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OUR VIEW

Don't marginalize rural viewers

Charter cable deal has the potential to bring the world closer

It's not often a familiar "local" company makes as much national news as Charter Communications did this week by announcing its intention to buy larger rival Time Warner Cable.

Cable television providers recently have found themselves in the broad category of information-sector businesses seeking fresh new ways to survive, compete and prosper.

This task takes on increasing urgency as customers discover novel Internet-based ways to access entertainment — in addition to shopping, doing our banking, researching school projects and other activities of everyday life. On the supply side of this information pipeline, it is costing cable companies more to purchase rights to broadcast the popular sports, movies, programs and games that consumers demand.

The travails of cable providers are unlikely to keep ordinary Americans awake at night. Along with satellite TV, cable companies are widely viewed as charging incrementally more each year for something that we somehow simultaneously value but find trivial. The fact that the Internet now allows consumers to bypass the cable or satellite dish is generating a great deal of excited discussion in corporate boardrooms.

But beyond the challenges from program-streaming services — such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu — Charter and other traditional "hard-wire" firms have additional reasons for striving to go wire-free, or at least cut costs. The technologies that have kicked off this strategic game, chiefly Wi-Fi networks that tie into the nation's cellular phone grid, have the ability to deliver content and interactive features to anyone with a smart phone. This opens up new ways to make money, but also threatens the relevance of companies that fail to keep up.

> When it comes to the merger between Charter and Time Warner Cable, what's in it for local customers?

News organizations like *The East Oregonian* have been at the forefront of this wave, realizing that convenient and rapid access to content is a consumer demand that isn't going away.

When it comes to the Charter merger, what's in it for local customers? This is a key question for regulators reviewing the plan. Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler said the FCC will carefully look at whether it's in the public interest. "An absence of harm is not sufficient," he said. The FCC "will look to see how American consumers would benefit" from the deal.

Our congressional delegation should monitor this process, making sure Charter's moves do not further marginalize rural places. If FCC does its job right, and if technology continues advancing, this merger can be a big step along the way to making our comparative isolation far less disadvantageous.

The benefit, even in places like Eastern Oregon, could be to shrink geography, making the choice to live and do business here even easier than it is today.

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.

YOUR VIEWS

Hermiston rail museum a gem, not an eyesore

I would like to comment about the article in the May 23-24 *East Oregonian* on the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum in Hermiston.

I would like to thank Connie Maret and John Spinden for maintaining the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum. I remember when John Bennett and others created the museum around a handful of donated railroad cars.

I cannot believe the city's Enhancement Committee criticizing the display as unattractive. The city's "You Can Grow Here" motto will not ring true if the city does not recognize the growth that has taken place in the past. This type of history is what has made Hermiston the city it is today.

The Hinkle Railroad facility has been and is today a large employer in this area.

The Railroad Museum is adjacent to Hodge Park and the city's park maintenance group could easily maintain the narrow strip in the museum area. The city government along with all of us should support the museum operation and its continued opening to the public.

Tom Harper
Hermiston

Kitzhaber's whereabouts leave the public wondering

Many of us are wondering at the whereabouts of our recently resigned governor. You know, the one we elected. It seems unlikely that someone who returned for an unprecedented third term, even though under a deepening cloud, should resign from such an elevated office only to disappear from public view. To be allowed to disappear?

We depend, as the Founding Fathers obviously intended, to remain informed about governors, their deviance and their paramours by means of the press, whatever and wherever that gentleman's circumstances carry him. Perhaps we should be grateful for the little snippet on Cylvia Hayes' travails in the courts that you provided in your May 25 edition. But it is with the governor that our concern lies, and I'll begin with you and copy a few of your occupational compatriots.

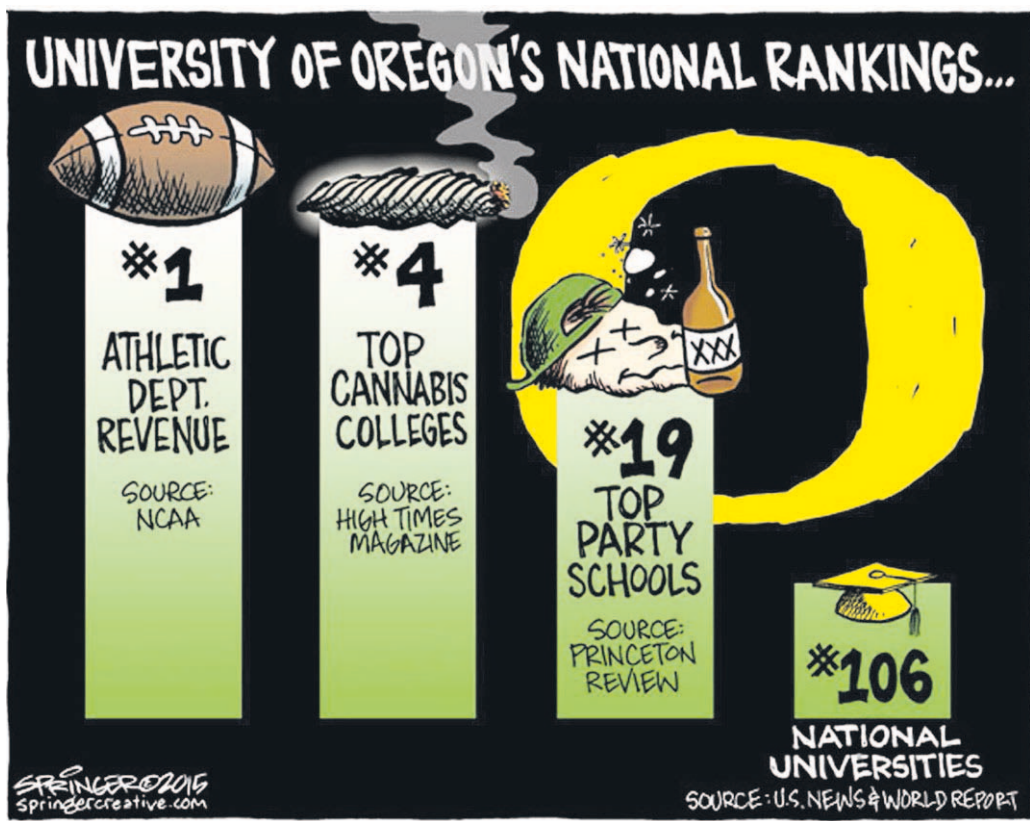
With the failure of the Fourth Estate to meet its responsibility to the electorate, as has been true more and more often in recent years, it does not seem unreasonable that officials elected to serve under the governor should make noise on the Internet in wonderment over his apparent disappearance from our beautiful state, if indeed that is the case. So I extend my appeal to those elected officials within my voter's sphere of influence by copy of this letter.

