Quick takes

Two Pendleton statues

Sure am enjoying the history on these statues. Some of it you never learned in school, so it's been fun to read about them.

— Rhonda Polk

My dad is in Walla Walla and didn't know about the statues. It freaked him out, stomped on the brakes, rose his heart rate.

—Donald Lien Jr.

What new law would make Oregon a better place?

Close all stores on Sunday. Give everyone the day off to worship with their family if they so desire.

— Jim Garrou

I'd like to make a law that we have to either enforce or get rid of existing laws before enacting new ones.

— Rick Scheibner

Get rid of the state tax and have a sales tax. Only make people pay tax on what they buy and out of state people are taxed as well. No tax on food.

— Jude Turner

Get rid of mail in voting system. Go to ballot boxes, with voter ID laws.

— Jordan Whetsler

Get Amtrak service again in Eastern Oregon.

— Sharla McDonald

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

Public can help EOTEC achieve success

DAVE DROTZMANN
Comment

Recently, the Eastern Oregon Trade & Event Center board hosted a community update that was well attended. However, we know that many of you who are interested and invested in this project were unable to attend. With that in mind, I reach out to you today with a project update on Phase 1 of the EOTEC.

As a historical reminder, the EOTEC project is a joint venture between the city of Hermiston and Umatilla County to remove the old Umatilla County fairgrounds from the compressed 21-acre site in downtown Hermiston to a new 94-acre site south of town, near the airport.

It has long been a vision, started over 30 years ago by many regional leaders, that one day the new site would be the location for the Umatilla County Fair and the Farm-City Pro Rodeo, coupled with a new Eastern Oregon Event Center. The Event Center will be capable of hosting larger audiences and attracting local, regional and state conventions and conferences, all of which is not possible at the current site without the investment of millions of dollars into massive infrastructure changes.

The Umatilla County Fair is unique in that it is one of the few fairs in the nation that successfully operates in the black, and its participation has grown by more than 54 percent over the last five years. This fact, coupled with the success and support of the Farm-City Pro Rodeo, makes for great appeal to a larger audience of attendees and spectators.

Over the last 10 years, regional leaders have been meeting to discuss the impending growth demands of the Hermiston School District, including the high school. It was agreed upon by all, that for the high school to expand, the fairgrounds needed to move. So in 2012, the school district purchased the fairgrounds for $3 million dollars, saving the community millions of dollars in bonding. By doing this, the school district guaranteed its expansion possibilities, without having to purchase additional land and build a new high school site somewhere else, at an estimated cost of over $100 million.

We all know that an initiative this size can't be accomplished without significant amounts of funding, which is the primary reason the fairgrounds haven't been moved for over 30 years. That all changed when the school district purchased the land, and EOTEC received the state lottery funds secured by state Rep. Greg Smith. Those funds, along with other state grants, and contributions from Umatilla County, the city of Hermiston, and our local hotel group, have bolstered us to $14 million in available resources.

The EOTEC Authority Board hired the Frew Group in October 2013. Over the last two years, 55 out of the 94 acres of barren ground have been transformed to meet our current needs and potential future expansions. In January 2015, the Exhibitor & Event Center building started construction and is now 75 percent complete, with an expected completion date of April 1, 2016.

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A fundraising group, consisting of Dennis Barnett, Greg Harris, Nate Rivera and myself, has been authorized by the EOTEC Authority Board to pursue additional contributions with the goal of raising $2 million in private funding. If these funds are raised, EOTEC will be unburdened by mortgage payments, allowing it to be profitable sooner. This would also complete Phase 1, allowing us to host the Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo starting in August 2017. By getting the funds up front, this regional complex will not be taking on large debt, like other regional event centers, and this region can start seeing the rewards sooner.

Families, groups, and businesses throughout the region can directly invest in a facility that reflects Eastern Oregon quality and brings benefits to all of us. EOTEC can be the facility that communicates to the rest of the state: "We are committed to the people of our region and are willing to work together to make it happen."

