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OUR VIEW

We will build it, because they came

Earlier this week, the Hermiston School District facilities committee recommended a new elementary school for the growing metropolis.

It also recommended an expansion of Hermiston High and Sandstone Middle.

The upgrades would cost a lot of money — somewhere between $73.8 million and $131 million, depending on how much building is required and how much taxpayers are willing to fund. A cool $100 million is a high price for a small community that is still paying off two previous school bonds. Already, a Hermiston taxpayer with a $100,000 home is paying about $400 a year for those relatively new school facilities that are already too small.

But something has to give. Hermiston continues to grow, and a good bulk of that growth comes from young families with school age children. The district has already been forced to use 24 portable classrooms, and a Portland State University study projects there could be 800 more students taking classes in Hermiston in just eight years. If that's the case, the current campus will have burst at the seams. And if we don't want children taking classes in parking lots and soccer fields, we'd better come up with a solution. That's hard to do when the cost is so steep.

The first comment on our story that broke the news was: "I don't want to pay the extra taxes, but I agree that a new grade school and potential middle school is in the future."

It's an understandable opinion for a city that is feeling some growing pains, always having to expend more dollars to stay in front of a increasing list of community requirements.

But Hermiston is also a place that has benefited greatly from expansion, with good jobs and new parks — and a larger population to spread around community costs. Growing too fast can be expensive, and it can lead to a community that spurts haphazardly without an overarching long-term plan.

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The older and smaller of two bonds, valued at $30 million, comes off the books in June 2019. That gives the district a little less than four years to come up with a facilities plan to pitch to voters. If the growth continues, the tax base will be bigger than ever and hopefully equipped to pay for such an expansion.

The more recent $85 million bond doesn't expire until 2027, and if no expansion has taken place by then students will either be stacked in bunk desks or coming to school in rotating shifts.

Hermiston School District, always striving to be Oregon's premier district, has its work cut out for it. To achieve their goal, the district will need to provide a safe and comfortable place to teach children, cutting costs where possible while raising and spending the necessary dough to accomplish the mission.

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

Revitalize Main Street Act would support local economies, schools

By PEGGY MORETTI, MIKE THORNE, SHARON KONOPA

The Oregonian's dismissal of the Revitalize Main Street Act (SB 565) republished by the *East Oregonian* reflects a short-sighted view of the state's role in the economic health and physical safety of communities both urban and rural, stating that any investment in the restoration of historic infrastructure robs money for schools. We suggest a more holistic view that acknowledges schools and local services depend on healthy local economies to support them — the very thing SB 565 strives to address.

Submitted photo

Pendleton's LaDow Block is one example of an historic downtown building that the act would try to help revitalize.

The Revitalize Main Street Act creates a state Historic Rehabilitation Fund capped at $12 million per year from which a rebate would be made to owners who restore historic commercial buildings and put them back into service in their communities.

Hundreds of new jobs would be created every year as empty stores, theaters, apartment buildings, hotels, factories, etc. are repurposed and reactivated. Instead of old buildings attracting crime, vagrancy, or posing safety hazards (which costs communities plenty), they would house new businesses, bring residents downtown, and attract heritage tourism. Instead of steadily declining in value, they would generate millions in new property tax revenues to pay for schools and services.

This is a well-tested idea. Thirty-five states have implemented similar incentives and study after study has proven they generate a positive return. For instance, in Maryland each $1 allocated toward rehab incentives generates $8.53 in economic output. Dollar-for-dollar, restoring an existing building generates more jobs than new construction and more of the money stays local because a larger percent is labor instead of materials.

Restore Oregon commissioned an economic analysis of a Historic Rehabilitation Incentive for Oregon by EcoNorthwest which took a conservative look at its potential. It determined that "Oregon would indeed be better off with an HRI."

The study projects a 4-fold increase in rehab projects, creating 1,369 jobs per year with income of $25.5 million, a $35.8 million net gain per year in direct development spending, capturing $13.3 million more federal tax credit dollars, and generating $2.3 million more in property taxes per year. In fact, because we're bringing tangible assets back online to generate revenue for decades, the annual increase in property tax revenues grows dramatically— to $9 million by 2025.

