

OPINION

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THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

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OUR VIEW

State lacks political will on PERS

Oregon has become the national poster child for public pensions gone awry. A recent New York Times story cast a spotlight on Joseph Robertson, an eye surgeon who retired as head of the Oregon Health & Science University last fall and gets a whopping \$76,111 per month. More than 2,000 other state retirees get pensions exceeding \$100,000 a year.

Although that number is eye-popping, the largess of the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System has been well-documented for years, with a seemingly endless succession of news stories and the resulting editorial outrage.

Fortunately, that number is also an outlier. The average starting monthly pension for state employees who retired in 2015 is \$2,362, according to PERS figures. The thrust of the Times story is that money that could go for teachers, police officers, firefighters, child-welfare caseworkers and other public employees instead must be used to prop up the bloated PERS system. Oregon's "experience shows how faulty financial decisions by states can eventually swamp local communities," the story said.

Some other states are in worse shape. Oregon stands out because our PERS problems contradict the state's national reputation for fiscal discipline (a reputa-

tion some Oregonians might raise their eyebrows about).

PERS has an unfunded actuarial liability of about \$22 billion. That's how short the system is of being able to cover its projected pension outlays.

Neither the current PERS board and management, nor most of the current politicians, are to blame for the long-ago decisions that led to this fiasco. But Gov. Kate Brown and the 2018 Legislature must bear the responsibility for taking only tepid steps to reduce PERS' burden on more than 900 local governments and school districts, as well as state agencies.

The Legislature did approve Brown's proposed matching funds to help schools and other governments pay down their PERS liabilities. But unless far more is done, PERS will gobble increasingly larger shares of state, school and local government budgets.

Much harm already has been done.

PERS BY THE NUMBERS

\$2,362

Average starting monthly pension for employees who retired in 2015

24

Average years of public employment

44%

For 2015 retirees, average percentage of salary replaced by PERS at retirement

54%

For all PERS retirees during 1990-2015, average percentage of salary replaced at retirement

134,323

Number of PERS recipients in 2015

213,455

Active, inactive members of PERS in 2015

Source: Oregon Public Employees Retirement System (bit.ly/PERS-2015)

Consider the public workers whose jobs became casualties of employers' needs to put more into PERS. Think about those employees who didn't take

vacation or sick days — whose use would have contributed to overall productivity — in order to beef up their final pensions. Remember Oregon's abysmally short school year and large class sizes. And on and on.

As the New York Times reported, "Oregon now has fewer police officers than in 1970, is losing foster-care workers at an alarming rate and has allowed earthquake and tsunami preparations to lapse."

Solutions exist. Tri-Met, the Portland area's regional transit system, righted its pension system by eventually switching to defined contributions instead of defined benefits. The progressive Portland City Club and other groups also have put forth reasonable ideas.

The courts have closed off some avenues but not all.

What Oregon lacks is political will among Gov. Brown and the Legislature's Democratic leadership. They pride themselves on the state's progressive reputation.

Maybe Oregon's tarnished national reputation will cause them to act.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Lady Gaga slept here! Who knew?

I've added "Cannon Beach" to my list of news alert search terms, delivering local, national and international links to my email inbox. Completely random, often barely relevant, real news, fake or otherwise, they nevertheless represent a mirror on our world we may not immediately recognize.

The bad and the beautiful

When eight members of the Hart family were presumed dead after an SUV hurtled off the side of the mountain in California, a news tie to Cannon Beach seemed far-fetched, even unlikely. Both the Oregonian and Bend



R.J. MARX

Bulletin looped Cannon Beach into their stories on the crash — through Jessica Smith, the woman who drowned her toddler in a Cannon Beach hotel in 2015. "Family annihilators," they are called by criminologists. Does this mean Cannon Beach will be forever entwined with this clinical subset of horrors?

Fortunately for the Chamber of Commerce and local lodging enterprises, the good outweighs the bad when receiving updates from around the country and around the world.

This headline from the L.A. Times is resplendent: "Cannon Beach captures the best of the Oregon Coast."

San Diego Magazine sent a reporter to Cannon Beach in 2017, describing it as "arguably the single most-Instagrammed location in Oregon."

"With boulders rising out of the waves, tree-covered mountains and jagged cliffs cascading right into the ocean, this is the Northern Pacific at its finest," they enthuse.

No wonder so many Californians want to move here.

Links pop up for listicles, like one from Forbes touting "the world's 50 best beaches." Cannon Beach is hanging in there by a thread at No. 50, but nevertheless it's on the list, just behind No. 48, Ageeba Beach, Egypt, and No. 49, Diani Beach, Kenya.

"The Pacific Northwest's most majestic creation is Cannon Beach, in Oregon," Forbes declared in November. "Majestic rocks soar far above the picturesque coastline while the watercolor sky paints the sea in vibrant shades of blues and teals throughout the day."

