

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Public pay measure could cut both ways

A proposed ballot measure for 2020 would force Oregonians to have a serious discussion about the role of public employees.

A self-described government watchdog group called Priority Oregon wants public employees throughout the state to have similar pay and benefits to what private employees receive. Last week, the business-oriented group filed the initial paperwork for its proposed constitutional amendment that would mandate “Equal Pay for Equal Work.”

Priority Oregon, which does not disclose its funders, has been a sharp critic of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown and Democratic legislative proposals.

The assumption is that public-employee compensation would decrease, freeing tax dollars for other uses. But the ballot measure could cut both ways.

The proposal raises a fundamental question: Should public and private employees be equally compensated? If so, the governor, city managers and school superintendents — even legislators — could argue for hefty pay raises when compared with private-sector equivalents. CEOs and boards of directors make far more in the corpo-



AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

Unionized state workers rally outside the state Capitol in Salem in 2011.

rate world. Government information technology professionals, and certainly many lawyers and doctors, could make more.

The larger issue is that an unwritten social contract has governed public compensation for generations. The private sector involves greater risk of success or failure, and thus the poten-

tial financial rewards are greater. In contrast, public employees generally have experienced greater job security, although that is lessening. In exchange for that security, they have received lower salaries but good benefits. If that social contract is to be changed, society's expectations must change as well. Priority Oregon contends that

Oregon public employees generally have much better pensions, more paid time off and lower healthcare premiums than most private-sector employees. That is accurate.

Salary is a different matter. Scads of statistical studies have been conducted, but all they have proved is the difficulty of comparing public and private pay for “similar” jobs. In conducting those analyses, numerous assumptions are made about what constitutes a comparable job as far as duties, working conditions and qualifications. That explains why practically any group can find a salary study to support its particular viewpoint.

For decades, Oregon has struggled, and failed, to find definitive answers. It would be expecting a lot of future legislatures to “establish criteria to guide public employers’ determinations of when an employee’s job is like or comparable to the job of an individual in Oregon who is not employed by a public employer,” as required by the proposed ballot measure.

The proposal is a long way from reaching the 2020 ballot, if it does. But it raises intriguing questions.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Night driver chronicles Seaside

I’ve never worked as a taxi driver, but I’ve taken plenty of taxis. It’s sort of like a blind date every time. You don’t know who’s in the front seat at the wheel. But before you panic, remember the guy in front doesn’t know who you are either.

Lou Solitske understands this dynamic. The former taxi driver in Sacramento, California, took the art of taxi driving to a new high: transforming it into a masterful collection of personal essays that present the world of taxi

driving as not only one of getting from here to there, but of making momentary but meaningful human connections.



R.J. MARX

It doesn’t hurt that he has a heart of gold. “One of the things I do is get stranded people home, regardless of their ability to pay,” he writes in his memoir “Taxi Tales.” “All they have to do is let me know what’s going on from the very beginning of the ride and not treat me like a chump.”

Don’t worry — not too many people took Solitske as a chump.

“I have been a night driver for Sacramento Yellow Cab since 1987,” he writes. “Right off the bat I found myself in bizarre, humorous, sad, thought-provoking and scary situations.”

Solitske describes himself as standing 6feet, 2inches tall and weighing 275 pounds. “I wear black boots, black pants, a black shirt, a black leather vest, black fingerless gloves and a black fedora. All in all, not a pretty sight. My attire and demeanor are designed to project the image that I would be more trouble than I’m worth.”

Frequenters of the Seaside Coffee shop know him. He’s been spotted walking along Broadway and U.S. Highway 101 with a camera and long lens. And the signature black outfit.

Taxi driver

Originally from Chicago, Solitske’s family moved to the San Fernando Valley in 1950.

He considers himself lucky in life “from the get-go.”

“When I was born they told my parents not to get attached to me because I wasn’t going to last too long,” he said.

Solitske was born with six holes in his ventricular septum, the wall separating the lower chamber of the heart.

“I had open-heart surgery in 1963, when I was 15, with a 75 percent mortality rate,” he said. “I knew what the odds were, but I made it. Ever since then I’ve felt compelled to give back.

He “escaped” in 1965 and never came back.



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

Lou Solitske in front of Seaside Coffee House.

With a degree in economics from San Jose State, he went from economics to selling pharmaceuticals and later as a manager’s representative at the San Francisco Merchandise Mart selling computers to doctors.

He hated it — despite being the company’s No. 1 salesman.

“They had me training new people,” Solitske recalled. “This one trainee said ‘I oozed sincerity and dripped credibility.’ I was selling my soul.”

He transitioned from sales, driving cabs at night on a part-time basis. During those rides, he regaled passengers with words of wisdom, arias from famous operas and recitations of the works of Longfellow, Yeats and Poe — and Solitske.

Despite his affinity for arts and letters, Solitske stepped into the good-guys-wear-black wardrobe as a precaution in dicey neighborhoods where customers were as likely to pull a knife as they were a \$5 bill.

“Looking like Guido the Hit Man helped me keep alive a little bit,” he recalled. “It was, ‘Hey, man, don’t tread on me.’ I had six robbery attempts. I was stabbed seven times.”

Driving a taxi was an opportunity for Solitske to make money, have fun and help people, he said.

At the instigation of friends and passengers, he started writing his memories down — soon finding enough material to fill a book. The project took 15 years, with the book’s release in 2001. It contin-

ues to sell.

Solitske’s memoirs are a little bit Robert De Niro, a little bit Judd Hirsch, with a lot of heart thrown in.

How many other taxi drivers would carry a wounded owl to a veterinary hospital? Kick bigots out of the back seat? Offer a free ride on Christmas? And recite poetry, too?

On to Seaside

After his memoir was published, Solitske continued driving, selling copies of “Taxi Tales” to his customers.

“I had a captive audience,” he smiled. But his taxi driving days were coming to an end as he and Jackie moved to Half Moon Bay, California, on the coast.

“We loved Half Moon Bay, but she hated our home,” he said.

She also hated the heat.

They considered Portland and Astoria before a Realtor sent them a listing from Seaside.

“We bought it sight unseen. The Realtor was a nervous wreck — but it was perfect.”

They relocated in May 2015.

Tragically, Jackie died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, shortly after their move.

“I took care of her,” he said. “To watch this capable, confident woman melt away was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done.”

Lens on life

Today he can be seen walking the streets of Seaside with a long lens. “I’m an omnivore, I’ll gobble up anything that gets in front of my camera,” he said.

Solitske describes Seaside as “a varied and target-rich environment for a photographer.”

Plus each camera weighs about 22 pounds. “I hump between 6 and 8 miles on a typical day — my lazy day I do 10 to 15 miles. If I don’t get my shots. I still get my exercise.”

At 71, Solitske said, “If I don’t use it, I’ll lose it and go right downhill.”

But nothing he has ever done to allow him to help more people in desperate situations than driving his cab.

“It’s in the middle of the night, I’ll have a parent call with a sick child, or a woman is battered and I’ve got to get her out of the situation before he kills her or she kills him,” Solitske said. “In situations like that money is not important.”

Solitske said he considered himself the luckiest driver in Sacramento. “I just got these trips out of nowhere — and I do believe it was a result of my deposits in the karma bank.”

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