

# EAST OREGONIAN

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## OUR VIEW

# Plute leaves Pendleton better than he found it

No one has had a bigger impact on Pendleton in the last decade than Al Plute.

The city councilor and downtown developer has renovated three of the largest buildings in the region, has been an outsized member of the planning department and city council and, along with his wife Gail, supported numerous local nonprofits and charities.

And he did it all while being a full-time resident of the city for just seven years.

During that time, Plute has also rubbed plenty of folks the wrong

way with his gruff demeanor and blunt talk. But that personality also allowed him to openly address Pendleton's clear problems — making him an outlier on a council that for too long has been content to kick those problems down the road or sweep them under a rug.

Plute, and the rest of the council, was wrong to hurriedly and haphazardly move forward with the

gas tax. And their response when it predictably failed is pretty rich. But Plute was the councilor who put the most work into the effort, while most of the others sat back and allowed him to be fed to the village wolves. Plute deserves credit for at least sticking his neck out there for a good idea before its time.

Plute also deserves credit for trying to institute the long-term budgetary planning that the city must consider if it is to get its rapidly inflating infrastructure costs under control.

But his quick desertion of the city shows some of his faults, and some of Pendleton's, too. Plute was too impudent for his own good at times, but Pendleton was too rigid and parochial to tolerate some ruffled feathers and new ideas.

Both are worse off with Plute's departure. Out-of-town landlords are the number one problem in downtown Pendleton, and there will soon be another one added to the list.

**Al Plute was a full-time resident of the city for just seven years. He leaves an outsized legacy.**

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

# Improving college affordability

The (Eugene) Register-Guard

Oregon's decision to change the way it awards the Oregon Opportunity Grant to college students — shifting from a first-come, first-served basis to one that favors students with the greatest need — was the right one, in line with the intent of the grants.

The program, originally called the Oregon Need Grant, was set up by the state Legislature in 1971 to help needy students attend community colleges and public and private four-year colleges within Oregon.

It is Oregon's largest state-funded, need-based grant program for college students. In the 2014-15 academic year, it awarded a total of \$57.3 million to more than 36,000 students.

But, under the first-come method of awarding grants, there was no guarantee that the money would indeed go to the neediest students. In fact, the neediest students were less likely to get help because they tended to apply later, after the money had run out, higher education officials found.

Eligibility for the Opportunity Grant is based on financial need, as determined by family income and household size. Students from families with up to \$70,000 in adjusted gross income per year — meaning income after specific deductions have been taken — are eligible to apply.

Until now, the deck was stacked in favor of students from families with the financial savvy and ability to apply early, before the money ran out.

One of the hurdles facing students applying for the Opportunity Grant, for example, is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form, or FAFSA. That form requires, among other things, the most recent tax information from the student's family. But employers have until Jan. 31 to provide W-2 forms to employees for the previous year. If students were to have a shot at getting any of the grant money under the first-come system, they needed to apply by early February.

Families with financial know-how — or who employed an accountant — could estimate with some degree of accuracy the numbers needed for the FAFSA, even if they didn't have a W-2 form, and file an amended form later — allowing them to file early and jump to the head of the grant line.

Oregon is among the 10 states with the largest expenditures on need-based grants (and no merit requirements) for college students, according to a study done in 2014 for the Washington State Legislature.

But Oregon received an F on its report card for college affordability a few years ago from the nonprofit National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, because there wasn't enough help for needy students.

"Financial aid to low-income students is low," the center wrote. "For every dollar in (federal) Pell Grant aid to students, the state spends only 24 cents. Poor and working-class families must devote 44 percent of their income, even after aid, to pay for costs at two-year colleges."

Oregon's definition of needy when it comes to financial aid is a fairly generous one. The unadjusted median household income for the state was \$51,075 in 2014, according to the most recent Census figures. Families with incomes up to almost 140 percent of the state's median income are eligible to apply for Oregon's need-based grant program.

