

OUR VIEW

Neglecting a piece of the puzzle

Oregon Speaker of the House Tina Kotek hopes to persuade the state Legislature to commit at least \$40 million to help finance new shelters for the homeless this year. If she's successful, the money will be a good step in efforts to provide relief for Oregon's least fortunate residents, though it's a long way from solving the problem.

Kotek, who in the 2019 session was a leading advocate for the nation's first rent control bill and for a measure that eliminates single-family zoning in many communities, may find herself in an uphill battle this year. Gov. Kate Brown hopes for between \$150 million and \$200 million to finance the first leg of a years-long program to reduce the state's vulnerability to wildfire. She also wants lawmakers to stash half of a predicted \$1 billion in unanticipated revenues away as a cushion against the next recession.

Kotek, meanwhile, not only hopes for shelter money, she wants funds to address problems in the state's adult behavioral health care services and to help fight substance abuse problems.

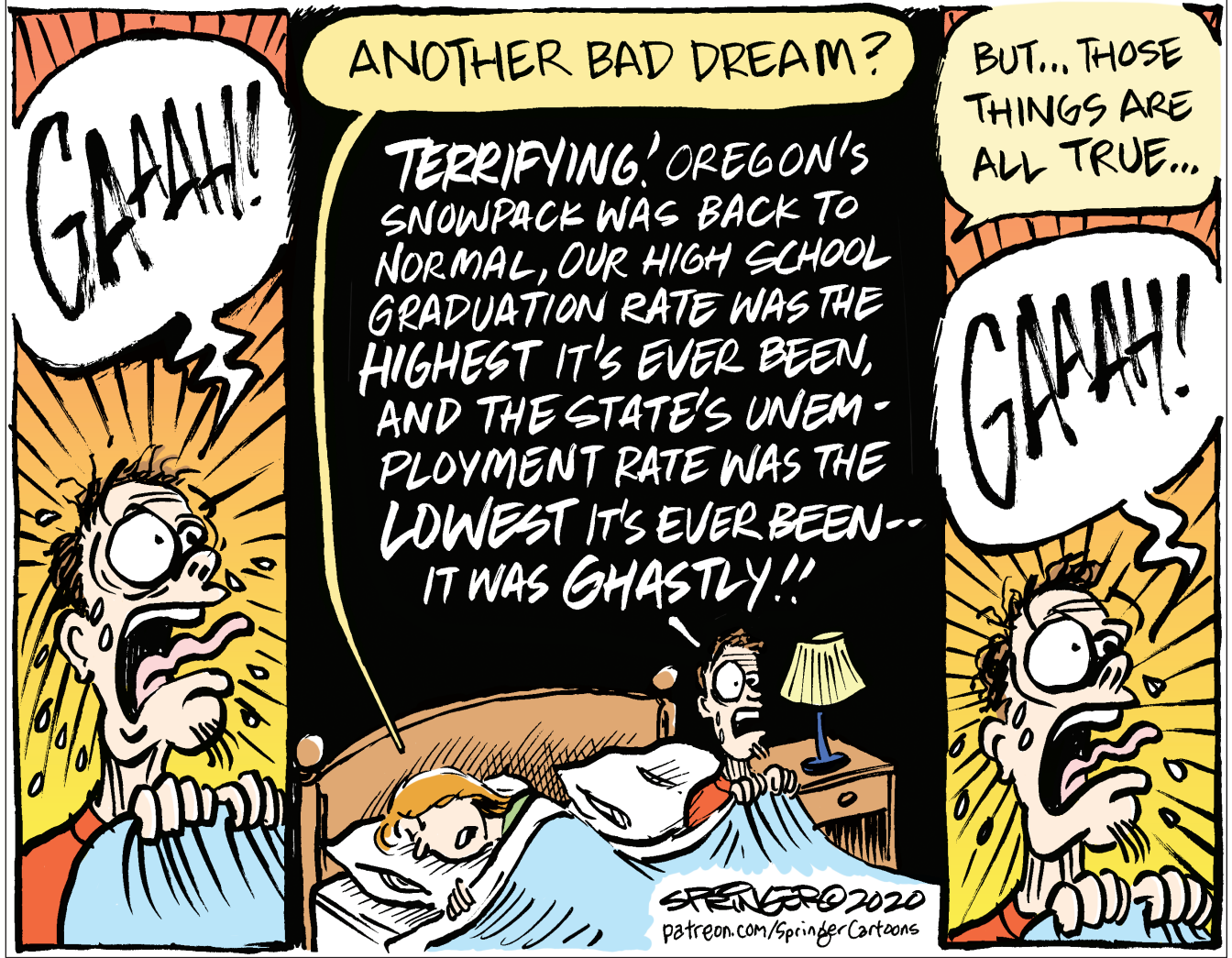
Oregon's problems in its child welfare system cannot be overlooked. While the state is making progress in addressing them, it's likely to require more money to complete the task and maintain a new, higher level of service.

