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OUR VIEW

Tip of the hat; kick in the pants

A tip of the hat to the city of Pendleton for their "Coffee with the City" program.
It kicked off earlier this month at Buckin' Bean and will migrate south to McDonald's on Nov. 5.

Certainly, the feedback might not be all blue skies and rainbows. But we think it is important for the city to listen to concerns. In addition, we also think staff and councilors should relish the opportunity to explain face-to-face how the city works, why it decides to take certain action, and its vision for Pendleton's future.

Not everyone can be a regular attendee of city council meetings. And unfortunately, not everyone is a subscriber to this newspaper. There are a lot of people out there whose knowledge of local issues comes only via social media and powered by the rumor mill.

And the rest of us know how light on facts those tidbits can be. Ergo, we appreciate the city finding new ways to listen to and interact with constituents. We're a small community and simple steps like a cup of coffee in a casual environment can go a long way to building trust and common ground.

In addition, we extend our hat tip even lower to councilor Al Plute, who has gone above and beyond his fellow members in helping explain the budget and the gas tax in a series of op-eds in this newspaper. Clearly, it takes a lot of hard work to try to make people comfortable with a new tax, and Plute has shouldered most of that burden himself.

A tip of the hat to the Hermiston city council for being forthright and honest about the struggles of the EOTEC project at a council meeting earlier this week.

For too long, the EOTEC board has pretended everything was hunky-dory. But fundraising quickly fell behind schedule — then construction fell behind schedule — and the community clearly began to lose faith in the project.

The best way to get people back pulling in the same direction was to be honest about mistakes and missed opportunities. Then come out with a clear plan and a promise to do better going forward.

It's entirely possible that spending \$600,000 to get EOTEC built is a good use of Hermiston's overflow funds. It's also entirely possible that the county won't be so eager to give. Either way, we hope EOTEC and the city — now that they have a seat at the board — keep in better communication with the public about this vitally important civic endeavor.

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 rural/urban divide

The Oregonian

What does Multnomah County have in common with Josephine County, aside from the same state flag? One answer can be found in a report presented to Multnomah County's commissioners last week. It's a review of so-called tax expenditures, and it also reinforces how little Oregon's most urban county has in common with many of its most rural. For these reasons, and because the state's urban-rural divide will be a topic of conversation at a county commission meeting next month, the report deserves a few words.

Produced by the county auditor's office, it documents the millions of dollars in taxes the county does not collect every year as a result of various exemptions. These uncollected sums could pay for a lot of things if the county could grab them. But, as county Chair Deborah Kafoury notes in a letter of acknowledgement, many expenditures are outside of the county's control.

That's the case for the bulk of property tax exemptions, which in tax year 2014 deprived the county and library district of about \$80 million. While some county residents might envision hordes of crafty property owners, or a few big businesses, taking aggressive advantage of various loopholes, reality is much more mundane. Government entities generally don't pay taxes on their property for reasons outside of the county's control, and they dominate the non-payer list. At the very top, accounting for about \$11 million in foregone revenue, is the federal government.

Uncle Sam's property tax exemption is well known in counties like Josephine, where the federal government owns about half the land area. To mitigate the sting, the federal government does send payments in lieu of taxes, which amounted to about \$16 million for the entire state in 2015, according to the Association of Oregon Counties.

But here's where urban and rural counties begin to diverge. The federal government's properties in Multnomah County differ in important ways from its holdings in the state's heavily timbered, rural counties. Consider the top five federal properties in Multnomah, in

descending order of foregone revenue: the Bonneville Dam and associated facilities; the Veterans Administration hospital; the federal offices at 2nd and Salmon in downtown Portland; the federal buildings by the Lloyd Center; and the federal courthouse downtown.

Rural counties aren't completely devoid of federal facilities, of course. But a crucial difference between the federal offices clustered in Portland and the vast expanses of federal forests that dominate many rural counties is that the former function as employment and service centers. They're populated by people who make good money (and pay taxes on it) and they contribute to the region's economic vitality despite their property tax exemption. Federal forests in rural counties were once engines of economic vitality, too, but logging has been virtually idled by environmental legislation and litigation. Congress has provided money to soften the blow, but funding levels are steadily decreasing and not intended to be permanent.

For Multnomah County to approximate the economic shock from which the state's timber counties have yet to recover, Portland would need a whole lot more federal buildings; they would sit idle, unstaffed and unproductive; and every once in a while they'd burn, threatening buildings around them and bathing tourists with smoke and ash.

That isn't to suggest that all environmental regulation and litigation should be looked upon with suspicion or, for that matter, that residents of rural counties are themselves blameless for local dysfunction. Property tax rates in some of the counties hit most heavily by the collapse of the timber industry are, for historic reasons, shockingly low, and voters in some areas consistently refuse to raise them even to pay for basic government services. Still, you can understand their reluctance to raise taxes given their inability to produce jobs and revenue on their slice of the federal government's Oregon property pie.

