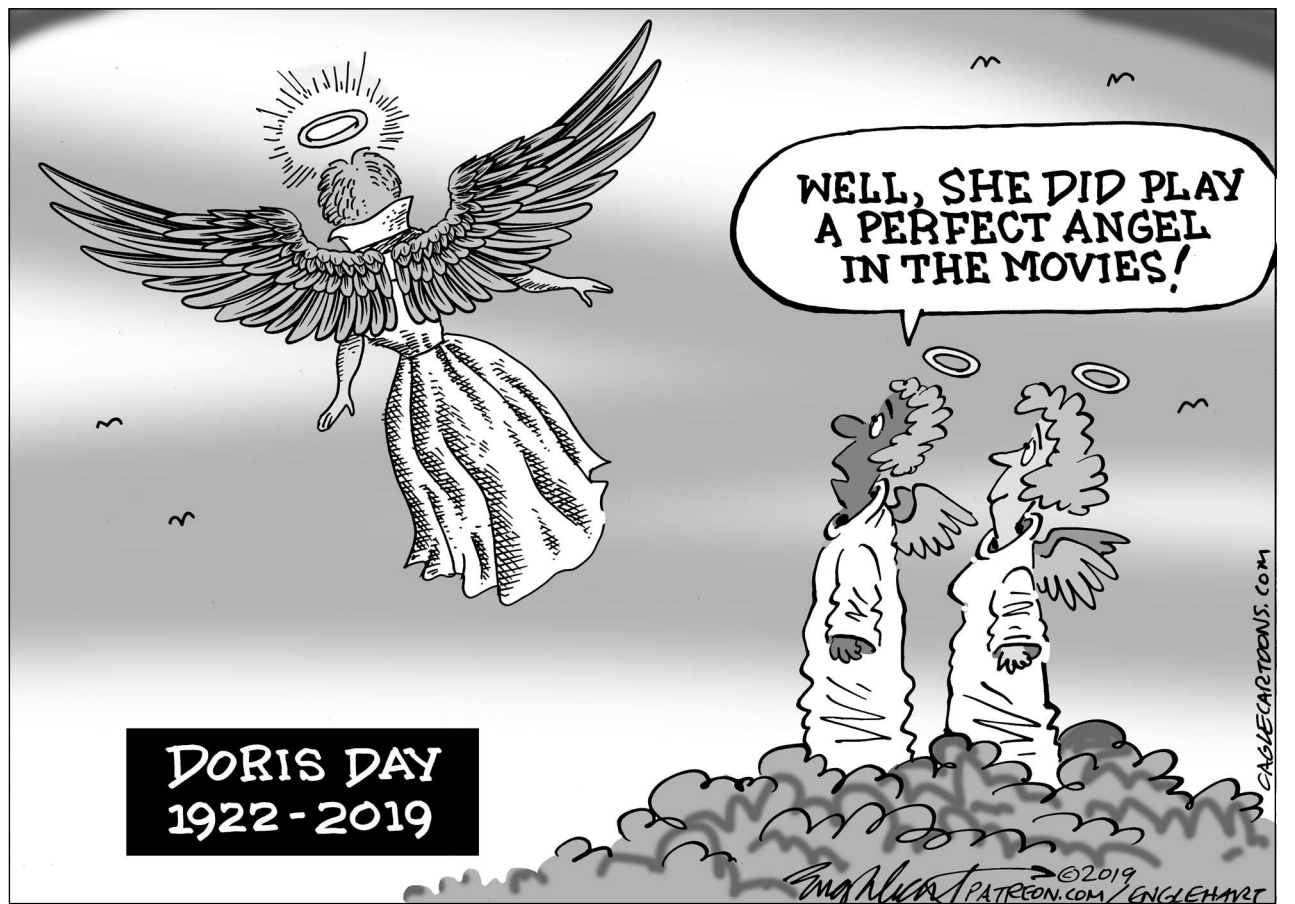
But this part of the proposal may already be dead in the water, with public employee unions vowing to go to court if legislators go ahead with the plan.