All are worthy, even vital causes.

That said, Kotek's plan seems to overlook a step that would not only help ease the homelessness problems here but also address the skyrocketing cost of all housing in much of Oregon. Oregon land-use law makes it too difficult for communities to grow as need and demand would have them do. That, in turn, drives up the cost of all housing.

Kotek has said in the past she doesn't want to see Portland become another San Francisco, where an average home sells for more than \$800,000. Yet unless communities can spread, and do so easily, that's a real possibility.

A POLITICAL CARTOONIST'S NIGHTMARE...



MY VOICE

Sharing responsibility for wildfire protection at wildland / urban interfaces

Private landowners and public agencies do and should share responsibility for wildfire protection at wildland/urban interfaces.

Private homeowners living in wildfire prone forest or rangeland should take personal responsibility for construction and maintaining buildings in a manner that minimizes risk. The cost of this should be born primarily if not exclusively by the individual landowner. On this few would disagree.

However, what should be done about individuals who build a log cabin with a cedar shake roof and an outdoor fireplace (with no spark arrestor) in the middle of a diseased grand fir thicket? Should the community make no effort to help him because his construction choices were stupid? Who bears the cost of increased risk of initiating a fire in such a setting? What if this poor individual compounds his troubles by trying to protect his house alone with a garden hose? Who is responsible for his life or helping him? Who is responsible for the trauma to the firefighting squad who leaves him alone and later hears he died? Answers are difficult.

On a larger ecosystem, level tree thinning and fuel management with controlled burns among other interventions have great potential to minimize the chance of the spread of wildfire to urban areas with enormous cost savings. Yet the cost and risk of these interventions are beyond the resources of most landowners. The cost of this should be born primarily if not exclusively by public agencies if the landowner is willing to maintain improvements and manage his land in a responsible manner. On this I expect few would disagree.

However, what do we do about the landowner desperate to liquidate his financial resources who over harvests his

About the author

Joel Rice of La Grande is a



psychiatrist. Rice is board certified in psychiatry and addiction medicine, according to his profile with Blue

Mountain Associates and Grande Ronde Recovery.

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property after a public agency financed tree thinning, leaving a fire prone "dog hair" thicket of regeneration, selling it a few years later to an unsuspecting individual who plans to build a log cabin? What is to prevent individuals from "mining" the government and taxpayers? Answers are difficult.

Whatever is done, we need to maintain individual freedom (including the right to be stupid) and take care of taxpayer dollars wisely.

Most local governments have identified the wildland/urban interface around their towns. I suggest there should be strict building codes in these areas requiring, for example, metal roofs, a noncombustible exterior, such as

cementitious siding, zones of defensible space around the building with no trees, etc. It would be nice if everyone just did what made sense for themselves and their neighbors, but I am afraid without an intervention it just won't happen in many cases.

Additional but more expensive or exotic protections, such as roof sprinklers, water catchments and irrigated green areas, might be given tax deductions. My reading of the literature on this issue suggests appropriate construction techniques dramatically reduce and practically fireproof a building. It may be that given the likely rise in fire intensity and frequency in the West that will accompany climate change we should just stop letting people build in fire-prone forest.

How to handle existing houses in the WUI is more difficult. I would favor grandfathering them into a fire protection district but raising property taxes to reflect the additional cost to the community. It is un-American to abandon members of our community, even if they are acting recklessly.

Tax rates could be contingent on what interventions have been done to make the home less prone to igniting. The devil would be in the detail, of course, as rules and regulations have a way of going sideways. Every effort should be made to encourage landowners, financially and otherwise, to do the right thing by their community.

Cabins that are not year round residences should be allowed to burn. They are wonderful (I just spent two years building one), but they are luxuries, not homes. No one should risk their life trying to save a luxury except for the idiot who spent two years building one in a fire prone area.

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Phone: 541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-422-3110
Fax: 541-963-7804
Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com
Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com
Street address: 1406 Fifth St., La Grande

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