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OUR VIEW

Dual approach is needed on pension reform

When it comes to reforming Oregon's Public Employees Retirement System, state leaders need to avoid taking one step forward and two steps back.

As the Legislature recently sputtered on pension reform, Gov. Kate Brown appointed a seven-member, public-private task force to scrutinize ways to make the most of state assets to reduce the system's \$22 billion pension liability.

Brown gave the task force a goal of reducing the liability by \$5 billion and suggested selling state assets, although not certain properties, such as prisons and state parks. Sales could include properties such as "buffer zones" around state prisons or youth correctional facilities. It's also possible the state could enter public-private partnerships or cut costs in other ways, such as by moving certain state offices to lower-rent areas.

Those are good steps and should be taken, but many would generate one-time-only savings and none address the real root of the PERS problem — the system's structure and the benefits themselves. Public employee unions have vigorously fought any reduction of benefits and the unions exert heavy political clout. Brown and other lawmakers acknowledged near the end of the legislative session that any structural or benefit reform would have to be tackled at the next full session in 2019, thereby kicking the can down the road once again. In this past session, a bill that would have required a 1 percent salary contribution toward PERS died in committee.

A multipronged approach is the right course to take. Legislators, for their part, can only make changes to the system going forward. The task force, though, isn't addressing the benefits issue. Its mission is finding ways the state can pay down a chunk of what it expects to owe. It's also looking at whether dedicating specific revenue streams to help reduce the obligation makes sense.

In its first meeting Monday, the task force agreed to focus its work — expected to culminate in a report due to the governor by Nov. 1 — on big-ticket items that can get to the \$5 billion figure.

Meanwhile, the board overseeing PERS is scheduled to vote Friday on whether to downgrade assumptions about how much return the system will get on its investments. Changing the assumptions about returns on the investments could greatly increase the pension's unfunded liability, which would mean state agencies and school districts would have to put even more money into the system in the coming years.

The governor and lawmakers need to be advocates for other system changes to reduce the financial threat the liability poses to the state's future well-being. Until those issues are addressed, the liability will continue to grow, public employers will have to increase the amount they pay into PERS for employee benefits and the task force's work will provide only short-term help.

No new drama needed at the Port of Astoria

Although Port Commissioner Robert Mushen's resignation from his post for health reasons this week wasn't surprising, we hope the selection process for his replacement doesn't generate new drama within the five-member board.

Mushen served as president of the Port Commission during the past year when meetings grew more heated and adversarial with infighting and innuendo. During an April meeting, Mushen suffered a spike in his blood pressure and had to be rushed to Columbia Memorial Hospital. During the recovery period that followed, Mushen's doctors advised him to resign, he said.

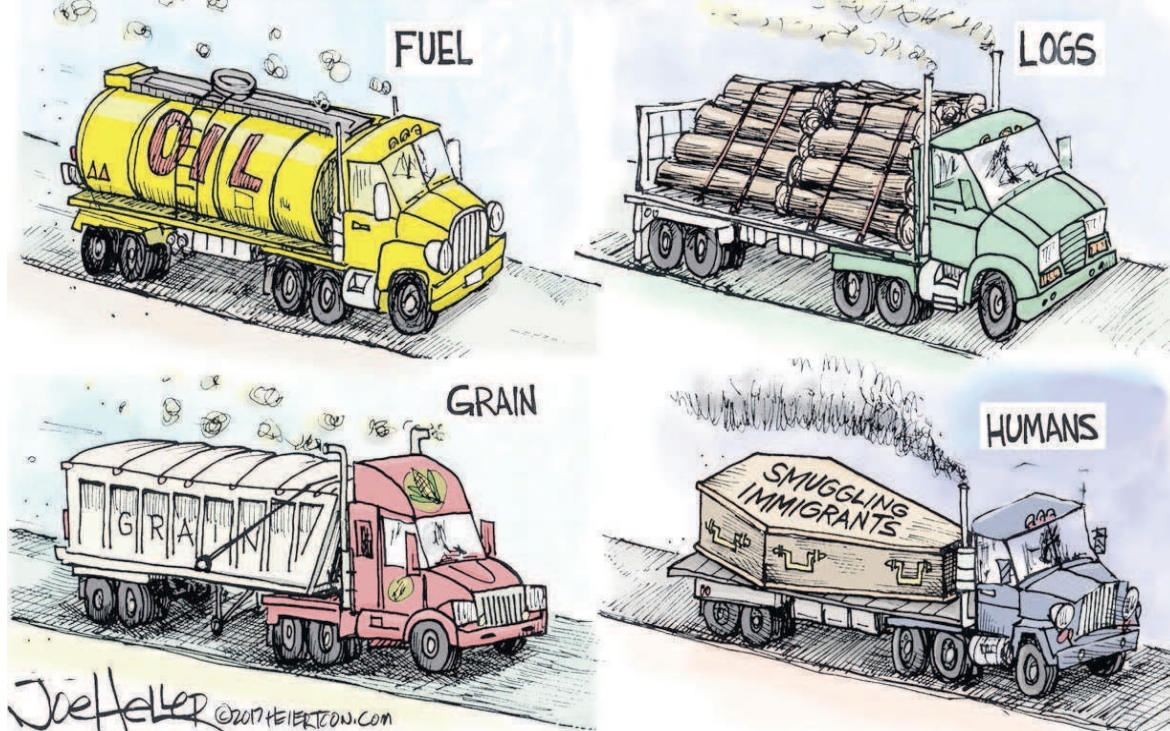
In May, voters re-elected Commissioner James Campbell along with newcomers Dirk Rohne and Frank Spence to join Mushen and Bill Hunsinger on the Port board. At the time, Rohne said he hoped the election results would lead to a new era of "boring but productive" meetings for the commission, and earlier this month the board elected new officers with Spence becoming president.