Another much-needed outcome of SB 565 is seismic safety. For all the truly alarming predictions of economic catastrophe and loss of life when The Big One hits, meaningful steps to actually implement seismic retrofitting have not been taken. Because retrofitting can add 25 percent to the cost of a project without creating greater market value, state incentives are called for. The Revitalize Main Street Act would cover this work in addition to other upgrades.

SB 565 is a grassroots, bipartisan initiative backed by hundreds of people from 65 cities, including 36 mayors, 31 downtown associations, 36 organizations ranging from 1000 Friends of Oregon to the Oregon Economic Development Association, and State Treasurer Ted Wheeler. It presents a modest investment with a big return in the form of new jobs, economic vitality, cultural heritage, and seismic safety — while the cost of letting our historic downtowns decline and collapse presents an education in foolishness.

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Peggy Moretti is the executive director of Restore Oregon; Mike Thorne is a former state senator and businessman from Pendleton; and Sharon Konopa is mayor of Albany.

OTHER VIEWS

How to beat the bots

THOMAS FRIEDMAN
Comment

Here's an interesting statistic from a 2014 labor survey by burning-glass.com: 65 percent of new job postings for executive secretaries and executive assistants now call for a bachelor's degree, but "only 19 percent of those currently employed in these roles have a B.A." So four-fifths of secretaries today would not be considered for two-thirds of the job postings in their own field because they do not have a four-year degree to do the job they are already doing! The study noted that an "increasing number of job seekers face being shut out of middle-skill, middle-class occupations by employers' rising demand for a bachelor's degree" as a job-qualifying badge — even though it may be irrelevant, or in no way capture someone's true capabilities, or where perhaps two quick online courses would be sufficient.

This is just one of the problems contributing to unemployment and underemployment today. It was the subject of a seminar last Thursday jointly convened by New America, McKinsey, LinkedIn and Opportunity@Work, a new civic group led by Byron Auguste, who headed President Barack Obama's recent efforts to reform the education-to-work pathway in America. The meeting's focus was a new McKinsey study on how we can use big data and online talent platforms to better nurture talent in the workforce, find it where it already exists but may not be "badged" by a college degree and connect it both with the real demands of businesses and with colleges looking to make their curriculum more relevant to changing workforce needs. As Sen. Mark Warner, who delivered a smart keynote address, noted, "Almost 25 people are running for president — and it is remarkable to me that not one of them is talking about these issues."

The McKinsey study begins: "Labor markets around the world have not kept pace with rapid shifts in the global economy, and their inefficiencies take a heavy toll." Millions of people can't find work, "yet sectors from technology to health care cannot find people to fill open positions. Many who do work feel overqualified or underutilized."

"The skills gap is real," explained Auguste, "but it is a symptom — not the cause — of a dysfunctional labor market, along with stagnant wages and declining job mobility." While it's true that more people need to master digital skills today, there are, he noted, a lot of people with skills employers are seeking — like coding skills — but who may lack the traditional credentials to be considered for the jobs. There are people who would be happy and able to master these skills but don't have the information on what they are, where best to learn them, or access to new learning platforms that are not covered by traditional government loans or grants; companies have employees in their warehouses, call centers and retail floors with the motivation and aptitude to learn the skills for new jobs, but too few employers identify them or offer them online training opportunities; and there are rural and urban areas where tapping into the potential of less-credentialed workers could bring IT jobs back to U.S. shores.

Check out linkedin.com/edu. LinkedIn has a giant database of millions of workers, which it analyzed to see which schools are launching the most graduates into the top firms in a variety of fields. They're not always what you'd expect. Accounting? Villanova and Notre Dame. Media? NYU and Hofstra. Software developers? Carnegie Mellon, Caltech and Cornell. Whether you want to be a plumber or surgeon, it is useful to know which schools' alumni keep rising at the leading firms.

