

Salem Report

By State Representative Brad Witt



Over the last couple of months, I have devoted a fair amount of time in this column to the budget, PERS negotiations and issues regarding

our state's financial security. This week I would like to devote this space to a discussion of your financial security, particularly opportunities regarding individual retirements. Last week, State Treasurer Ted Wheeler convened a forum of nationally recognized experts in the field of retirement security, especially with regard to those workers who have no retirement option through their employers. It is a discussion that is long overdue, and HB 3436 has been introduced to get the ball rolling.

Historically, Americans do not have a very good track record when it comes to saving a consistent percentage of their incomes and Oregonians are no exception. Most Western European nations average savings rates in the

10-12% range, whereas our rates hover around 4%. Participants at the forum indicated that the average worker should have accumulated about \$500,000 in order to retire comfortably. Unfortunately, 80% do not even have one year's income in savings. Many will be relying on Social Security as their sole source of income. This means that roughly 1/3 of middle class Oregonians will be retiring at or near the poverty level. It is incumbent upon us to look for ways to try to mitigate that prospect.

We know that if given a chance, Oregonians will take advantage of the opportunity to invest in a safe, accessible investment plan. The success of the Oregon College Savings Plan is a clear example of how much Oregonians will embrace a well-designed system. With this model in mind, HB 3436 establishes the Oregon Retirement Savings Investment Board and tasks it with developing a retirement plan for employees in the private sector who lack any other options. Here are some features of the proposal:

- An automatic IRA account would be created for all Oregon workers
- Workers would be enrolled through their work, although they can opt out

- Enrollment would be voluntary
- It would not cost employers anything (no withholding costs)

Oregon is not alone in considering legislation like this, especially given recent experiences with both the stock market and the banking industry. California enacted legislation in 2012, and eleven other states have considered it in recent years as a way to invest without the considerable expense and market risks to which individual savers are exposed. If HB 3436 passes, Oregon workers will have another tool in the toolbox to help them secure a stable and adequate retirement. The bill is currently in the Ways and Means Committee and if it gets to the House floor, I look forward to supporting it.

Recently I testified before the House Judiciary Committee in support of amendments to HB 2581. The amended version of the bill is intended to assist the family of Jennifer Warren, a resident of St. Helens and a constituent, who was brutally stabbed to death in the course and scope of her employment. Jennifer was murdered while delivering medications to a man who was under court mandated supervision by our state's Psychiatric Security Review

Board.

Because Jennifer was murdered "on the job," current state statute provides immunity from liability caused by injury or death and places the incident under workers compensation law. Under those statutes, the family of Jennifer Warren was paid \$16,000, most of which was consumed by funeral expenses. This was not an accidental death – this was a wrongful death perpetrated by a person under state supervision. The situation begs for a remedy as proposed in HB 2581, so that the Warren family, and any other victims similarly affected, can be justly compensated.

The committee, though sympathetic to the situation, is prudently cautious when exposing third parties to lawsuits. The Workers Compensation Division is equally concerned about the process. The consequence is that the Judiciary Committee will study this situation during the Interim and attempt to devise a solution. I am satisfied that, having brought this issue to the forefront, we will see some appropriate legislation next session, perhaps focused on the limited instances where a wrongful death is involved.

Voices From the Crowd: Support the Arts in Our Schools *continued from page 3*

be at the time decided that this was a good time to save money and cut back on the Arts. They didn't have to worry about Mr. Tesdal in their face anymore and had a rookie teacher coming in that they knew they could control and pass on their cut back vision of the arts. Kim Morrison was the perfect choice to continue the great art program Vernonia had. She went through it as a Vernonia student and was ready to carry on the program for the future. She was also a photography student at Pacific University and was looking forward to continuing the photo program. However it turned out the first program that the district cut was the photo program. I found this out as I was finishing my last year, not from the administration, but through hear say. I immediately went to my principal who confirmed it was true. Not only were they going to cut the photography program, but they were also going to cut Art to a half time program. Anyone who knows me knows that I was miffed. I was extremely disappointed for the students and the teacher in Vernonia.

I immediately drafted a letter to the superintendent, principals, and School Board. I presented my feeling about the destruction of the art program to the Board. It ended up that because they needed a place for the students to go for their electives, they kept Art as a full time program minus photography. Kim took over being a first year teacher without much control over how her program was to be run. The funding kept dwindling and eventually she transferred to Jewel

School District where they were ready to support her and her program.

Linda Allen is the Art teacher who replaced Kim. She had to accept a smaller classroom with the hope that when the new school was built she would get a room where she could actually spread out and teach art the way it should be. I have substituted several times for Ms. Allen and know the conditions she has to work under. She was housed in the Metal Fabricated building where the HS was before the new school. Small desks that can barely hold two students at a time. The desks when I taught held 4 to 6 students with elbow room to work. She had one sink for cleaning materials, and very little storage room for all the Art supplies. Pottery was basically non-existent because it was located inconveniently over in the old shop. Now they have even cut the Art program to ¾ time.

So this year I was all excited about the prospects of a new Art room in this wonderful new school. They were going to have this beautiful new area for both the shop and the Art room. And then rumors began to fly again that end up being fact. There will be NO shop, and the art room will be a regular classroom. Shop in Vernonia goes back way before I ever came. It's a given that if you live in a town in the middle of the forest, a logging community, that a shop for the students is of course a priority.

My wife and I, like many, were there for the grand opening on the 21st of August. It was great. It was a wonderful celebration for the future of our kids and community. It was like old home week where I saw many colleagues from past years, along with so many students both past and present. We toured the building like everyone else. I was impressed with the facilities until I came to the Art room. My frustration at seeing this room cannot be expressed in words. This room is as small if not smaller than the last art room. The only saving grace is that it has an adequate sink for cleaning. The storage room is not near big enough and

there will be no pottery going on in this room. We still have a kiln and potters wheels in the district, but where they are I don't know. I'm sure Ms. Allen had tears in her eyes because of the facilities she has been given to teach art in a brand new building. I would think they could have put at least two rooms together. I've been told there are rooms used only for storage. With some planning they could have put two of them together.

Alright, I've said my piece. It's probably obvious I have stored this up for a while, like ever since I retired. At the grand opening more than once I heard it's all about the kids. I couldn't agree more. At the root of everything I always hear it's a money issue. How much more would it have taken to give our students a decent shop while the construction was going on and an Art room where a teacher could actually teach all the mediums we want to give to the kids? There's a kiln just sitting somewhere along with the potter's wheels to create incredible works of art.

My plea to the Vernonia School District 47J and the community is to get the support back for the Arts. Many of you who may read this were my students at one time and now I'm subbing for your children and grandchildren. Let's bring back the support for an Art program that our children deserve. Vernonia has always supported the Arts when I was teaching. We had Art fairs every year showing off the students work from both the Art students and the beautiful wood projects from the shop students. Our students showed their work around town, at the US Bank and Sentry Market managed by Randy Parrow, whose father was one of the best principals and superintendents it was my privilege to work under. Art Parrow was also one of the strongest supporters of Vernonia's Art program. We need that support back.

Art is still only a part day curriculum and we need it back full time. Many of you also probably remember that many at risk students thrived in the arts, and it kept them in school. Just saying!

In the past, as a Vernonia teacher, I'd present my rather strong opinions by going through proper channels to present this document. Now I'm a concerned citizen and retired Art teacher and still feel I have a stake in how our Vernonia students are taught. I urge you to reconsider the current accommodations and to restore the art and shop programs to full time.

Doug Tesdal is a retired Vernonia art instructor who taught Vernonia students from 1977 – 2004.

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