After Mushen's announcement during Tuesday's meeting, he left the room to standing applause. Campbell said Mushen has been an asset to the community and served well, while Spence said Mushen's calm, rational demeanor will be missed.

The appointment process now begins, and Spence said any registered voter in Clatsop County can apply by sending a letter of interest and resume to him at 1 Pier St., Suite 308, in Astoria. Applications are due by noon Aug. 9, with interviews taking place later in the month. The full board will make the final decision and the person selected will fill Mushen's remaining term, which runs until mid-2019.

We hope the opening draws a solid pool of applicants who are interested in moving the Port forward, those who put the team ahead of their own interests. The Port is poised for progress, and the commission needs to ensure that the appointment is another step in that direction.

A Guide to Semi-Truck Loads



The Trump tower of absolute folly

By ROSS DOUTHAT

New York Times News Service

Donald Trump's campaign against his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, in which he is seemingly attempting to insult



and humiliate Sessions into resignation, is an insanely stupid exercise. It is a multitiered tower of political

idiocy, a sublime monument to the moronic, a gaudy, gleaming, Ozymandian folly that leaves many of the president's prior efforts in its shade.

Let us walk through the levels of stupidity one by one. First there is the policy level — generally the lowest, least important in Trumpworld, but still worth exploring.

To the extent that any figure in the Trump administration both embodies "Trumpism" and seems capable of executing its policy ambitions, it is Sessions, who is using his office to strictly enforce immigration laws and pursue an old-school law-and-order agenda.

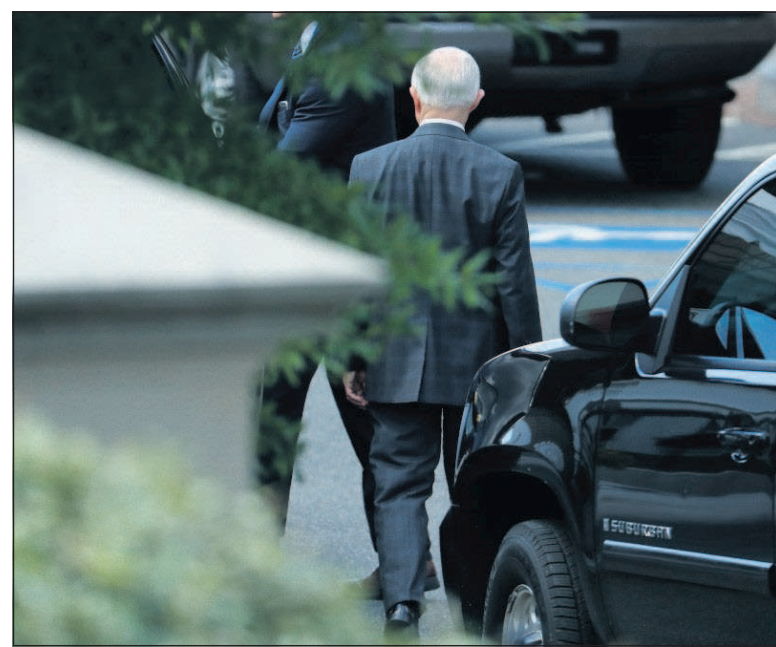
You may hate his agenda (as most liberals do) or dislike parts of it (as I do), but it is clearly the agenda that Trump ran on, and the attorney general's office is one of the few places where it is being effectively pursued. So cashiering Sessions would be a remarkable statement (though hardly the first) that the president cares almost nothing for his own alleged platform and governing philosophy.

