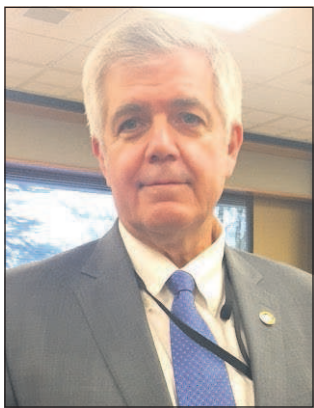


Bentz: Legislature should prioritize revenue, PERS reform

By **PARIS ACHEN**
and **CLAIRE WITCOMBE**
Capital Bureau



EO Media Group
Rep. Cliff Bentz is meeting resistance from leadership on his calls to prioritize budget and tax reform.

make state and local public agencies use excess revenues to pay down unfunded obligations of the Public Employees Retirement System.

The state faces potentially dramatic shortfalls for Med-

icaid and PERS in the next two years.

Instead, Gov. Kate Brown and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, want to focus on passing a “cap-and-invest” carbon program in the 35-day legislative session early next year. The program would set a limit on the amount of carbon a business could emit and put a price on any excess. It would yield an estimated \$700 million per year in revenue to invest in projects to slow climate change.

“If they pass cap and invest to pull \$700 million a year out of our economy, are we going to go back a short year later and say we want another \$2 billion to address PERS?” Bentz said.

“How much can our economy stand?”

Bentz and three other lawmakers — Rep. Phil Barn-

hart, D-Eugene; Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas; and Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton — convened in late August to discuss a format for pursuing revenue and spending reform.

The Ontario lawmaker said he approached Brown and Kotek about pursuing reform ideas now.

“What I have been told is wait until March,” Bentz said.

Hass agreed that “cap and invest” policy should wait until 2019, when instead of 35 days, lawmakers have more than five months to pass laws. (The Oregon Legislature convenes for the shorter session in even years and the longer session in odd years.)

“Policies of that magnitude should be dealt with in the long session, and the short session should be to add

changes that require prompt attention,” Hass said.

“I think it is fair to say we can start a process to look at that, but I think it is something we should pick up in 2019,” he added.

There are a few reasons why leadership may want to delay an overhaul of the state’s interconnected budget, public pension system and tax structure.

For one thing, it’s unclear what Congress may reform health care and tax policies that affect the state budget.

There’s talk that Medicaid funding for states could move to a block grant format, Bentz said. That potentiality and any changes to tax policy, such as policies surrounding deductions, could affect the amount of revenue Oregon brings in.

There’s also the complex-

ity factor: simply put, tax policy is hard.

Hass, a consistent advocate for tax reform, said last month that legislators needed to address tax reform sooner rather than later, rather than risk future fiscal crises.

The Beaverton Democrat has advocated for an overhaul to the state’s tax structure, a move he believes could help address the pension system’s \$24 billion unfunded liability — the amount of money that the state owes retirees that its assets cannot currently pay.

Meanwhile, Gov. Brown has convened an advisory task force looking at ways to reduce the unfunded liability of PERS by \$5 billion.

“Nobody disputes the need to do this (revenue and spending reform); it’s just a question of when to start,” Bentz said.

JOHN DAY — A prominent legislator who helped shepherd a massive transportation package through the Legislature earlier this year is meeting resistance from leadership on his calls to prioritize budget and tax reform. “Spending reform, tax reform and (public pension reform) are in another world of complexity as compared to the transportation package,” said Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, in a meeting with the Pamplin Media/EO Media Capital Bureau. “We should be starting now.”

His comments came hours after a coalition called Priority Oregon announced it had filed an initiative petition to



Christina Grauff

Astoria High School students (from left) Tyler Gagnon, Issi Wilcox and Matthew Grauff assemble a donated drill press they will use to build a robot as part of the FIRST Robotics Competition.

Astoria High launches robotics team

Students need computer-savvy adult mentors

By **EDWARD STRATTON**
The Daily Astorian

For the past three years, Astoria High School senior Matt Grauff has traveled to South County rival Seaside High School, where he was an engineer with the CYBORG Seagulls, a competitive robotics team with the international FIRST Robotics Competition.

