

news Briefs

GOV CALLS HUDDLE ON SCHOOL TAX

The Eugene City Council voted 8-0 Jan. 24 to pursue a May ballot measure on an income tax for schools struggling with drastic budget cuts.

But now the governor appears to be getting involved. This week Nancy Golden, Gov. Kitzhaber's new advisor on education, called a Feb. 2 meeting between Kitzhaber and local school officials around the state considering local tax options.

Eugene District 4J Superintendent George Russell will attend the meeting with Kitzhaber, 4J spokesperson Kerry Delf said.

Mayor Piercy has also been invited, along with Joy Marshall of Stand for Children. It's unclear whether Kitzhaber will support or oppose local efforts to fund schools.

The Eugene tax measure could raise \$14 million or more a year to reduce the impact of huge budget cuts that could lay off 100

teachers, boost some class sizes to 50 or more, and cut schools to four days a week.

The council plans to discuss details of the measure on Feb. 14 and take a final vote. The 4J School Board may vote Feb. 9 on whether to support the additional city funding and how much.

Hillary Johnson, a parent helping lead the grassroots effort to fund schools, said school advocates will continue to push the council and School Board for final approval. "We're very happy we had an 8-0 vote to put it on the May ballot," she said. "It was a victory."

Several conservative councilors appeared to indicate they may ultimately oppose referring a school funding measure to a May ballot vote, but a majority of four councilors and the mayor spoke in favor of a May measure to save local schools.

That majority could shift, however, if the Eugene School Board somehow opposes getting money from the city. School advocates and the city have been discussing the revenue measure for the last two months, but the 4J and Bethel school boards have yet to take an official position.

Asked if he supported the May revenue measure as opposed to calls by some councilors to delay a vote until November, 4J Superintendent George Russell responded, "Obviously, the sooner the better." Russell said a November vote would force the district to implement another year of deep cuts because by state law the district must plan a budget by June 30.

Russell's proposed budget includes \$10 million in revenue from a city tax measure.

State law prohibits the school system from passing its own tax increase to fund school operations.

The 4J District, however, has been considering a May measure to fund not operations, but school construction. Russell said he is unsure whether the two measures should be on the same ballot. A May bond measure could allow the district to get \$15 million in federal matching funds.

But voter confusion could hurt the chance of passage for both measures. People may not understand that 4J cannot use its construction bond measure to pay teachers, according to Russell. "I'm not sure folks will get the difference," he said.

Another unresolved issue is how soon 4J could start using the money to avert budget cuts if the measure passed in May. The district may be able to use its limited reserves, borrow from city reserves or borrow commercially in anticipation of the revenue, a common government practice.

Details remain undecided, but school supporters have discussed a graduated income tax starting at 0.5 percent and increasing to 1.5 percent for the wealthy that would raise at least about \$10 million for 4J and \$4 million for Bethel schools per year in proportion to the number of Eugene children they serve. The income tax discussed would exempt those below \$50,000 in annual income and sunset in six years.

School supporters say their polling shows such a tax could pass if voters are given a chance to vote. A state income tax on the wealthy passed in Eugene last year by a 3-1 margin. — Alan Pittman

INCOME GAP PLAGUES OREGON

Oregon Center for Public Policy recently released several studies looking at income inequality in Oregon. OCPP is a nonpartisan research institute in Silverton that does in-depth analysis of budget, tax and economic issues. Their goal is to generate material that improves decision-making, thus generating more opportunities for all Oregonians. They can be found at www.ocpp.org and contacted by phone at (503) 873-1201.

A recent *Oregonian* story by Jeff Manning summarized the rising income gaps in Oregon. Inflation-adjusted annual wages for Oregon's top 2 percent of earners hit \$153,480 on average in 2008, a 29.5 percent increase from 1990. Median workers wages stood at \$32,659, a 2.4 percent increase. The lowest income percentile saw an increase from \$15,512 in 1990 to \$16,622 in the same time frame, an increase of 6.6 percent.

OCPP's most recent release was on the economic impact that Oregon's recent increase in the minimum wage will have. Oregon's minimum wage rose by 10 cents on Jan. 1 as a result of Measure 25, which passed in 2002.

"A strong minimum wage is good for low-wage workers and is good for Oregon's economy," says Chuck Sheketoff, executive director of the OCPP. "The extra dollars help low-

HEAVY HAUL TO ROLL ON?

More than 30 pieces of massive tar sands equipment from Imperial Oil made their way up the Columbia River to the Port of Lewiston and have been sitting at the port since December. The river is currently shut down for repairs to the dams, but at least 170 more loads are planned for when the locks reopen.

Four similar megaloads belonging to ConocoPhillips seem to have cleared a legal hurdle in Idaho that could set a precedent for the Kearsarge Module Transport Project loads, but opponents are still working to get the plan stopped before Imperial Oil's mega-sized oil machinery makes its way through Montana.

Groups such as Oregon and Montana-based All Against the Haul (AATH) have objected not only to using the Columbia/Snake river system and scenic byways in Montana to facilitate turning Canada's boreal forests into strip mines; they are also concerned about the effects the massive loads — some are 210 feet long, 30 feet high, 24 feet wide and weigh more than 500,000 pounds — will have on the roadways themselves and on nearby forests and rivers. Local residents in Montana and Idaho fear vital services such as ambulance

transport could be affected by the slow moving loads that take up both sides of the roadways.

The Idaho Transportation Department decided last week to let the ConocoPhillips loads go through. Those loads are being moved by Oregon-based Emmert International and are destined for an oil refinery in Billings.

The Montana Department of Transportation has said once Idaho gives approval it would issue ConocoPhillips permits for the four loads. MDT has not yet released a final environmental assessment on Imperial Oil's 207 megaloads, though *EW* found a draft of that assessment on the internet dated August 2010 issuing a "finding of no significant impact."

Trish Weber of AATH says the group "considers the Imperial Oil rigs to be a different situation than the ConocoPhillips rigs, largely due to the fact that the construction necessary to allow passage of the Imperial Oil rigs would constitute permanent improvements that would allow future passage of other megaloads."

The Port of Lewiston has indicated hopes it will become a gateway to a permanent high and wide load corridor.

Weber says that it remains unclear exactly how the ConocoPhillips rigs are

actually going to navigate the Montana portion of the route. She says that that there does not appear to be sufficient turnouts in place for the loads to pull into to allow the rigs to stop and allow other traffic to pass, as required by state law.

"AATH has groups in both Montana and Idaho who are organizing to perform monitoring of the ConocoPhillips loads, if and when they roll," she says, and she adds, "If the rigs do not meet the delay times that are stated in the respective state transportation plans, it will provide further ammunition in the legal cases."

The group has recently published a book on the issue, *Heart of the Monster*, written by environmental writers Rick Bass and David James Duncan, which is available at <http://allagainstthehaul.org>

— Camilla Mortensen

