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OUR VIEW

Sins of transmission

Idaho Power Company wants to build a transmission line from Boardman to Hemingway, Idaho, that would transfer energy between the Columbia Basin and the intermountain west.

Currently, that transmission line would cut across prime farmlands and wildlands in Eastern Oregon and western Idaho, as well as the not-so-prime lands in between.

The initial pushback that happens when any looks-good-on-paper project is grafted onto the real world is already underway. Proposed routes as currently drawn would blast through some of the most productive agricultural land in the region while others would run directly over homes

or through some of the natural landscapes of the Blue Mountains.

Some of those “micro-siting issues” can be fixed. A few feet here and there can change the trajectory of the line, allowing it to bend around bedposts and houses. And just putting towers on a non-irrigated side of the road compared to an irrigated side can help save some of our most productive ag land. That isn’t always possible, however, and like any multi-million dollar, hundreds-of-miles-long energy project, there will be plenty of missteps, complaints and power plays ahead of us.

In one sense, we’ve done the damaging part: we’ve built dams and coal plants and erected thousands of windmills. In the grand scheme, these have a larger impact than a tall, narrow line cutting from horizon to horizon.

And at the very least, we should get relatively cheap and exceptionally reliable energy from the line.

That’s the pro-argument to be made: we’re creating energy here right now, relatively green when compared to the rest of the world, and we need to find better ways to share that energy across the grid.

Idaho Power’s proposed way to do that is by building huge towers stringing transmission lines across the landscape, private property and some of Eastern Oregon’s most beautiful land. It’s not exactly cutting edge, but it’s the best affordable technology we’ve got.

In general, we think the narrower we can make our footprint the

better, and we’re in favor of protecting valuable areas (private property and forest ecology) when we have the opportunity. An interstate energy corridor that runs along the same strip of land we’ve already pulverized and paved into an interstate makes sense on paper. But of course, there are drawbacks to that, too. Hundreds

of miles of bright, blinking lights can wear on drivers and cause a safety hazard. Many of our great Eastern Oregon vistas — although we’d argue you have to get off the freeway to see anything worth seeing — would be detrimentally impacted.

Though it is not yet financially feasible in the great expanse of the American West, we think the future will eventually bring buried power lines to our country, as has been done by first-world economies abroad for generations.

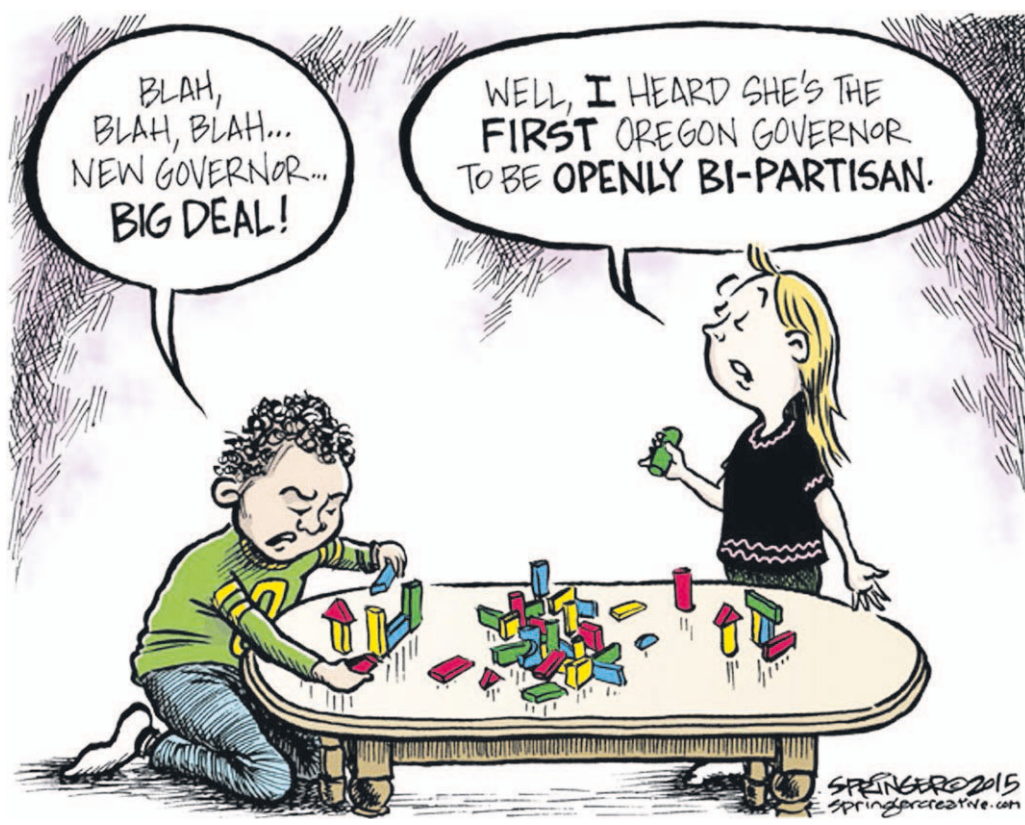
But that’s far in the future. And last we’ve heard, there is no magic energy source that has no ill effects and is able to power the world’s engines and automobiles and electrical outlets. Until then, we have to burn damaging fuels and string ugly, buzzing lines across our beautiful world.

