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OUR VIEW

Child care is a deal breaker

For two-earner couples and single parents, child care is life and death. In rural Oregon, creating child care capacity that is dependable is a challenge. It is also a largely unseen, but critical, element in a local economy.

Without dependable child care, some men and women simply cannot work.

If that sounds familiar to regular readers, it should. We wrote those exact words back in 2010.

While the child care providers on the North Coast have changed in nine years, their importance has not.

The availability of safe, reliable and affordable child care is still a deal breaker for young working couples or single parents.

And there is still a dire need. Clatsop County is considered a “child care desert,” a bluntly worded state designation given when fewer than 33% of children have access to child care.

That’s why efforts to keep Shooting Stars Child Development Center in Astoria should be supported and commended.

During the past few decades, we have regularly reported how child care providers have a hard time finding, keeping and paying highly-trained staff a living wage and benefits while keeping care affordable for parents. Many report having difficulties staying afloat — not being able to meet their monthly expenses, in part because some parents cannot pay on time.

It has been five years since the substantial operation at Coryell’s Crossing closed. Since then, other



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

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small, private facilities that tried to fill that gap have come and gone. Soar With Us in Gearhart closed earlier this year. And while state overseers have identified some issues with Shooting Stars not complying with state regulations, we are hopeful those can be resolved in a manner that assures parents that it is a safe haven for their children. Frankly, its 50 slots are crucial in Clatsop County’s mix of offerings.

Over the years, studies have correlated children’s development success with quality child care. The best ones provide a safe learning environment led by enthusi-

astic, stable, well-trained staff. Staff-to-child ratios are of special importance.

Parents have become especially desperate to find child care outside of the traditional workday, which affects people working swing, night or weekend shifts.

So what is to be done? Task forces have been formed in Clatsop, Columbia and Tillamook counties to figure out how to address and finance more child care and preschool options in the region.

The Northwest Early Learning Hub received a grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust for

\$100,000 to support them. A separate parent advisory board will help inform the task forces.

The initiative follows a feasibility study conducted in 2017 — led by retired Seaside principal Dan Gaffney — that looked at providing subsidized, high-quality preschool in Clatsop and Tillamook counties.

It followed the Pay for Success model, where private investors pay for social programs and get repaid with interest if those programs save the public money.

The one success story is Lil’ Sprouts.

Essentially, it is the only social services offered by the city of Astoria. It came about following collaborative efforts involving the city and some key large employers like the U.S. Coast Guard and Columbia Memorial Hospital. Clatsop Community College, some banks and some retailers were also key early supporters. One or more prior incarnations at the school district did encounter some difficulties, but the current formula appears solid. It is no surprise that it is a government-led activity, where the profit motive of the private sector is less relevant than the community service it provides.

There is no single answer. Private-sector child care must be encouraged. But it also must be appropriately regulated, inspected and all its staff vetted and trained.

Ten years ago, we wrote that “child care is a largely hidden ingredient that makes success or failure in the 21st century economy.” It needs to stay on the front burner as a public policy priority.

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GUEST COLUMN

Boone’s case should spur campaign finance reform

Today’s wheels of civic progress turn so slowly at all levels of government. Often it feels like we’re stuck, or moving backwards. As Oregonians scrutinize problems in our nation’s capital, we should work harder to improve things at home.

Money lies at the root of our political quagmire. With no cap on campaign donations, Oregon is one of the most regressive places in America to engage in the democratic process. To worsen matters, state election laws now on the books are ignored or unenforced. Improvements move at a glacial pace, regardless of whether Democrats or Republicans are in charge.



WATT
CHILDRESS

We were reminded of this status quo in a case involving our former state Rep. Deborah Boone, D–Cannon Beach. After leaving her seat in the Oregon House, the seven-term legislator was quoted on the record regarding behavior that, if accurately reported, looks like a crime.

An article about Boone in The Oregonian presents details about pass-through political donations — channeling money to campaigns on behalf of other donors, shielding their names from financial disclosure forms. Such donations are a felony in Oregon punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$125,000 fine.

Quotes attributed to Boone displayed candor on this matter. If the article is accurate, she clearly believed she did not do anything out of the ordinary. In fact, her words suggest such financial dealings are common practice, thus offering the public an unfiltered look at Oregon’s political norm.

“It’s so prevalent,” she is quoted as saying. “I would think if it was illegal, they’d cite you on it.”

These words are certainly in keep-



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

ing with the state’s handling of Boone’s case. After months of doing nothing, officials finally responded when area citizens wrote a formal letter to Oregon Secretary of State Beverly Clarno.

Of particular concern was a donation to Boone from John Helm, husband to Sen. Betsy Johnson, D–Scappoose, who co-chairs the powerful Joint Committee on Ways and Means. The Oregonian quotes Boone as saying that Helm gave her the money with instructions to pass it along to Tim Josi, a long-serving Tillamook County commissioner who was campaigning to fill her seat in the Legislature.

Secretary Clarno’s staff sent letters of inquiry to Boone, Helm and Josi. Boone’s response appears to reverse earlier statements printed in The Oregonian. Rather than seek to explain the contradiction, officials simply stopped the investigation in August.

After The Oregonian published another article about the case in September, Clarno announced her intention to improve law enforcement. But not for Boone, Helm and Josi. Why should parties in a case that prompted more public scrutiny be exempted from state law?

Clarno’s move signals little more than window dressing, at best, if she refuses

to complete her investigation. At worst it leaves us with the appearance of duplicity, or the sense that state officials may have carefully worded an inquiry so as to allow flexible interpretation, then dropped the case without addressing the obvious need for clarification. In other words, it smacks of special treatment for political insiders.

This dramatic shortfall of duty also undermines trust in reporting about elections. In a recent editorial published by The Oregonian, their editorial board mentions an assertion by Boone that the state’s newspaper of record got the story wrong. Yet to date no one has requested a correction.

A responsible course of action need not be punitive in this case, even if pass-through donations occurred. I see no reason for Boone or anyone involved to be punished if what they did was engage in a crime that has been ignored up to this point.

We don’t need to make an example of someone. We need civic leaders to be examples by demonstrating a renewed commitment to truth-telling and transparency.

I’d like to view Boone’s reported candor as a frank acknowledgement of systemic failures that require our timely attention. Give her the chance to clear up any confusion over conflicting public statements. Expound on the pervasiveness of the problem, if appropriate.

Use this as an opportunity to expedite campaign finance reform and help remove a moneyed stain from politics as a whole.

Oregon can model leadership for America by moving from behind up to the front of the class. We’ll do this if, and only if, we strengthen public confidence in fair elections.

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