Washington state's comparable program, the State Need Grant, for example, is weighted toward students from the poorest families. Students from families where incomes are less

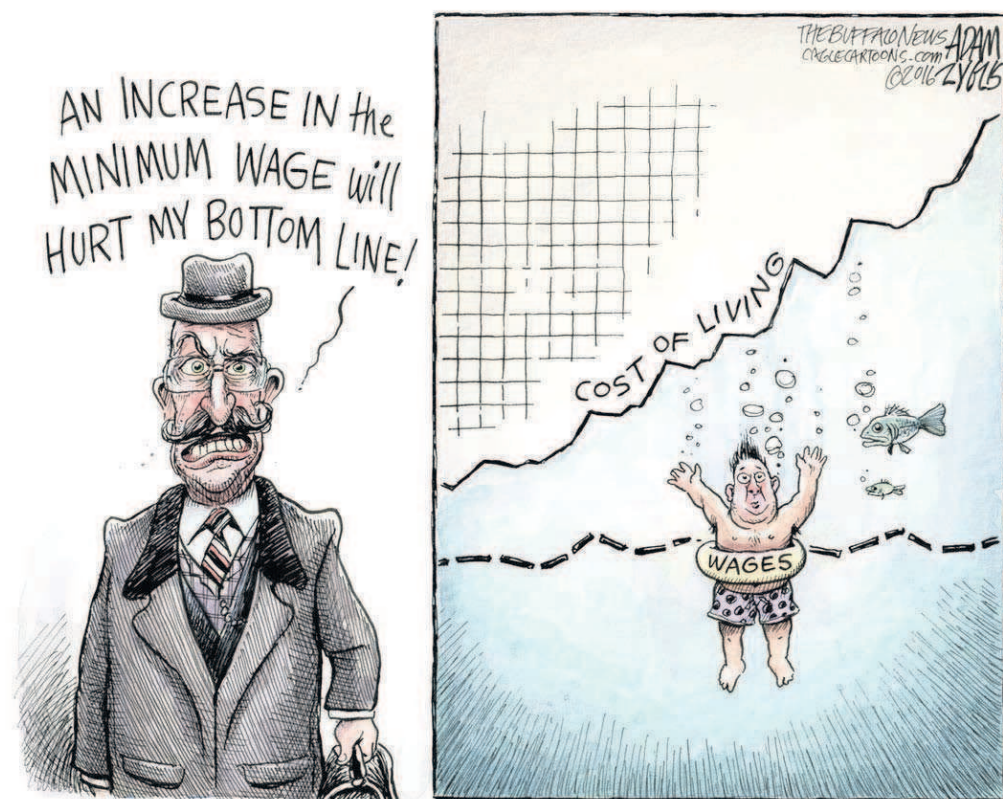
than half of the median adjusted gross income for the state are eligible for the full grants offered by the program. Those with family incomes that are 50 to 70 percent of the state's median family income are eligible for partial grants.

An analysis of the impact of the State Need Grant, done in 2014 at the request of the Washington Legislature, confirmed that the model gave the state the most bang for the buck, in terms of both enrollment and graduation rates for students who might not otherwise earn college degrees.

The Oregon Legislature's decision to change the method used to award the Opportunity Grant may be a difficult one to swallow for middle class families feeling squeezed between the wealthy, who don't need financial help, and low-income families, who are now first in line for grants.

But the Legislature also increased funding for the Opportunity Grant in the 2015-17 biennium by almost 24 percent, dedicating \$140.9 million to the program. It estimates that it will allow another 16,000 people to receive grants as a result, which may soften the blow for some families relegated to a lower position on the priority list. And the University of Oregon has said that it wants to make sure that students currently receiving the grants aren't left without aid as a result of the change — a key issue.

In the end, the Legislature made the right move, ensuring that the grants will go to the neediest students, as was intended when the program was created.



## OTHER VIEWS

# How covenants make us

When you think about it, there are four big forces coursing through modern societies. Global migration is leading to demographic diversity. Economic globalization is creating wider opportunity but also inequality. The Internet is giving people more choices over what to buy and pay attention to. A culture of autonomy valorizes individual choice and self-determination.

All of these forces have liberated the individual, or at least well-educated individuals, but they have been bad for national cohesion and the social fabric. Income inequality challenges economic cohesion as the classes divide. Demographic diversity challenges cultural cohesion as different ethnic groups rub against one another. The emphasis on individual choice challenges community cohesion and settled social bonds.

The weakening of the social fabric has created a range of problems. Alienated young men join ISIS so they can have a sense of belonging. Isolated teenagers shoot up schools. Many people grow up in fragmented, disorganized neighborhoods. Political polarization grows because people often don't interact with those on the other side. Racial animosity stubbornly persists.

Odder still, people are often plagued by a sense of powerlessness, a loss of efficacy. The liberation of the individual was supposed to lead to mass empowerment. But it turns out that people can effectively pursue their goals only when they know who they are — when they have firm identities.

Strong identities can come only when people are embedded in a rich social fabric. They can come only when we have defined social roles — father, plumber, Little League coach. They can come only when we are seen and admired by our neighbors and loved ones in a certain way. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds."

You take away a rich social fabric and what you are left with is people who are uncertain about who they really are. It's hard to live daringly when your very foundation is fluid and at risk.