So, please, join us, and the many others who've already invested in this project To learn more about Phase 1 of the EOTEC project, or how you can contribute, go to www.eotechermiston.com.

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David Drotzmann is an optometrist and has been mayor of Hermiston since January 2013.

Views from across the state: Oregon editorials

On increasing Oregon's minimum wage:

The (Yamhill Valley) News-Register

There's been much ado lately about Oregon's minimum wage.

The group 15 Now PDX is pushing a ballot measure to increase the state's minimum wage, currently the nation's second highest at $9.25, to $15 by 2019. It hopes the Legislature will enact a $15 minimum during the upcoming session, but is ready to take it to voters in November if necessary.

The proposal has also sparked several counterproposals, including a smaller cap of $13.50 to a regionally tiered system. But the aspect of all this that makes the most sense to us is allowing local jurisdictions to set their own minimum, subject to a statewide floor.

There are many solid arguments for increasing the minimum wage in metropolitan areas, where the cost of living is skyrocketing, and there has been some action in that direction. Seattle led the way with legislation that increased its minimum wage to $11 in April, and is scheduled to take it to $13 this Jan. 1 and $15 next Jan 1, when the calendar turns to 2017.

Some early evidence is confirming the fears of restaurant owners, however, whose businesses operate on very thin margins.

According to the American Enterprise Institute, restaurant employment in the Seattle metropolitan area enjoyed five years of steady growth before taking a dip this year. Statewide, the industry added 5,800 jobs this year, which works out to 6.6 percent. But in Seattle, it shed 700 jobs.

That may not tell the full story. It serves as a warning sign, though.

Large increases in the minimum wage can stunt growth in the food trade, and both Portland and the wine country to the south cherish their local foodies scenes.

Repercussions could be felt in other industries as well, if payrolls have to be boosted to accommodate a $15 floor. If the lowest salaried jobs are worth $15 an hour, then employers previously earning that rate will feel due an increase, sending ripples all the way up the line.

Could major corporations headquartered in metropolitan areas absorb the impact without resorting to layoffs? Perhaps, but what about smaller businesses plying their trade in rural areas? We'd hate to find out the hard way.

Raising the minimum wage to $15 in the next few years is a legitimate issue in Portland, but not down-state — at least not in our opinion.

Oregon's economy is on the mend, but it's been slow going. Let's start the experiment in Portland and find out how it plays there first. Any statewide rollout is premature.

On reforming Oregon's pension system:

The (Medford) Mail-Tribune

Business leaders gathered in Portland for their annual Oregon Leadership Summit last week singled out the unfunded liability facing the state's Public Employee Retirement System as a major concern because it could hinder efforts to increase investment in public education and transportation projects the summit participants identified as priorities. Business leaders said PERS reforms should be a top priority for lawmakers in 2017.

The problem is, most of what can legally be done to reform PERS has already been done. The rest either won't pass judicial scrutiny or would require major concessions from public employee unions at the bargaining table.

Oregon's public pension system actually has been in much better financial shape than funds in other parts of the country, despite stock market losses in the recession that pummeled its assets.

Then last year, the Oregon Supreme Court threw out reforms enacted by the 2013 Legislature that reduced cost-of-living increases for retirees in an attempt to save money. The court said the state cannot alter accrued pension benefits after the fact. That ruling means a $5.1 billion increase in PERS costs.

In all, the PERS system is facing an $18 billion unfunded liability. That will have to be made up over the next several bienniums by increased payments from public employers — school districts, cities and counties as well as state agencies.

The Medford School District, for example, faces $2.3 million in additional PERS payments over the next two years. For now, the district plans to dip into its contingency fund, but eventually cuts will need to be made if no new revenue is forthcoming.

