

Quick takes

Dark days in Eastern Oregon

I hope you can recover. One of the sad things about the takeover of the refuge is the damage it surely has done to the very positive cooperative projects on the refuge. Can refuge staff feel safe with outsiders who will remain (or come in) to meddle and agitate and stalk? Can they trust local ranchers who were benefiting from these projects but who didn't (or felt they couldn't) speak out against the threats?

— Emily Sieger

Rural communities are being governed by folks who have no idea what impact their decisions make. I believe that many of the decisions are well meaning but, because of lack of understanding, are contributing to the death of the way of life of many rural communities and families.

— Jennifer Smith Wine

If you want to protest, put down the rifles. It's maddening that rural Oregon doesn't understand this. I do not support your right to protest by threatening people around you with military style weapons. Period.

— dead_red

I think we also need to remember that, while people may have their "lists" of things they would change in this country, there is also a vast, open, and mutually agreed upon way of being that we can all be at peace with that is reflective of our common values. Everything else is meaningful, but should not be put against loving one's neighbor, or fellow citizen.

— Ed Jordens

The feds needed to act. John Day was just the first outside excursion, with Malheur County next on the traveling circus. As has been stated here, civil disobedience backed by gun is not how things should be changed.

— zdonb

Education also needs to be key. We need more education on how our government works and how people can be involved in the appropriate ways.

— Jean

As a lifetime rural Oregonian from near the coast, I'd like to thank the people of Eastern Oregon for all the wonderful trips I've enjoyed on "the dry side of the mountains," in particular the open and friendly community of Burns, where I've spent a considerable amount of time. I look forward to more great trips in the future.

We're all Oregonians, and we're all in this together. Best of luck to all of you. Come and visit us on the wet side.

— Bill Uhlig

I'm a Willamette Valley Oregonian, but I've spent a lot of time in central, eastern, and southeastern Oregon. I treasure those places and love and admire the people I've met there. The Malheur Wildlife Refuge and the Steens are sacred places to me.

The occupation by the militants and its results are heartbreaking. Don't let it destroy the good work that has been done there to understand and acknowledge a variety of interests and to work together for the common good. Please spread the word that hundreds of people all over Oregon are trying to figure out how we can support the residents of Harney County when this is done. I think really listening would be a good start

— Susan Christie

I think it's important to note almost none of these yahoos, in particular, none of the hardcore dead-enders or the leaders, were from Oregon. I think rural Oregonians have enough sense to have problems with the federal government, but address them appropriately. It just tears me up they're the ones that have to deal with the aftermath of this.

— ragekage117

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.

New year, new look at Pendleton city budget

Well it's a New Year and time to get busy with more information for you on our city budget.

I hope you kept some of the previous articles so you can add up the shortfall of what the city really needs to adequately sustain itself. I will deal with four buildings in this article.

The Arts Center building is owned by the city. It was remodeled in the late 1990s with approximately \$1.8 million. The funds were raised from local private corporations, foundations, community and state funds. The lease provides for maintenance to be provided by the Arts Center. The city maintenance department provides minor HVAC service. The cost to the city is negligible.

The Vert is our community performing arts center. The income for the Vert this year is estimated to be approximately \$11,000. The cost for utilities and maintenance are approximately \$72,000 per year. There is no replacement fund for the Vert. This means that when the roof needs to be replaced our maintenance fund takes a huge hit. This last year the roof was replaced at a cost of over \$120,655. The heating and cooling system, stage structural work to improve safety, ADA lift, front door replacement, fire system upgrade, elevator update and office work that needs to be done is estimated to cost \$1.2 million.

This means we subsidize the Vert in the amount of approximately \$61,000 per year for operation from the general budget just to keep the doors open. If we are to keep the structure safe, heated and cooled we need to come up with \$1.2 million. The improvements will probably have a lifespan of 20-25 years. Capitalize that over 25 years and you are looking at approximately \$50,000 per year additional expense.

The real cost for the Vert on a yearly

basis is more like \$122,000 to operate and maintain with an investment of \$1.2 million to make the necessary improvements.

With the income we have now, with no expectation that we can raise it significantly, will mean the Vert will cost the city budget a minimum of \$61,000 per year with the expectation that this number will increase to \$122,000 per year after upgrading with the need for income to rise. Ultimately you will have to make the decision.

The library is another building the city owns and the library commission operates. The utilities, maintenance and custodial costs for this building are provided by the city. I cannot give you an accurate account of these expenses because they are lumped together with City Hall. However, I can tell you that all these costs are subsidized by the general budget. Again, there is no replacement fund for this building and the roof was replaced last year at the cost of \$124,400. Again, this was a huge hit to the budget.

