

OUR VIEW

School spending falls short

It seems unlikely that members of the Oregon Education Association, the teachers union that lavishes most of its campaign contributions on Democratic candidates, will ever pine for Republicans to have more clout in the Oregon Legislature.

At least not publicly. But recent actions in Salem, where the Democrats have supermajorities in the House and Senate, might well have given some union officials, and members, reason to at least ponder their political preferences. Last week, Republicans in the House advocated for the state to spend \$300 million more for public schools in the two-year budget cycle that starts July 1. But GOP members don't have the votes to move the school budget bill back to a committee, where the amount could be increased, so the bill went to Gov. Kate Brown's desk at \$9.3 billion. Republicans called for \$9.6 billion, the amount the Oregon School Boards Association had suggested is necessary to avoid any program cuts or layoffs. Just two Democrats — Mark Meek of Oregon City and Marty Wilde of Eugene — joined 20 Republicans in voting for a motion to send the bill back to committee, with a goal of boosting the spending to \$9.6 billion over the two years. That wasn't enough Democratic support. Rep. Susan McClain, a Democrat from Forest Grove who's chair of the education budget subcommittee, tried to defend the \$9.3 billion by saying that the Legislature is "creating record investments in public schools this year."

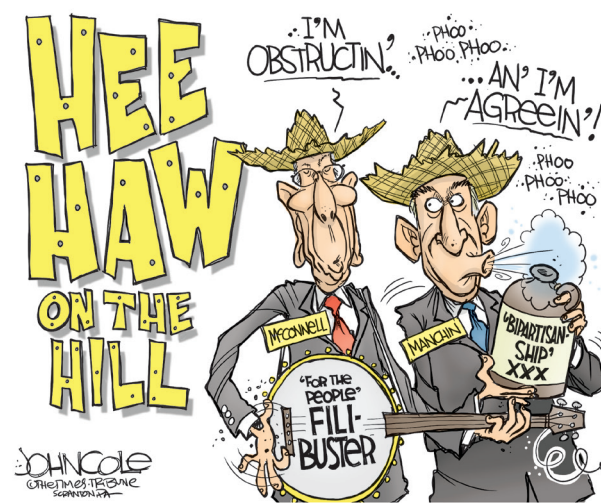
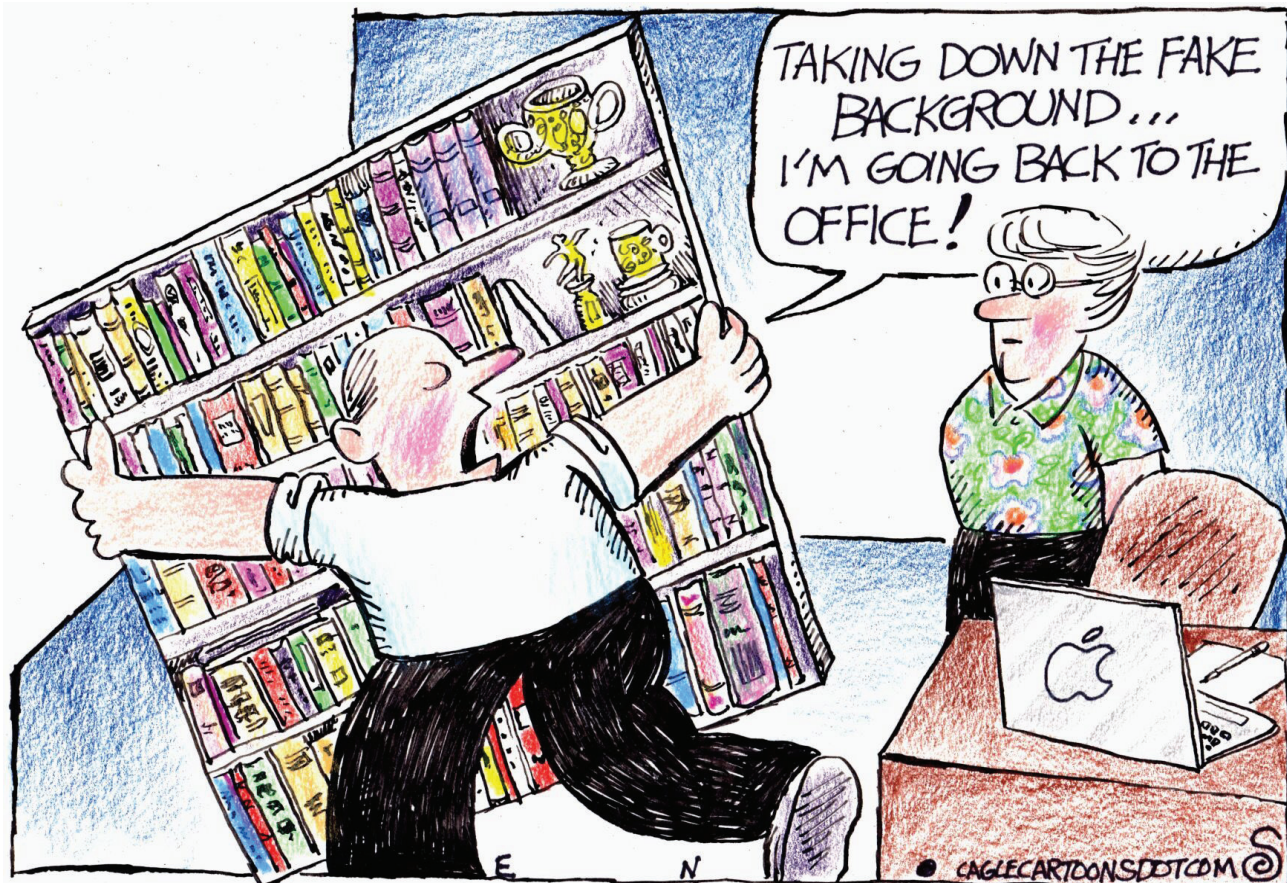
The \$9.3 billion figure is up from \$9 billion in the current two-year budget cycle. Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, co-leader of the Legislature's joint budget panel, said, "It is our job as a legislature to find out what is the Goldilocks porridge in our budget that meets the needs of our children, but also at the same time, is a sustainable budget that we can continue to operate on."

