

WHAT BUDGET CRISIS?

We are being told that we have a budget crisis, but what most people don't know is that the budget is not the only way to gauge the financial health of the city. The full picture can be found in the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. The CAFR reports all the assets and liabilities of the city; the budget is just a very small part of that report. The CAFR has always shown a huge surplus, even when the budget shows a deficit.

The following are quotes from the 2012 CAFR report (page 15): *As noted earlier, net assets may serve over time as a useful indicator of a government's financial position. In the case of the city, assets exceeded liabilities by \$817.1 million at close of fiscal year ending June 30, 2012.The remaining balance of net assets \$117.9 million (14 percent) are unrestricted and may be used to meet the government's ongoing obligations to*

citizens and creditors. The problem is that very little, if any, of this \$117.9 million is being "used to meet the government's ongoing obligations to citizens and creditors," or we would not have this "budget crisis."

Go to the city of Eugene website, search for FY12 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report and see for yourself. The library has a copy also. Why are these assets not being used by the city? Why are

we being asked once again to pay more taxes? Go to cafr1.com and cafrman.com to find out what's going on.

Abraham Likwornik
Eugene

SPECIFICS NEEDED

Bonny Bettman McCornack seemed to be channeling "Romney-Ryan-speak" in her column [2/7]. She opposes new revenue for the city of Eugene and rails

VIEWPOINT BY MARY LEIGHTON

System Enhancers

CHARTER SCHOOLS CAN HELP CARRY THE LOAD

At a recent City Club meeting, Oregon's Chief Education Officer Rudy Crew passed up a great opportunity to peel his hands off a "cow" that's sacred in some circles — opposition to school choice — and make current investments in public education work a little more efficiently. The last question of the program was, "Can you find ways to make the charter schools in Oregon operate as part of a comprehensive system of public education?" He answered, "No. Charter schools are the competition." If he looked at the local evidence, he might see things differently. In Eugene, charters are carrying their share of the load, not as the competition, but as colleagues who add value to the regional school system.

Local and national critics of public school choice often claim that charter schools can widen the gaps among young people from different social and economic groups by separating them into "have" and "have not" student bodies. Choice can be a way for more affluent families to extricate their children from schools with less advantaged children. So in some cases, charter schools are "the competition." Public policy has not promoted equity in these cases, and therefore many progressive educators reject choice reflexively, and charter schools with special enmity.

But in Oregon, and particularly in Eugene District 4J, equity is at the center of every deliberation over a charter application. Consequently, charter schools here offer programs and structures that extend the reach of free public education in ways difficult to achieve in the mainstream. Public charter schools in Eugene add program value and diversity while serving proportionate shares of students living in poverty and coping with

disabilities. Leadership behavior that stems from the unfounded belief that charter schools do not share the challenges and the values of mainstream public schools leads to inefficiencies. We lose the chance to benefit from professional development, facilities use and intangible but productive connections that grease the wheels of collaboration on behalf of students.

Network Charter School (NCS) is a good example of a district enhancement. It is a unique Eugene solution to a challenge that occurs everywhere — students whose gifts do not prosper in big classes and big schools, but need small classes and hands-on, community-embedded learning experiences that are very labor intensive to provide. In Eugene, we have lots of education-oriented nonprofits willing to pitch in, and well-qualified teachers willing to work for less than union scale. NCS makes use of those local resources to teach. Our unconventional but standards-based curriculum provides a nurturing learning experience, with classes of 15 or fewer that permit individual attention. We attract highly qualified teachers who care more about academic freedom (such as it might be in a standards-based framework) and place-based lessons than about making a living wage. NCS is not vying for students who are doing well at their home schools. If students crave the chance to study French or play on a football team, we send them along with our blessing. We do not believe the other schools are bad; we just know they don't meet the needs of all students. Ours is not a model that could work without a mainstream system. We complement the rest of 4J's offerings.



Likewise, Coburg Community School is not in competition with the nearest 4J elementary; it was created to maintain a public community school that could not be maintained cost-effectively any other way.

Village and Ridgeline Charter Schools use the flexibility of the charter to provide Waldorf-inspired and Montessori education, respectively. These models are not available in mainstream schools in Oregon, despite proven effectiveness. The four 4J charters enroll students from families in poverty and with special education needs in generally the same proportions as the district population, and in some cases considerably more. All but one offer teachers prevailing wages and benefits. They add value to the system in exactly the ways charter schools are supposed to add value. Enrollment caps keep the whole system in balance.

At City Club, Rudy Crew got the big picture politics right — choice has often been bad for poor and minority kids — but he failed to look carefully at local charter schools. In 4J, charter schools increase opportunity and effectiveness without increasing cost. Due to thoughtful oversight, charters are awarded only to programs otherwise unavailable.

Charter schools in our community enhance the system and add capacity to engage more students productively in achieving community goals for education. Is our chief state school officer ready to face these facts, even when they do not support his past perceptions? Oregon students deserve leadership that looks at the facts on a case-by-case basis, with a view to optimizing the whole public school system. Local public charter schools are not the competition; they are designed to be and actually function as assets, and should be treated that way.

Mary Leighton became the executive director of Network Charter School in 2006 after a career as an education policy researcher, classroom teacher and school reform consultant.

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