City Hall had heating, cooling and telephone upgrades last year that cost \$233,000, which was another unplanned hit to the budget because of no replacement funds listed in the budget. City Hall had a cost of \$82,000 for utilities and \$14,000 for janitorial costs split with the library. City Hall is a center of service to the community and it is hard to determine, at least at this time, the accumulation of the income derived by all the services that it provides.

The McCune gym building has an income of approximately \$11,000 per year. Utility fees are approximately \$23,400 per year, custodial fees are \$12,000 per year

and maintenance is \$11,500 per year. Total expenses are \$46,900. The city budget subsidy for the gym is \$35,900 per year. The roof was replaced last year for the cost of \$61,400. Again, there were no reserve funds in the budget for replacement.

A familiar theme throughout this article is that we have no line item in the budget for replacement. Every time we have something large to replace we take money from our maintenance budget to give it to capital improvements. We save in the short run and lose in the long term.

We must find the true cost of adequately maintaining our facilities. Then we must have a line item in the budget for replacement. This will help us to do proper maintenance and save costs in the future.

I am happy to report that our new financial software package for the city is installed and operational now and will help to ascertain our true financial picture for the city. Our council looks forward to having more information for the upcoming budget to make better-informed decisions for the future.

With the new software package we will be able to separate out all the departments, buildings, etc., in much more detail and help to arrive at our true costs for each entity. This will help us truly understand the financial health of our city.

I will write about more buildings in the next article. As you can see, almost every building so far is costing us more than what is revealed in our budget at this time. Perhaps you can see why the city has a deeper problem than just moving money around in the budget. The streets are not our only challenge.

Al Plute is a Pendleton city councilor.



AL PLUTE
Comment

We must find the true cost of adequately maintaining our facilities.

Imperfect solutions can make elections more fair

I'm grateful to the *East Oregonian* for spotlighting the vexing and profound problem of big money in our political system ("Our view: Long shadow of Citizens United hangs over elections," Jan. 26). In my opinion, the editorial correctly highlights just how serious of a problem it is for our democracy when a small number of large donors are able to exert more influence over our political process than the vast majority of the public.

I also appreciate the editorial's attention to solutions. I'd like to expand a bit on one particular approach: Selectively using public dollars to boost the power of small donors to help level the playing field.

As a starting premise, my belief is that the problem is not money in politics per se, but rather big money in politics. Private political giving can be an important feature of democratic elections. Donating funds is an important form of individual expression and a way for private citizens to engage with the political process. Moreover, in a more balanced system, fundraising can be a critical measure of the strength of both a candidate's ideas and the effectiveness of her campaign organization — which give voters valuable clues to her potential effectiveness at governing.

As the editorial board correctly notes, this also means that there are legitimate First Amendment concerns with the idea of limiting how much money a donor can give. But, as the *East Oregonian* also notes, our society carefully regulates speech when there is a compelling public interest to do so. Unfortunately, the courts have taken an overly narrow view of what that public interest is in this instance, giving us problematic rulings like *Citizens United*.

As a result, the courts have made it very hard to enact the simplest, most intuitive solution — limit the amount of money that can be given and spent on elections down

to levels that ordinary people can afford. That's not for lack of public support; Oregonians have twice voted to limit campaign contributions to low levels, only to see them stymied by the courts.

There are efforts underway in Oregon to thread the needle on this matter by seeking higher contribution limits

that the courts might uphold. If successful, it may make somewhat of a difference in the short run, but not likely in a fundamental way because those limits will still allow wealthy donors to outgive small donors by several orders of magnitude.

The courts may eventually correct themselves, paving the way for across-the-board limits on both contributions and spending, but it might take a while. In the meantime, should we wait for that to happen, or should we consider other options? I'm in the latter camp, and encouraged by what I see in New York City, where a small donor financing program has been in place for some time now.

The nation's biggest city, with more people than our entire state and a political system swirling with wealthy developers and Wall Street interests, had 61 percent of all the money raised in the 2013 citywide election come from small donors giving \$175 or less. There, small contributions up to \$175 from city residents are matched with public funds at a six to one ratio, at a total cost that is .06 percent of the city's general fund.

Because small donations are given a boost that allows them to compete with deep-pocketed donors, we're seeing more people getting involved in New York City

elections and more candidates of ordinary means running for office and winning.

Of course, one city's success doesn't necessarily translate to Oregon. And the *East Oregonian* raised a hard question: On principle, is it a good idea to use public

dollars to subsidize political donations, even if the donations are small? In an ideal world, I'd much rather just strictly limit contributions and spending and let the marketplace of ideas, small money and passion play out.