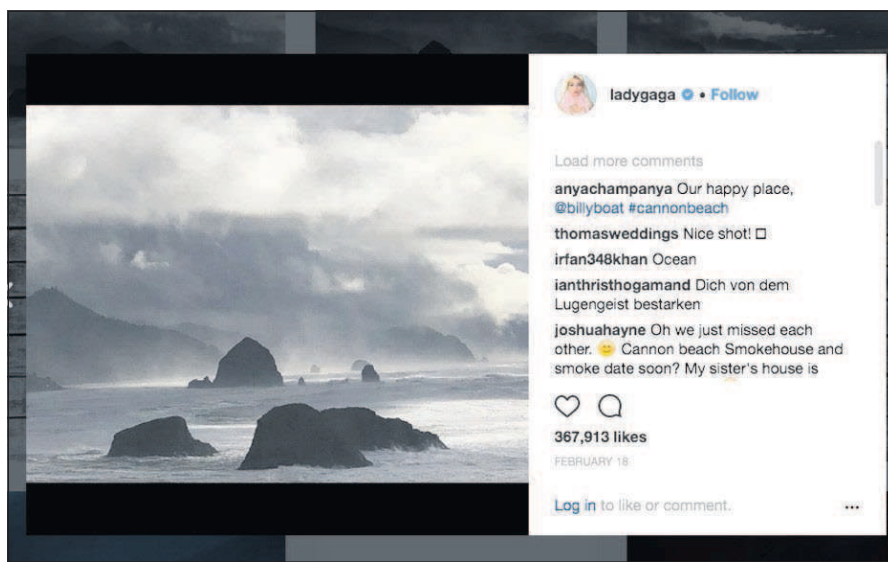
The most beautiful beach in the world? Whitsunday Beach, Whitsunday Islands, Australia, says Forbes.

The Thrillist, an online food and lifestyle guide, selects Cannon Beach as "the best small town to visit in Oregon," ahead of McMinnville and Carlton.

One day my alerts reported Trip Advisor's "16th annual Traveler's Choice Awards for the best hotels in



Lady Gaga and friend as posed on Twitter.



You're as likely to hear about what's going on in your own backyard from Twitter as you are from your next-door neighbor.

the U.S. for 2018," bringing our city into some lofty company. I must say I do feel some pride to know the Stephanie Inn is No. 5, sandwiched between the Hotel Emma in San Antonio, Texas, and the Santa Maria Suites in Key West, Florida.

Family memories

A whole population who have never lived here consider Cannon Beach part of their life story, impactful enough to be included in an obituary or a wedding announcement.

Consider John Butler Brassfield, who died March 8, at the age of 95. According to his memorial announcement in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, he spent his early years in Oregon, moving back to Seattle in 1939.

He served as president of the West Seattle Monogram Club. He was a golfing member at Meridian Valley Golf and Country Club, where he shot his age in his 80s. He and his wife Barbara traveled around the world. And they celebrated wedding anniversaries at the Stephanie Inn at Cannon Beach.

Tammy Harris of Moscow, Idaho, died Feb. 28 at age 55. A founding member of her local Habitat For Humanity, a certified nurse practitioner whose family was "of utmost importance," she and her husband married in Cannon Beach in 2007.

Larry and Kathy Morehouse of Yakima celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this month in Cannon Beach — a place they have been visiting for 45 years, according to the Yakima Herald-Republic.

News of the weird

On the coast, we've read of the fishing boats washed ashore from Japan subsequent to the 2011 tsunami. One remains beached at an end of Hug Point.

We received an alert in December with a new story twist. "Although the wreck clearly showed the signs of wear and tear you'd expect, it was also teeming with life, including gooseneck barnacles, which can sell for £90 a plate," wrote The Mirror, Britain's "intelligent tabloid." That would be British pounds sterling or about \$128. I was left shaking my head at the innovation of the writer, who had discovered a completely new angle to a five-year-old story. Who would ever think of eating the 7-year-old barnacles off a boat that had quite possibly been exposed to radiation after the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear reactor?

Those Brits have their finger on the pulse of Cannon Beach, for sure. It took this alert from another Brit tabloid, The Sun, to inform us that we just missed a visit from Lady Gaga in our own backyard.

"Lady Gaga is back in the recording studio after health problems made her axe her latest tour," wrote The Sun in early March. "She has teamed up again with Born This Way and Artpop producer DJ White Shadow in Cannon Beach, Oregon — an area with 'healing properties.'"

Lady Gaga canceled her last tour due to fibromyalgia, and the inference is that Cannon Beach is the Lourdes of the North Coast. "Back in Malibu after having spent some time in Oregon," Gaga tweeted.

Links to her Instagram account confirm what appears to be the visit, with pictures of the iconic sea stacks.

If her bassist Jonny Good hadn't shared the story with the tabloids, we would have never known.

I continue to check my alerts, not only for Cannon Beach and Seaside, which I cover, but Saugatuck, Michigan, where my dad lives, and Katonah, New York, where I lived and worked for a newspaper for 20-some years. It's almost like being there.

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian's South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.