Where is John Kitzhaber, and what are his circumstances?

H.F. "Harry" Neuwirth
Salem

Be heard!

Comment online at eastoregonian.com or our Facebook and Twitter sites.



OTHER VIEWS

Let's do some railing

GAIL COLLINS
Comment

Just before Congress slunk away for the three-day weekend — which it was, of course, planning to stretch into a week — senators from the Northeast held a news conference to denounce Republicans for underfunding Amtrak passenger rail service.

"Amtrak has some infrastructure that is so old it was built and put into service when Jesse James and Butch Cassidy were still alive and robbing trains," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

"In Connecticut we have a bridge that was built when Grover Cleveland was president," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

Now you have to admit, this is pretty compelling. Especially if you merge them and envision Butch Cassidy and Grover Cleveland robbing commuters on the Acela Express.

The Northeast corridor from Boston to Washington is the centerpiece of the nation's commuter rail system. It carries more people than the airlines, makes a profit and takes an ungodly number of cars off extremely crowded highways. However, it needs $21 billion of work on its bridges, tunnels, tracks and equipment.

We've all been thinking about it since the terrible derailment in Philadelphia this month. In a moment of stupendously bad timing, House Republicans chose the day after the accident to cut more than $1 billion from the $2.45 billion the Obama administration had requested for Amtrak.

> Fix Amtrak. Connect the country.

Speaker John Boehner said any attempt to link the two things was "stupid." As only he can.

Let's take a middle road, people, and assume that while the Philadelphia crash might not have been related to any funding cut, it's a good reminder that running packed trains through 19th century tunnels and bridges is asking for trouble.

Amtrak is a managerial mishmash, trapped under the thumb of Congress and also responsible for long-distance service across the country, touching cities from Chicago to New Orleans to Grand Rapids to Salt Lake City on a series of routes that are never going to make money. Conservative groups that call for the privatization of Amtrak are basically envisioning a system where the Northeast Corridor is left to fend for itself while the money-losing routes fade into history.

"Ideally, we would like to see all transportation spending and taxing devolve to the states," said Michael Sargent of The Heritage Foundation.

None of the Northeastern senators at the news conference complained about the cross-country money-losers. Perhaps that was out of deference to their colleague, Dick Durbin, D-Ill. Perhaps they instinctively understood that no matter what the drain, Amtrak has a better chance of political survival running through 46 states. It's a theory that works great for the Defense Department.

Maybe the senators just had a national vision of what national rail service is supposed to be.

"It's worth reminding our colleagues the Northeast Corridor is the only part that makes money," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., in a phone interview. "But that doesn't mean I want to get rid of the rest of the system. If we only kept the portions of government that made money, there wouldn't be any point to the state of Connecticut running a Department of Children and Families anymore."

What's your off-the-cuff verdict, people?

A) Save the railroad!

B) Prioritize! Every train for itself!

C) They can do anything they want if they'll just get together and fix the pothole on my corner.

Wow, I believe I see a majority for the pothole. Remind me to tell you about how members of Congress just passed the 33rd super-short-term highway bill because they haven't been able to come up with any normal road repair funding since 2008.

Transportation unites the country, but the crowded parts and the empty parts have different needs. Cities require mass transit, which is something that tends to irritate many rural conservatives. (It's that vision of a whole bunch of strangers stuck together, stripped of even the illusion of control.) Remote towns and cities need connections to survive, even though the price tag seems way out of proportion to those of us who don't live on, say, an Alaskan island.

Amtrak's operating budget is about the same as the Essential Air Service program, which subsidizes commercial air service to remote communities. Most of the flights are at least two-thirds empty. CBS News, in a report this year, found one flight between Kansas City, Missouri, and Great Bend, Kansas, that generally carried only a single passenger.

Everybody knows that the government can waste money. (If you have any doubts, I will refer you to a recent report by Pro Publica about a glorious new $25 million, 64,000-square-foot headquarters the military constructed for U.S. troops in Afghanistan even though said troops were going home.) But making money-losing links between different parts of the theoretically United States doesn't seem to be in that category.

Fix Amtrak. Connect the country.

■

Gail Collins joined The New York Times in 1995 as a member of the editorial board and later as an Op-Ed columnist. In 2001 she became the first woman ever appointed editor of the Times's editorial page.

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.