

# Selling Out Higher Education



*Without knowing it was up for sale, the Oregon Institute of Technology has found a bidder.*

In Corvallis, OSU Local 83 members and leaders were faced with budget shortfalls, audit problems and a complicated "redesign" of the university. As of now, some staff have been laid off, but the "redesign" has been halted and budget problems have largely been put off until next year.

In Klamath Falls, Dick Wendt, who has successfully sponsored legislation to take public assistance checks away from the individual due them and give them to businesses who hire them, is now dangling \$100 million in front of OIT officials if the state school will become a private school. The school and the Higher Education system has not decided whether, or under what terms, to accept the offer. Students, faculty, the members and leaders of OIT Local 090 and the community at large have offered considerable constructive criticism of the proposal and will continue to participate and to influence the outcome.

SEIU Local 503, OPEU President Kathie Best, on leave from OIT's business office while she is statewide president, said "A quality, affordable

higher education should be an important priority of this state. Unfortunately, we've been moving the opposite direction, especially since the passage of Ballot Measure 5 in 1990; it is becoming more and more difficult for many qualified young people and their families in Oregon to afford a four-year college degree."

"The proposal from Dick Wendt, to make OIT a private institution, takes us further in the wrong direction, to judge by the high tuition charged by private colleges and universities," she said.

OIT's technical and liberal arts curriculum has served the residents of Lake and Klamath counties, as well as the state, well. It has contributed to the life of the community.

Before the Oregon University System gives away OIT, it should be more forthcoming about the details and the impact of the deal. So far, it has given the public, students, staff and faculty almost none. It should give the same consideration to the public it is giving to one wealthy individual.

The public, all Oregonians, own OIT.

Other important questions need answers before this deal goes any further:

- What is the impact of this deal to the students, the faculty, the public in southern Oregon and throughout the state? Will OIT's students, who largely are working and middle class and largely come from Klamath and Lake counties, still be able to afford the tuition if the institution becomes private?

- Valuable public property is being proposed to be transferred to private ownership. Why? Under what conditions? Is it a good business deal for the state?

- We haven't been told why it is necessary for the school to become private to receive this gift. Wealthy individuals and corporations have for years made generous gifts to all the schools in the state system without dictating the terms to this extent.

- Is it appropriate for one wealthy citizen to dictate public policy to such a great extent? So many people have invested a great deal in OIT over the years. Are their contributions going to be cast aside to satisfy the demands of one person?

At Oregon State University in Corvallis, meanwhile, a plan for "redesign" has been quietly closed.

OSU Local 83 members and leaders repeatedly challenged the numerous problems they found in the school's budget and "redesign" plans.

In October 2001, OSU announced a \$19.1 million budget shortfall and plans to redesign the university. Since then, 34 employees have been laid off and 120 positions will remain unfilled. Earlier this winter it shelved the "redesign" plans but must continue to work on filling the budget hole. The 2002 shortfall was closed in part by moving some expenses to next year where a \$12.7 million problem awaits. ●



## Voter Education Project

Last December the streets of Oregon were full of more than Christmas shoppers. Ballot initiative circulators cruised the crowds for signatures. But they weren't alone. Joining them this year were members of the Voter Education Project.

The new project is a non-profit organization supported by SEIU Local 503, OPEU and others and headed by political veteran Jeannie Berg. After years of working on initiatives, she says that paying signature gatherers (or "dealers" as she calls them) by the bounty system as some campaigns do has had a corruptive effect on Oregon politics.

"Think about it," she says. "A signature

dealer gets money every time you sign. That's a high temptation for fraud."

Because of that and the harmful effect many initiatives have on public policy and public services, the Voter Education Project is "Think Before You Ink."

The Voter Education Project will be on the streets through the signature-gathering season that ends in July 2002.

Already this election, the Oregon Department of Justice has pursued two cases of election fraud committed by signature dealers, thanks in part to complaints filed by Voter Education Project. The first resulted in the prosecution of Paul Frankel, an Alabama man who used a "bait and switch" technique to entice signatures on initiatives that voters

hadn't even read. Frankel also forged the signature of a Department of Justice investigator on initiatives that were found in the office of Bill Sizemore, executive director of Oregon Taxpayers United.

In December the AG's office also issued a warrant for the arrest of James Gurga, who worked with Frankel.

"Elections law violations and the placing of fraudulent signatures on petitions are very personal violations of Oregon's democratic process," says Attorney General Hardy Myers.

The Voter Education Project needs your help. When you see a paid signature dealer anywhere in Oregon, call (800) 295-5597 so someone can be sent to the scene.

For more information on how to protect yourself from fraud, go to [www.votereducationproject.org](http://www.votereducationproject.org)