One meeting among county commissioners isn't going to close the state's urban-rural divide and it isn't suddenly going to boost timber harvests on federal land. But listening matters. We are part of the same state and we have a lot at stake here.



OTHER VIEWS

Benghazi came up short in showdown with Hillary Clinton

There's a reason Benghazi Committee chairman Rep. Trey Gowdy offered Hillary Clinton the chance to testify in a private, closed hearing. And there's a reason Clinton chose to appear in an open setting, with the whole world watching.

The Benghazi Committee has made incremental advances in the public's knowledge of the circumstances of the death of four Americans in Libya on Sept. 11, 2012. But incremental advances — nuggets of information — don't make for dramatic hearings.

In addition, public hearings can become sidetracked, for everyone to see. If one side decides to pitch a fit and bickering ensues, that is what millions of viewers experience. If the questions go off on a tangent, viewers see that, too. In any event, the purpose of the hearing goes by the wayside.

And that is what took place more than once last week in Clinton's much-watched Benghazi testimony.

Republicans presented some new information. One leading Democrat had a tantrum and started a fight with Gowdy. And some Republicans got tangled up in side issues that didn't tell the public much about the core issues at stake in Benghazi. The result was a marathon hearing that didn't accomplish much.

At this point, there is really only one angle on Benghazi: Americans were in danger in a very dangerous country, security was deteriorating, and the State Department and secretary of state did little, and in some cases nothing, to protect them.

As 2012 unfolded, Ambassador Chris Stevens and others in Libya repeatedly told the State Department that threats were increasing. Clinton has said many times that she did not receive those messages from Stevens, that the ambassador followed protocol and sent them to another part of the State Department. But Republicans made the valid point that Clinton friend Sidney Blumenthal had quick, direct access to her — he knew her secret email address — while Stevens had to jump up and down waving his hands trying to get his security needs met.

"Can you tell us why security requests from your professionals ... none of those made it to you," Rep. Mike Pompeo, R-Kan., asked Clinton. "But a man who was a friend of yours, who had never been to Libya, didn't know much about it ... every one of those reports that he sent on to you that had to do with situations on the ground in Libya — those made it to your desk?"

Pompeo and other Republicans cited multiple requests for security, many of them rejected by Clinton's top officials. It might have been instructive to go through a list of those requests, one by one. Did Clinton see this one? That one? Who did? What was done?

It might have been damaging; Clinton had a responsibility to protect those Americans.

Instead, after Gowdy made a similar point about Blumenthal's access, the ranking Democrat on the committee, Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, jumped in.

"I move that we put into the record the entire transcript of Sidney Blumenthal," Cummings said. "We're going to release the emails; let's do the transcript. That way the world can see it."

Another Democrat chimed in: "I second that motion."

"Well, we didn't — we didn't..." Gowdy stammered.

"The motion has been seconded," said Cummings.

"Well, we're not going to take that up at a hearing," said Gowdy.

Of course the transcript wasn't the point. It was all a distraction. The point was to throw the proceedings off track, which Cummings accomplished quite nicely.

Republicans were capable of throwing themselves off track, too, which is what they did with a near-obsession with Blumenthal. His name was mentioned 60 times — before the first questioner had even finished.

Blumenthal, notorious for his role as a Clinton acolyte during the scandals of Bill Clinton's administration, is a provocateur and master of misdirection. He's probably happy to be the villain of

the day, to the extent that it ensures Hillary Clinton will not be the villain of the day. But he is not a major figure in the Benghazi affair.

The committee did find some good nuggets about the talking points that the administration used after the attack. Clinton, President Obama and other administration officials called the attack a spontaneous reaction to an anti-Muslim Internet video, when in fact they knew from the first minutes that it was a planned terrorist assault.

The committee uncovered evidence that on the evening of the attack, Clinton sent an email to daughter Chelsea explaining that the Americans had been killed by "an al-Qaida-like group." And the day after the attack, Clinton told the Egyptian prime minister, "We know that the attack in Libya had nothing to do with the film."

The documents were still more evidence that the blame-it-on-the-video story was lies and spin. But the public has known for a while that it was lies and spin. It seems unlikely to strike many Americans as very big news.

So a hearing billed as an epic, High Noon-style confrontation — granted, the hype came from the media, not Republican committee members themselves — instead turned out to be a somewhat interesting look at a few limited aspects of the Benghazi affair. In other words, no big deal. And that is very, very good news for Hillary Clinton.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.



BYRON YORK
Comment

There is really only one angle on Benghazi: Americans were in danger in a very dangerous country.

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