The PERS system is a favorite target among critics of government, largely because of decisions made decades ago to reward public employees with generous pension benefits in place of pay increases. A booming stock market then added more money to the pension fund, and some workers ended up earning more in retirement than they did during their working years. Most of the employees in that Tier 1 group have already retired, and the benefits they earned cannot be taken away.

The excesses of that former pension structure have been eliminated for more recent hires. Essentially, PERS has been fixed going forward. But the system must continue to honor its commitment to those earlier retirees as long as they live. That means one of two things: raise more money through taxes, or cut spending.

A third option — continue to adjust the system for current employees by requiring them to contribute more toward their pensions — will face opposition from employee unions, which will demand pay increases to offset members' contributions, thus eliminating any savings.

Business leaders who say they want more investment in schools and transportation should figure out what cuts they would support in other services or what kind of tax increase they could tolerate to raise more revenue.

On Oregon's high school graduation rates:

The (Eugene) Register-Guard

The correlation between eighth-graders' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test and high-school graduation rates is tight: Good test scores lead to a high graduation rate. Oregon is the most conspicuous outlier. Its test scores are fair to middling — 29th nationally in the percentage of eight graders who are proficient or better in math, 18th in reading — but its graduation rate is lowest. This is a crisis, but one that presents an opportunity for a fast turnaround.

For years it was possible for Oregonians to whistle past the graveyard of failed high school careers, pretending that Oregon's low graduation numbers were the product of different methods of tracking degree completion. But in 2005, governors in all 50 states signed a compact agreeing to create a common methodology for measuring graduation rates. The U.S. Department of Education introduced the measurement tool three years later, and while it is still imperfect, Oregon's problem has become harder to ignore. The state's 2013 graduation rate was 68.7 percent, the lowest of any state. Oregon's rate rose to 72 percent in 2014 — a welcome improvement, but still far below the 2013 national average of 81.4 percent.

Such a showing makes a mockery of Oregon's goal of ensuring that by 2025, 100 percent of high school students will graduate, and 80 percent of graduates will be prepared to go on to two- or four-year colleges. The goal is clearly aspirational — no state has achieved a 100 percent rate, and Oregon is not likely to get there in 10 years. The state can, however, aim for a marked improvement in an even shorter period.

Gov. Kate Brown recognizes this opportunity, and at the Oregon Leadership Summit last week announced the creation of a new position in the state Department of Education dedicated to high-school completion. Her announcement came in response to a report by the Chalkboard Project, a foundation-funded group dedicated to improving Oregon's education system. The report surveyed states and school districts in Oregon that have made progress in recent years, and offered recommendations for replicating those successes. One recommendation called for the appointment of a high-level state high school completion team, and Brown has now moved in that direction.

The Chalkboard Project found that states with high graduation rates have done three things: They made high-school completion a priority, they focused on identifying and assisting students who are at risk of failing to graduate, and they collected reliable data to measure success. None of that sounds difficult or expensive. But the reward is enormous: Each percentage point improvement in Oregon's graduation rate would represent 450 students a year, each of whom would earn a degree that is a ticket to better-paid and more secure employment, less reliance on social services and a better quality of life.

The Chalkboard Project recommends an ambitious but achievable target of boosting Oregon's graduation rate to 85 percent within five years. Hitting that target would mean that five out of six of today's eighth-graders would finish high school, compared to fewer than three out of four at the current graduation rate. Progress toward the goal should be tracked continuously.

An essential element of a strategy to improve the graduation rate will be a fast, early and effective response to any student who shows signs of struggling in school. Warning signs include absenteeism, behavior problems, a lack of academic progress and falling short in the accumulation of credits.

Others include a lack of involvement in extracurricular activities and the absence of an adult — a parent or school mentor — who takes an interest in the student's progress.

Oregon schools' capacity to respond to these warning signs has been weakened in important respects. A short school year encourages absenteeism and limits opportunities for intervention. Counseling staffs have been cut. Programs ranging from art and music to career and technical education have been scaled back, depriving some students of the subjects that keep them engaged in education.