

MINIMUM WAGE GETS A BOOST

Oregon's minimum wage increased from \$7.80 to \$7.95 per hour on Jan. 1, reflecting the rise of the cost of living as defined by the Consumer Price Index. The change is required under Ballot Measure 25, approved by voters in 2002.

The boost of 15 cents an hour will help low-wage earners keep pace with inflation, but many at the bottom rung of the pay scale will remain mired in poverty, according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCP).

A full-time minimum wage worker will get a raise of \$312 a year and a total annual income of \$16,536, still below the \$17,170 that constitutes the 2007 federal poverty line for a family of three.

"Adjustments to the minimum wage are essential for keeping the lowest-paid workers from falling further behind, but they are not a ticket out of poverty for most families depending only on a minimum wage job," said Michael Leachman, policy analyst for the OCP, this week.

Oregon now has the nation's third-highest minimum wage, behind Washington (\$8.07), California (\$8) and Massachusetts (\$8). The national minimum wage of \$5.85 per hour is scheduled to increase to \$6.55 per hour on July 24, 2008.

Critics of Measure 25 predicted Oregon's relatively high minimum wage would hurt job growth, but OCP says Oregon's non-farm payroll employment growth was 12th fastest in the nation from 2002 to 2007.

Critics representing the Oregon Restaurant Association predicted that "nearly 30,000 more Oregonians could lose their jobs" as a result of Measure 25, but OCP reports employment in the restaurant industry has grown 19 percent, more than twice as fast as the overall non-farm payroll statewide. And the Oregon Employment Department recently forecast that from 2006 to 2016 the restaurant industry will add more jobs than any other industry in the state.

OPERATION BACKFIRE SENTENCINGS

The sentencing date has been pushed back to Feb. 12 for Jacob Ferguson who pled guilty in October to one count of arson and one count of attempted arson in the Operation Backfire environmental arson cases.



Jacob Ferguson

Ferguson was actually involved in 14 arsons or attempted arsons, according to court documents. However, he took a plea deal in exchange for cooperation with the FBI that involved wearing a body wire during conversations with others accused of involvement with the arsons.

Ferguson's original sentencing date was set for Jan. 10 in U.S. District Court but after Jeff "Free" Luers was given a court date of Jan. 8 in Lane County Circuit Court for his resentencing, the Ferguson date was changed.

The cases have been linked in the past. The night before Luers' 2001 trial for the arson of several SUVs at the Romania Chevrolet Truck Center, eco-arsonists (later convicted in the Operation Backfire case) set fire to 35 SUVs at the same location. They issued a communiqué referencing the Luers case.

The Operation Backfire cases being handled in Washington state have not yet gone to sentencing. One defendant, Briana Waters, maintains she is innocent of the charges.

Waters' trial is scheduled for Feb. 4. She faces 35 years in prison if convicted of acting as a lookout during an environmentally motivated arson at the University of Washington Horticulture Center.

On Dec. 26 Waters' attorneys filed a motion accusing the government of "egregious prosecutorial misconduct." They have asked the judge for a status conference "as soon as possible."

The motion, among other issues, accuses the FBI of "suppression of very significant exculpatory evidence" in Waters' case, as well as the "execution and filing of perjurious declarations by two FBI agents, and the filing of at least one false pleading by the prosecution."

Specifically, the motion accuses the FBI agents of doctoring documents to hide the fact that Waters was not named by cooperating witness Jen Kolar, who has pled guilty to the arson, as a fellow participant in the arson in a December 2005 interview with the FBI. — Camilla Mortensen

CORRECTION/CLARIFICATION

Our Dec. 27 cover story reported that Eugene could use a real estate transfer tax to raise money for housing the homeless. Enacting such a tax would require a change in a state law that preempted local real estate transfer taxes.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



news Briefs

KICKER COSTS ARE HIDDEN

Last month the mainstream media celebrated the income tax kicker "Christmas present" from the state.

Now comes the hangover and the big credit card bill. A recent report from the Oregon Center for Public Policy laid out the many high costs of those big checks:

- Because of cash flow issues, the state had to borrow money to pay for the kicker checks at an interest cost of about \$45 million.
- Mailing the kicker checks cost about \$1 million.
- About 20 percent of the kicker, \$214 million of \$1.1 billion, will go to Washington, D.C., in the form of higher federal income taxes.
- The kicker will go mostly to the wealthy. The top fifth of taxpayers will get nearly two-thirds of the kicker, averaging \$2,002, or six times what the typical taxpayer will receive.
- The state may have to slash school, health care and other vital services in the future because it didn't save its surplus kicker money for a rainy day. —Alan Pittman

CRIME FALLS, FEAR RISES WITH TV

A recent study by German criminologists found a curious trend. Statistics showed that crime was falling for the last decade but surveys indicated that the public believed that

crime was actually increasing. Why? The University of Hanover researchers linked the unfounded increase in crime fear to television viewing.

Numerous U.S. studies have shown similar results. Crime shows and TV crime hype have made people more scared of crime despite actual falls in crime rates.

A similar phenomenon may be happening here in Eugene. In the last decade, Eugene's violent crime rate has fallen 59 percent and the property crime rate has fallen 41 percent, according to FBI data.

With such a big drop, you'd think the police would be celebrating. But the EPD is focusing more on getting a big boost in their budget, up to 50 percent or about \$20 million a year. A plummeting crime rate doesn't fit in with the argument that more cops are desperately needed.

The Eugene City Council also appears more tuned in to TV crime hype than falling crime rates. The council has made increased police staffing to produce "a community where people feel safe" a major official goal and budget priority. But the studies show a cheaper route to making people "feel safe" may be more funding for TV Turnoff Week at the Eugene library, rather than more cops. —Alan Pittman

REBOOTING DEMOCRACY

A contingency of Lane County residents will be catching the bus to Portland Jan. 11-13 for what's being called "the Northwest's premier nonpartisan political conference." The three-day event to be held at the Montgomery Park Atrium and Ballroom is being sponsored by the Oregon Bus Project. Costs for the conference run from \$95 to \$179 and scholarships are available.

Speakers lined up for the conference include Congressman Earl Blumenauer, former Secretary of State Norma Paulus, Air America host and author Thom Hartman. Candidates expected include Steve Novick, Jeff Merkley, John Kroger, Greg Macpherson, Brad Avakian, Vicki Walker, Rick Metsger and Kate Brown.

Space at the event is limited and a system for nominating people to attend is available at RebootingDemocracy.com, along with informa-