

Debt: 'We're looking at a \$1.6 billion deficit'

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While the Department of Revenue has ways to collect debt, sometimes the agency lacks enough information to find people with outstanding debt, and sometimes the people who owe money don't have the means to pay.

"We have kind of a standard set of tools we use," Estabrook said. "... And once you've gone through the standard steps, you can get to a place where (debtors) don't have assets we can pursue, or we don't have the information to pursue that debtor."

It is tough to say whether hiring more people at the department, as a bill before the Legislature proposes, would greatly decrease the amount of

money owed to the state.

Legislative relief

Senate Bill 89 is an effort to centralize collections at the Department of Revenue, a move that could cost the state about \$2.4 million in additional personnel costs. The bill would require certain state agencies using private collection agencies for specific debts after 90 days to use the collections services of the Department of Revenue instead.

An analysis from the non-partisan Legislative Revenue Office says the proposed measure has "indeterminate" effects on the state's revenue because it depends on an unknown: whether the Department of Revenue is more effective at collecting debt than pri-

vate collectors.

"Data are not available on the relative efficacy of collections efforts and the population owing debts to various agencies can vary greatly," the analysis states. If the Department of Revenue is more effective at collecting debt than a private entity, then revenues could increase; but if they're not, revenues could actually decrease.

State Rep. David Gomberg, D-Central Coast, who has advocated for improving state debt collection, said he believes there are several things the state can get better at.

Among them, he thinks that the state should keep track of state contractors who have outstanding debt, a measure

the governor's executive order plans to call for. The state hasn't tracked contractors who owe the state money because of "antiquated computer systems that can't talk to each other," Gomberg said.

He also has suggested cross-checking lists of people who win lottery awards or receive other money from the state in the form of tax refunds and pensions with lists of people who owe the state money.

Gomberg acknowledged that more robust debt collection wouldn't address the current \$1.6 billion gap between revenues and expenses in the upcoming two-year budget.

"Listen, in the short run we're looking at a \$1.6 billion deficit," Gomberg said. "Improving our debt collec-

tion isn't going to solve that problem, but if we can generate another \$100 million or \$200 million a year, that's money that can be well spent on a lot of important programs right now."

Collective bargaining

Brown also ordered that, when in collective bargaining with labor unions, increases to employees' total compensation in the Legislature's budget include salary, cost-of-living and health care costs. State agencies must also ensure salaries are competitive, but also in line with other "comparable employers."

Salary and benefit costs for public employees represented by labor unions could go up \$145 million during the

2017-19 cycle when the deficit looms, although lawmakers are proposing scaling that back to \$50 million, according to a recent Ways and Means Co-Chair report.

The governor said the order is similar to what "private employers do. These are things we have done on and off as a state. We must do them consistently."

Brown also directed the creation of a new task force that, by Nov. 1, will report back to the state ways to shave \$5 billion from the public pension system's \$22 billion unfunded liability.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.



Photos by Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

LEFT: Stephanie Ramsey, a large animal doctor who has worked for Russel Hunter for five years, trims the points off a sedated goat's horns. RIGHT: Veterinarian Russel Hunter breaks out his supplies while making house calls to treat large animals. More photos available online at DailyAstorian.com

Hunter: Caring for large animals is 'very physical work'

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discussed the possibility that she might one day take over the practice when Hunter, now 77, retires. Ramsey, in fact, lives a short distance away with her husband and two children.

Large animal doctors, Hunter said, are an "endangered species" in the veterinary field. The vast majority of aspiring vets choose to treat companion animals like dogs and cats.

Caring for large ones, Ramsey said, is "very physical work. It can be much nicer to be in a nice, warm, cozy, small-animal clinic than to be out in the field, like we are all the time."

Plus, there is often more money in treating traditional pets — no small consideration when veterinary programs tend to be enormously expensive, requiring many aspiring vets to take on burdensome debt loads, Ramsey said.

Though he works closely with the person who could one day become his successor, when the subject of retirement came up, Hunter quietly protested: "I'm going to die on the road," he said with a smirk.

The job, he said, is "too damn enjoyable."

"It's exciting, because there's always something new," he said. "There's things to learn. Every case is an investigation, or a detective story, you might say" — one

in which the vet is always working to identify the culprit — to "figure it out and do the best you can do."

'In the trenches'

Now in his 51st year as a veterinarian, Hunter gets to use these detective skills in a community where his expertise is essential — and where other large-animal practices have opened and closed, while his has survived and thrived.

Something he didn't realize until he joined the profession: Though driven by animal care, the job is often as much about caring for the animal's owner. "You develop really long term, close, trusting relationships," he said.

In a profession that can be

dirty and dangerous, a veterinarian and an animal owner can experience a lot together, moments of distress and of breakthrough — moments when their happiness is hitched to the well-being of the creature in their care.

One time, when he was living in Eureka, California, he

was summoned to a beef ranch in the mountains, where a cow was ready to calve. As he reached the higher elevation, the rain turned to snow. By the end of the birthing, it had snowed 6 inches, and Hunter was hypothermic. "I was in agony," he said. "I was totally soaked. I was so cold."

The rancher took Hunter indoors, dried his clothes, helped him clean up and put warm food in his stomach before sending him on his way.

"When that kind of stuff happens, it's kind of special," he said. "It's like you've been in the trenches together."

Port: Arguments will be laid out in a hearing with DEQ

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In its appeal, the Port did not elaborate on the arguments the agency will use to contest the fines. Knight said the Port's arguments will be laid out in a hearing with the department.

"My sense is that DEQ really wants to work with

us," he said, adding the Port has improved relations with the agency. "They're not trying to inappropriately punish us."

The Port was fined \$36,916 last year for failing to conduct required stormwater monitoring at the Port's central waterfront and North Tongue Point facilities during the 2014-15

monitoring year, and for failing to file required reports in a timely manner.



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