But we can't do that now, and maybe not ever. In this void, wealthy interests have a much bigger say than

you and I, often securing special tax deals and wasteful government spending that cost far more than a well-designed small donor financing program might. In a less than ideal situation, would we rather have our elections driven by special interest money or public money?

So please consider a small donor financing program for Oregon elections with an open mind. There are many questions that must get worked out, especially the cost and administration of the program. But New York City, with over twice Oregon's population, provides a scaled-up, relatively low-cost, tested model for us to examine and adapt for Oregon. There may still be downsides to such a program, both in principle and practice. But in our imperfect world, the upsides of such a program for our fragile democracy might outweigh the downsides.

David Rosenfeld is the executive director of the OSPIRG Foundation, a statewide public interest organization. He lives in Portland.



DAVID ROSENFELD
Comment

In a balanced system, fundraising can be a critical measure of the strength of a candidate's ideas.

Rural Eastern Oregon must unshackle from 'poverty promoters'

The West and the industries that created our communities have been under assault for more than 30 years. The federal land that historically made them prosperous has been managed under the influence of environmental and conservation "poverty promoters" for enough years to make no mistake in the results of their agenda: poverty.

Poor land health, reduced grazing, runaway numbers of feral horses and their associated land damage, invasive plant species, very little logging on federal lands, with all resulting in unhealthy rangelands and forests leading to massive fires every year. Not a very good report card, is it? In most western states, there is little investment being made in mineral exploration along with the lost opportunities for mining and the jobs and tax income that any productive uses produce. Result: poverty.

The human cleansing of the



ANDY BENTZ
Comment

Rural America wants to be sustainable and produce value.

rural west has been in motion for years with no jobs and no hope for a productive future. Children must leave to make a living and cannot return home and raise a family. The rural counties and cities struggle to maintain a basic level of services that make their communities livable. No way to invite new investment or job

opportunities, but for the low paying service sector. Their schools struggle and downsize with decaying facilities. Those that remain by choice or lack of options

sink further into poverty hoping the government will backfill their shrinking tax base at the expense of their state's more populated counties. Result: poverty.

Public lands are supposed to be managed for multiple uses; that includes everyone, economic sustainability, local and federal tax production, tribal needs and wellbeing, recreation, wildlife and healthy lands. Environmental

groups want all uses off the land except for limited recreation because they say "it is only fair that each state has a certain percent of land mass in a special designation."

Wow, that is some logic. Even stranger is the activities they claim to want the special designations for can be done today, yesterday and forever just as the land is now.

The existing road systems allow the land to be accessible to everyone in the United States, young and old, disabled or healthy, rich or poor, urban or rural — not just for their interest group members. These groups will always point to their funded economic reports and claim their studies show local towns being better off if the land surrounding it would have a wilderness or monument designation. Their studies are naive number manipulation at best and at worst economic malpractice.

Special interest groups masquerading as environmental "fundraising organizations" have sued their way into control of the public's lands. This cottage industry was made possible by their ability to recover legal costs with your tax dollars using the Equal Access to Justice Act.

Another way to look at this is you get to pay them for suing you. Nice system for their budgets. Result: poverty.

They want no value coming from the land that is not directly related to their hobbies and like hiking, backpacking and the associated purchasing of wanted clothing and gear they manufacture. Most often in foreign factories that care next to nothing about their employees or paying taxes in the USA. Result: poverty.

Environmental interest groups see federal managed lands as their private playground. Monuments and wilderness areas are a thinly veiled land grab for only those with money. This does not meet the multiple use mandate that the land is supposed to be managed for all uses and people.

They have paralyzed land management agencies with their litigation to the point that there is no flexibility allowed in management plans to promote land health, prevent wildfires or help communities be self-sustaining. Adopted rules and policies to combat the litigation have made planning and permitting take too long and cost too much money

to be economical. We see the frustration played out in rural communities with harsh words and misguided anger at the "federal government" when that energy should be focused toward the groups that cause the conditions they are frustrated with.

It is time that the counties and cities of the rural West are allowed to pay for their own needed services and become net exporters of taxes again. Rural America wants to be sustainable and produce real value for all citizens.

They can and are willing to do the hard work of helping feed our nation, produce the wood fiber to house our nation, locate and mine the needed mineral, gas, oil and geothermal resources so we can be safer from foreign nations that do not have our interests at heart. We can do this while protecting and improving the land and beautiful spaces we are all blessed to be stewards of.

Let's start building America again and not be driven under by "poverty promoters."

Andy Bentz is the managing member of a consulting group in Ontario. He retired as the sheriff of Malheur County in 2011.