Here's the upshot: The PERS proposals most likely to withstand legal challenges offer maybe two years of relief, but don't come anywhere near a solution.

Even the legislator who's been most active in pitching PERS reforms, Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, noted that the proposed package is a "temporary fix."

"The only thing it does is lower rates in the short term," Knopp told Sickinger, the state's leading reporter on PERS. And then Knopp added this sad note: "But with the political dynamics that exist, we'll be hard-pressed to get too much more from inside the building."

Which raises the question: Who will lead the way for substantial, long-lasting PERS reform? It's a mantle that seems to be ready for the taking. ■



May 15 is Peace Officers Memorial Day

The month of May is Memorial month. We all celebrate Memorial Day on the last Monday in the month of May. Memorial Day is a federal holiday, but it is intended to be more than a day off of work or school and even more than the beginning of the summer camping season or a good excuse for a barbecue. It is intended to be a time of remembrance for those who have passed on from our presence, especially for those who have served our nation.

There are several other days of remembrance during the month of May. Every year since 1963, on May 15, law enforcement officers who have died in the line of duty are recognized and remembered for their service and their sacrifice. John F. Kennedy signed the bill into law on Oct. 1, 1962, after the idea was first brought up in Congress in October the year before.

Since records have been kept, beginning in 1791, there have been 23,721 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. The worst period of history for violence against those who serve in law enforcement was 1927-1932. In five of those six years, there were more 300 each year killed in the line of duty, with 1930 being the worst when 335 were killed. The next worst period of history was 1970-1975, the worst during that stretch being 1973 with 278 killed and 1974 with 285 killed. The year 2001 saw another spike in line of duty deaths

among officers, as well as other first responders, due to the heroic and selfless efforts by these professionals to rescue people in the 9/11 World Trade Center Towers attacks by terrorists. In the past 10 years, we have had several years with spikes in the deaths of those who serve to protect us. The worst of those years, during the Obama administration era, were 2010 and 2011 when more than 180 were killed each year. In 2016 and 2017, 174 law enforcement professionals were killed in the line of duty each year.

The sad reality is that officers are often being killed because of the uniform they are wearing. In many of these deaths of law enforcement personnel, the investigation has shown the attacker was targeting those who serve in law enforcement. In some cases, they were lured into an ambush attack with the intent to kill those who responded to the 911 call. One incident of a killing of officers in Washington state took place while they were on their lunch break at a café. These are crimes of hatred toward people who represent the laws of our land and who serve to protect law-abiding citizens from those who desire to bring others harm.

As our society erodes and our civility declines, attacks on law enforcement professionals are worsening along with attacks on schools. It is the result of the devaluing of life by many different influences and the deteriora-

My Voice

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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tion of respect of others, especially those in authority.

In a recent meeting, I was serving as a volunteer chaplain for our local law enforcement professionals, and Capt. Craig Ward made this staggering statement: "In the calendar year 2018, 166 officers were killed in the line of duty from all causes. According to Officer Down Memorial, which includes officers who died as a result of effects of the 9/11 attacks, 52 of those death were from gunfire. In the same year there were 15 combat duty deaths for our U.S. military branches, all in Afghanistan, according to Stars and Stripes and Army Times. There are roughly twice as many combat troops in the U.S. military as there are law enforcement officers on the streets of America."

So, you can see from the math, last year was about seven times more dangerous for an officer in America than for a soldier in Afghanistan. This in no way detracts from the heroic

service of those in our military, but it is a startling reality about the condition of our society. In 2019, 39 law enforcement professionals have already been killed in the line of duty.

We, as parents and guardians, must begin to teach our children to respect those who serve in a uniform that represents professionals who put their lives in harm's way to protect law-abiding citizens, including those who serve in our military.

As you think of memorials this month, please do not forget to remember those who serve in our local community. There is a memorial monument at the entrance of the La Grande Police Department and Sheriff's Office that reminds us of those who have died in the line of duty in the history of our own community. Let us make sure to remember the fallen and thank those who serve to protect us and are willing to put their lives on the line for the benefit of a peaceful community.

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