The more apt fairy tale in this case is Rumpelstiltskin. The federal government has been spinning quite a lot of gold during the pandemic, and one result is that Oregon's revenue is burgeoning. The most recent estimate from state economist Mark McMullen, released in May, is for an additional \$1.18 billion in the soon-to-end biennium, with much of that coming from rising income tax collections spurred by federal stimulus payments. McMullen projects an increase of \$1.25 billion from projects for the biennium that starts July 1, and \$1.64 million more for the 2023-2025 budget cycle. Put simply, the state absolutely can afford the \$9.6 billion schools budget the Republicans, and too few Democrats, have advocated for.

House Minority Leader Christine Drahan, R-Canby, pointed out that the flush state coffers isn't the only reason to boost education spending. Oregon students have also suffered greatly during the pandemic, with in-person classes limited at times in every district, and students in some of the larger districts missing more than a year of normal schooling.

"As we ask our schools to bring kids back to have full in-person learning five days a week, they are going to be bombarded with unknowns," Drahan said. "The need for them to have the resources necessary to create an environment where these kids can be successful cannot be overstated. Our state has more money than ever, and we're committed to giving families the choice of in-person learning next fall. This is the wrong time to move forward with a 'cuts' budget. Our kids deserve better."

Indeed they do. It's a pity that the majority Democrats in Salem, who can always count on support from the teachers union, didn't do the same for their political benefactors.



What is forest health?



GEORGE WUERTHNER
OTHER VIEWS

The Forest Service continuously justifies logging our forests based on what it calls "forest health." The agency claims logging will "restore" resiliency. But few ask what exactly constitutes a healthy forest ecosystem?

The agency defines forest health as a lack of tree mortality, mainly from wildfire, bark beetles, root rot, mistletoe, drought, and a host of other natural agents. To the Forest Service, such biological agents are "destructive," but this demonstrates a complete failure to understand how forest ecosystems work.

This Industrial Forestry Paradigm espoused by the Forest Service views any mortality as unacceptable other than that resulting from a chain saw.

This perspective is analogous to how Fish and Game agencies used to view the influence of natural predators like wolves and cougars on elk and deer. Over time biologists learned that culling of the less fit animals by predators enhanced the survival of the prey species.

Similarly, wildfire, bark beetles, and other natural sources of mor-

tality enhance the long-term resilience of the forest ecosystem.

For example, the snag forests resulting from a high severity fire have the second-highest biodiversity found in forested landscapes. Large, high severity fires promote more birds, bees, butterflies, wildflowers, bats, fungi, small rodents, trout, grizzly bears, deer, elk, and moose. Many species of wildlife and plants are so dependent on snags and down wood that they live in mortal "fear" of green forests. Some estimates suggest that as much as 2/3 of all wildlife species utilize dead trees at some point in their lifecycle.

Even worse for forest ecosystems, the Forest Service emphasizes chain saw medicine to "fix" what they define incorrectly as a "health" problem. Chain saw medicine ignores the long-lasting effects of logging on forest genetics. Research has demonstrated that all trees vary in their genetic ability to adapt to various stress agents. Some lodgepole pine and ponderosa pine have a genetic resistance to bark beetles. Others are better adapted to deal with drought and so forth. Yet, a forester with a paint gun marking trees for logging has no idea which trees have such adaptive genetics.

Research has shown that thinning even 50% of a forest stand can

remove half of the genetic diversity because it is the rare alleles that are important in the time of environmental stress. Perhaps one in a hundred trees may have a genetic ability to survive drought or slightly thicker bark that enables it to survive a fire.

There are numerous other known ecological impacts associated with logging that are minimized, overlooked, or ignored by the Forest Service.

For instance, one of the primary vectors for the spread of weeds into the forest ecosystem is logging roads. Logging roads are also a primary chronic source of sedimentation that degrades aquatic ecosystems. Logging removes carbon that would otherwise be stored on the site. Even burnt forests store far more carbon than a logged/thinned forest.

So when the Forest Service asserts it is logging the forest to enhance "forest health," one must ask whose definition of forest health are they using? The timber industry? Or an ecological perspective? So far, the agency is more a handmaiden of the industry than a custodian of the public trust.

George Wuertner is an ecologist who specializes in fire ecology and livestock issues.

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