For his senior project, Grauff is captaining an effort to start a team in Astoria, nicknamed the River Bots, for this year’s international competition.

FIRST, created in 1992 by Segway inventor Dean Kamen, annually challenges high schoolers from around the country to build a robot to complete a specific mission.

“The first Saturday of January, they announce what the year’s challenge is to all the teams in the world at the exact same time, and then you have exactly six weeks to build a robot that will fulfill that,” Grauff said.

Advising the team is Cris Wilcox, a parent of three students and a former manufacturer with the Oregon Air National Guard’s 173rd Fighter Wing in southern Oregon and Intel who moved to the area several years ago.

“When I first moved here, I was surprised there wasn’t already a robotics team in the area,” she said.

One of Grauff’s earliest teammates was her daughter Issi, who said she became interested in the team after growing up watching her mother working on fighter jets, seeing her cousin compete in the FIRST competition and building Lego robots at Astoria Middle School.

Grauff spent the summer reaching out to more than 50 businesses and individu-



Christina Grauff

Matthew Grauff (standing), a former member of the Seaside High School’s CYBORG Seagulls, is trying to start a team at Astoria High School.

als, raising more than \$5,000 to fund the team, which received another \$5,000 in startup money from the district. After putting out word over the summer, more than 20 students showed up at the high school interested in joining the team, he said.

By mid-November, the team needs to solidify its membership, find several adult mentors and pay

\$11,000 to register with the competition, after which they receive a robotics kit.

“We want as many students as are interested,” Grauff said. “It will be a core of students more dedicated, then others who come in every once in a while.”

FIRST provides a kit to build an entire robot, but encourages teams to budget and buy their own specialized

parts. The River Bots are hoping to raise a total of \$23,000 in grants and donations to cover registration, building and travel expenses throughout the competition.

With no coding classes at the high school, the team especially needs computer-savvy mentors. One adviser is Clatsop Community College physics instructor Pat Keefe, who oversees an underwater robotics team through Marine Advanced Technology Education that draws students from local high schools.

“I’m interested in AHS robotics as my son, Malachi, is in the club,” Keefe said of River Bots. “I hope to help them with specialty parts. Being AHS’ first year, they will have a hard time getting something together.”

For more information, contact Grauff at mgrauff@gmail.com and Wilcox at criselda.wilcox@gmail.com

County approves urban renewal plan for Seaside growth

The project will sunset after 25 years

By **JACK HEFFERNAN**
The Daily Astorian

Clatsop County gave an official nod Wednesday to the Southeast Seaside Urban Renewal Plan.

Because small patches of the 530-acre project within the city are considered unincorporated, the plan required approval from the county Board of Commissioners, who unanimously voted in favor.

The city hoped to gain access to a failing septic system affecting residents in an unincorporated area.

“We certainly want to provide them with the services that are normally available to citizens of a city,” City Manager Mark Winstanley said.

The Seaside City Council approved the plan in August. Elimination of 33 acres of land originally included in the project, but not owned by the city, made the decision easier both for city councilors and county commissioners. Inclusion of the land had prompted backlash from residents.

The project has a legal cap of \$62.4 million indebtedness and will sunset after

25 years. It may help build bridges, add traffic enhancements and fund infrastructure improvements for the Seaside School District’s new campus in the southeast hills.

Designating an area as an urban renewal district allows for the use of property taxes to revitalize down-trodden or underdeveloped areas. Taxes resulting from increased assessed property values in the district are frozen, and increases are funneled toward the city’s urban renewal agency rather than taxing districts.

Improvements that lead to higher assessed values then generate more funds for the district.

The Board of Commissioners also reviewed the plan to make sure it followed statutes as well as county-wide plans. While the county will not see any short-term impact, increased property taxes once the project sunsets could ultimately lead to more property tax revenue.

“It’s basically another type of stimulus program,” Clatsop County Manager Cameron Moore said.

Urban renewal district boundaries could be frozen — and the land designated as a taxing district — as early as October.

“Now we are really getting going on this,” Winstanley said.

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