Whether the Boardman-to-Hemingway line is an environmental, aesthetic and economic sin we’re willing to pay — that remains to be seen.

But we need to think ahead and think big when it comes to energy. Being too NIMBY might save a backyard, but we’ve got a whole world to worry about.

In one sense we’ve done the damaging part: we’ve built dams and coal plants and erected thousands of windmills.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

The cost of union decline

Like many Americans, I’ve been wary of labor unions.

Full-time union stagehands at Carnegie Hall earning more than \$400,000 a year? A union hailing its defense of a New York teacher who smelled of alcohol and passed out in class, with even the principal unable to rouse her? A police union in New York City that has a tantrum and goes on virtual strike?

More broadly, I disdained unions as bringing corruption, nepotism and rigid work rules to the labor market, impeding the economic growth that ultimately makes a country strong.

I was wrong.

The abuses are real. But, as unions wane in American life, it’s also increasingly clear that they were doing a lot of good in sustaining middle class life — especially the private-sector unions that are now dwindling.

Most studies suggest that about one-fifth of the increase in economic inequality in America among men in recent decades is the result of the decline in unions. It may be more: A study in the American Sociological Review, using the broadest methodology, estimates that the decline of unions may account for one-third of the rise of inequality among men.

“To understand the rising inequality, you have to understand the devastation in the labor movement,” says Jake Rosenfeld, a labor expert at the University of Washington and the author of “What Unions No Longer Do.”

Take construction workers. A full-time construction worker earns about \$10,000 less per year now than in 1973, in today’s dollars, according to Rosenfeld. One reason is probably that the proportion who are unionized has fallen in that period from more than 40 percent to just 14 percent.

“All the focus on labor’s flaws can distract us from the bigger picture,” Rosenfeld writes. “For generations now the labor movement has stood as the most prominent and effective voice for economic justice.”

I’m as appalled as anyone by silly work rules and \$400,000 stagehands, or teachers’ unions shielding the incompetent. But unions also lobby for programs like universal prekindergarten that help create broad-based prosperity. They are pushing for a higher national minimum wage, even though that would directly benefit mostly nonunionized workers.

I’ve also changed my mind because, in recent years, the worst abuses by far haven’t been in the union shop but in the corporate suite. One of the things you learn as a journalist is that when there’s no accountability, we humans are capable of tremendous avarice and venality. That’s true of union bosses — and of corporate tycoons. Unions, even flawed ones, can provide checks and balances for flawed corporations.



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

Many Americans think unions drag down the economy overall, but scholars disagree. American auto unions are often mentioned, but Germany’s car workers have a strong union, and so do Toyota’s in Japan and Kia’s in South Korea.

In Germany, the average autoworker earns about \$67 per hour in salary and benefits, compared with \$34 in the United States. Yet Germany’s car companies in 2010 produced more than twice as many vehicles as American companies did, and they were highly profitable. It’s too glib to say that the problem in the U.S. sector was just unions.