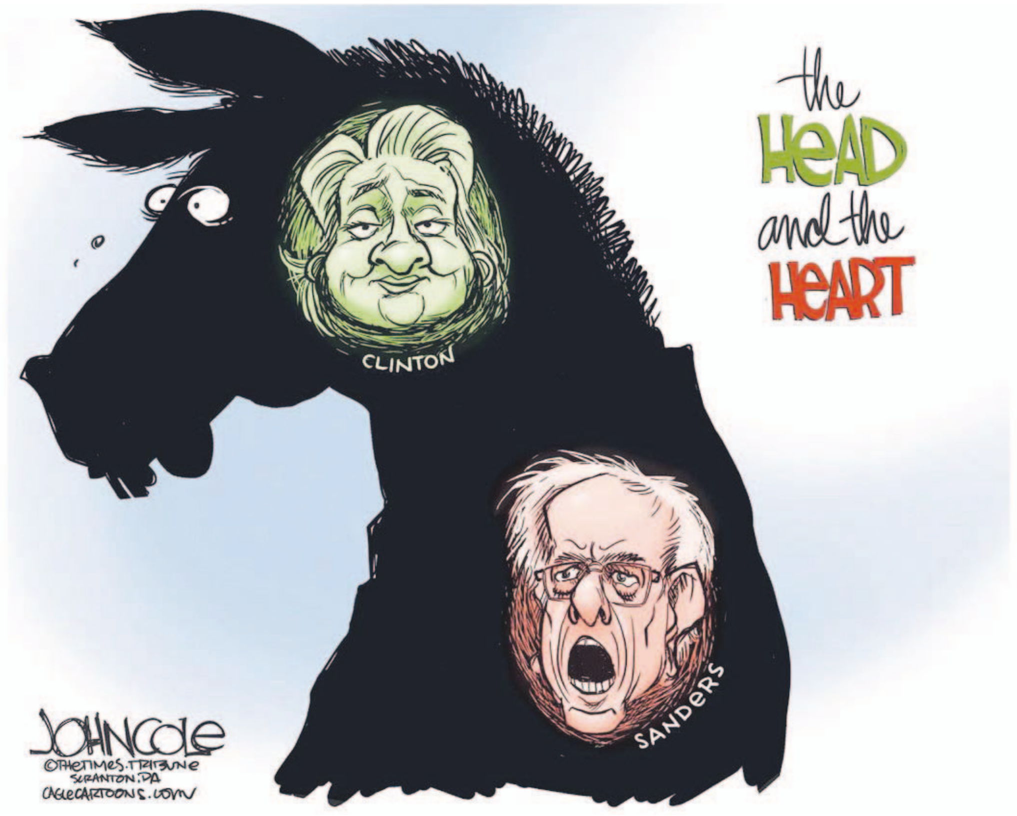
> Technology is redefining work and commerce, and if we're smart it can also redefine education for employment and advancement.

Technology is redefining work and commerce, and if we're smart it can also redefine education for employment and advancement so everyone can monetize, or improve, any skill and connect with any employer in need of it. "Up to 540 million people could benefit from online talent platforms by 2025," McKinsey said. It is not that hard. We need to be making much better use of the federal government's labor market data and that of websites like Monster.com, HireArt.com and LinkedIn, and even consider creating skill equivalents of the Obamacare health exchanges. Online talent platforms — that can link everyone's CV with every job opening, with the skills needed for that job, with the online and campus-based schools offering those skills with data showing which schools do it best — create more employment, more relevant skills and the right education for them.

Congress needs to create the legal, privacy and financial incentives to nurture this new social contract, Warner argued: "The biggest challenge for this labor force, and for federal policymakers, is the change in the traditional employer-employee relationship." If we used all our technology resources, said Aneesh Chopra, former chief technology officer of the United States, we could actually give people "personalized recommendations for every step of your life — at every step of your life." Adds Auguste: "We can use technology to do more than automate tasks. We can use it to accelerate learning, optimize talent, and guide people into better jobs and careers."

The robots will only take all the jobs if we let them — so let's use technology to keep the middle skilled in the middle class.

Thomas L. Friedman won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, his third Pulitzer for The New York Times. He became the paper's foreign-affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995.



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