We're not going to roll back the four big forces coursing through modern societies, so the question is how to reweave the social fabric in the face of them. In a globalizing, diversifying world, how do we preserve individual freedom while strengthening social solidarity?

In her new book "Commonwealth and Covenant," Marcia Pally of NYU and Fordham offers a clarifying concept. What

we want, she suggests, is "separability amid situatedness." We want to go off and create and explore and experiment with new ways of thinking and living. But we also want to be situated — embedded in loving families and enveloping communities, thriving within a healthy cultural infrastructure that provides us with values and goals.

Creating situatedness requires a different way of thinking. When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. When we are situated within something it is because we have made a covenant. A contract protects interests, Pally notes, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are part of one another. It

involves a vow to serve the relationship that is sealed by love: Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people.

People in a contract provide one another services, but people in a covenant delight in offering gifts. Out of love of country, soldiers offer the gift of their service. Out of love of their craft, teachers offer students the gift of their attention.

The social fabric is thus rewoven in a romantic frame of mind. During another period of national fragmentation, Abraham Lincoln aroused a refreshed love of country. He played upon the mystic chords of memory and used the Declaration of Independence as a unifying scripture and guide.

These days the social fabric will be repaired by hundreds of millions of people making local covenants — widening their circles of attachment across income, social and racial divides. But it will probably also require leaders drawing upon U.S. history to revive patriotism. They'll tell a story that includes the old themes. That we're a universal nation, the guarantor of stability and world order. But it will transcend the old narrative and offer an updated love of America.

In an interview with Bill Maher last month, Sen. Cory Booker nicely defined patriotism by contrasting it with mere tolerance. Tolerance, he said, means, "I'm going to stomach your right to be different, but if you disappear off the face of the earth I'm no worse off." Patriotism, on the other hand, means "love of country, which necessitates love of each other, that we have to be a nation that aspires for love, which recognizes that you have worth and dignity and I need you. You are part of my whole, part of the promise of this country."

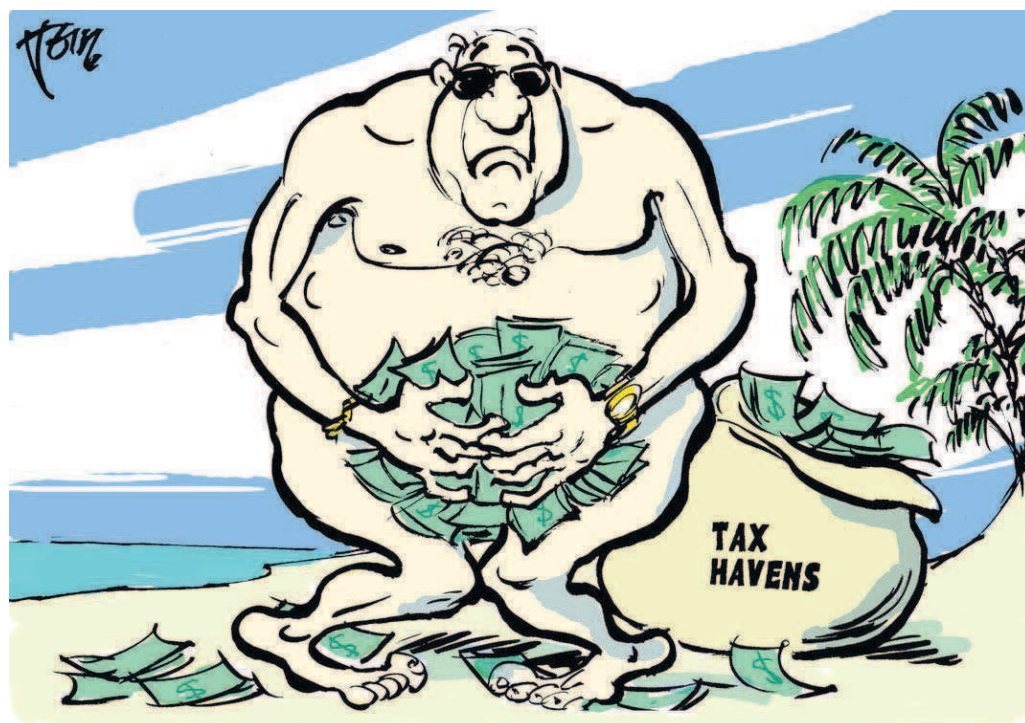
That emotion is what it means to be situated in a shared national life.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.

**Strong identities can come only when people are embedded in a rich social fabric.**



DAVID BROOKS  
Comment



## 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.