Or look at American history. The peak years for unions were the 1940s and ’50s, which were also some of the fastest-growing years for the United States ever — and with broadly shared prosperity. Historically,

the periods when union membership were highest were those when inequality was least.

Richard B. Freeman, a Harvard labor expert, notes that unions sometimes bring important benefits to industry: They can improve morale, reduce turnover and provide a channel to suggest productivity improvements.

Experts disagree about how this all balances out, but it’s clear that it’s not a

As unions wane in American life, it’s also increasingly clear that they were doing a lot of good.

major drag.

“If you’re looking for big negatives, everybody knows they don’t exist,” Freeman said.

Joseph Stiglitz notes in his book “The Price of Inequality” that when unions were strong in America, productivity and real hourly compensation moved together in manufacturing. But after 1980 (and especially after 2000) the link seemed to break and real wages stagnated.

It may be that as unions weakened, executives sometimes grabbed the gains from productivity. Perhaps that helps explain why chief executives at big companies earned, on average, 20 times as much as the typical worker in 1965, and 296 times as much in 2013, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Lawrence F. Katz, a Harvard labor economist, raises concerns about some aspects of public-sector unions, but he says that in the private sector (where only 7 percent of workers are now unionized): “I think we’ve gone too far in de-unionization.”

He’s right. This isn’t something you often hear a columnist say, but I’ll say it again: I was wrong. At least in the private sector, we should strengthen unions, not try to eviscerate them.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill, Oregon. Kristof, a columnist for The New York Times since 2001, writes op-ed columns that appear twice a week. He won the Pulitzer Prize two times, in 1990 and 2006.

YOUR VIEWS

Ore. senators favor immigrants over Americans

Both Oregon senators, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, are eager to force Americans to pay the costs of the president’s illegal amnesty. This despite the fact federal judge Andrew Hanen just agreed that Obama’s amnesty fiat is illegal.

Congress can most easily block the amnesty by refusing to pay for the bureaucratic processing of millions of new applicants. But both Wyden and Merkley have repeatedly voted against bringing up HR 240, the amnesty defunding bill that recently passed the House. Both of them want the initial five million new applicants to be able to legally compete against entry-level citizens while Obama adds another 30 million work permits in increments.

At that point, we won’t have a recognizable country anymore. Americans will have lost our voice in favor of a chaotic avalanche of low-skilled Third World poor. How will that improve the lives of the Americans Wyden and Merkley pretend to represent?

Lyneil Vandermolen
Tualatin

Stand by decision to locate Requa bronze at Brownfield

The placement of the Requa bronze statue at the Brownfield Park site would be appropriate since the artist sized it for that space.

Carol Schacher Petteys
Parkdale, Ore.

Every effort was made and every procedural step was taken to ensure that the statue was placed in the optimum location. This included approval by the Arts Commission and 100 percent approval by the city council.

I have personal qualms about the location, but believe the site was set and the money raised based on prior agreement. At this point, I believe we should embrace this generous gift of public art and change our debate to how future art and sites should be funded and placed.

Terry Andersen
Pendleton

Requa helped me get a scholarship from Stanford and he did the same for hundreds of athletes during his long tenure at PHS.

They may no longer live here but they have written about how Requa inspired them.

Let’s compare this loyalty to Requa with “the beloved” Stella Darby who inspired young women to become prostitutes so that she could profit from their labor.

Jerry Cronin
Pendleton

Let me urge that the terms of the original agreement stand and that the memorializing of a special man who made a long-standing and lasting contribution to generations of young people in the Pendleton area and to the community in general go forward.

Fred vonAppen
Missoula, Montana

I am writing this letter in support of

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.

placing the Requa statue at the Brownfield Park location. It seems to me that this matter has gotten blown out of proportion by a few people that don’t like the placement.

What it comes down to is this: The city council was presented with the proposed location, which was agreed upon by the city council. The Pendleton Linebackers and the organizers of the fundraising efforts have lived up to their end of the deal. It’s now time for the city to live up to their end, and place the state in the approved location.

Kelly Dietz
Pendleton

Editor’s note: These letters have been edited for space considerations and to remove duplicity. They are published in their entirety at eastoregonian.com.