Next in our tower of folly is the institutional level. Trump has had difficulty staffing his administration, his secretary of state is muttering about leaving, and his White House is riven by factionalism and paranoia. Meanwhile, he is both under investigation by Senate Republicans and dependent on their good will to keep the investigations contained to just the Russia business.

Trying to defenestrate Sessions, the lone Republican senator in Trump's corner during the primary campaign and a popular figure among his former Senate colleagues, will make things worse for the president on both fronts. It demonstrates a level of disloyalty that should send sane people running from Trump's service, it tells other Cabinet members to get out while the getting's good (and to leak and undermine like crazy on their way), and it further alienates Republican senators whom Trump needs to confirm appointees (including any Sessions replacement) and to go easy on his scandals.

Next on our tour is the level of mass politics, where Trump's war on Sessions is one of the few things short of a recession that could hurt him with his base — which he needs to hold, since he isn't doing anything to persuade anyone outside it.

Of course many Trump supporters will side with him no matter what and lots don't care about Sessions one way or another. But the Trumpian core also includes conservatives who like Sessions for ideological reasons, who trust Trump in part because Sessions vouched for him, and who don't like or trust very many other people (the family, the New Yorkers, the ex-Democrats) in Trump's inner circle. Which is why Trump's campaign against Sessions has already brought him negative coverage from Breitbart, Tucker Carlson and various pro-Trump or anti-anti-Trump pundits — making it an extraor-



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

Attorney General Jeff Sessions leaves the White House Wednesday.

inary act of political malpractice from a White House that lacks a cushion for such follies.

Next there is the legal level. By his own admission, Trump's beef with Sessions centers on the attorney general's recusal from the Russia investigation, which from Trump's perspective led to the appointment of a special counsel he now obviously yearns to fire.

Trump's war on Sessions is one of the few things short of a recession that could hurt him with his base — which he needs to hold, since he isn't doing anything to persuade anyone outside it.

This blame-Sessions perspective is warped, since it was Trump's decision to fire James Comey (an earlier monumental folly) that was actually decisive in putting Robert Mueller on the case. But regardless of whether he has his facts straight, Trump's logic is a straightforward admission that he wants to eject his attorney general because Sessions has not adequately protected him from legal scrutiny — an argument that at once reveals Trump's usual contempt for laws and norms and also suggests (not for the first time) that he has something so substantial to hide that only omerta-style loyalty will do.

Which, of course — now we've reached the peak of the tower of folly — he probably will not get if Sessions goes, because no hatchet man will win easy confirmation, and until Sessions is replaced the acting attorney general will be Rod Rosenstein, the man who appointed Robert Mueller as special counsel in the first place!

So it's basically madness all the way to the top: bad policy, bad strategy, bad politics, bad legal maneuvering, bad optics, a self-defeating

venture carried out via deranged-as-usual tweets and public insults.

And if it were any other president behaving like this — well, rather than repeat arguments I've made before, I'll quote Bloomberg View's Megan McArdle, writing a few months ago in response to my admittedly extreme suggestion that Trump's behavior might justify removal under the 25th Amendment:

Imagine, if you will, that George W. Bush had started acting like Donald Trump partway into his second term Is there any question that people would be talking about invoking the 25th Amendment to remove him? Not for political reasons, but because it would be obvious that some tragic mental impairment had befallen the commander in chief.

Adults of mature years know not to engage in histrionic self-pity in public, not necessarily because they avoid self-pity but because, outside of high school parties, this is a singularly ineffective way to make people like and support you. Competent leaders do not preside over staff who are leaking what is essentially one long and anguished primal scream to any reporter they can get to hold still. Seasoned professionals do not, suddenly and for no apparent reason, say things in public that make them better targets for legal investigations ...

And so the only possible explanation for such a quick succession of stunning lapses in judgment would be a severe stroke, an aggressive brain tumor or some other neurological disaster that had rendered him unfit to continue in office, at least until it could be treated. I don't even think this would be controversial, even among his supporters. "Poor fellow," they'd murmur, "the strain of the office has destroyed his health. He has given more than his life for his country." Time to let him rest and heal while someone else shoulders his Sisyphian burdens.

Trump hasn't had a stroke or suffered a neurological disaster, and his behavior in the White House is no different from the behavior he manifested consistently while winning enough votes to take the presidency.

But he is nonetheless clearly impaired, gravely deficient somewhere at the intersection of reason and judgment and conscience and self-control. Pointing this out is wearying and repetitive, but still it must be pointed out.

You can be as loyal as Jeff Sessions and still suffer the consequences of that plain and inescapable truth: This president should not be the president, and the sooner he is not, the better.