



EAST OREGONIAN

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WINNER OF THE 2015 ONPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

One dollar

Panel blames Kitzhaber for Cover Oregon failure

Democrats point finger at Oracle

SALEM (AP) — Republicans on a U.S. House committee have found former Gov. John Kitzhaber and a federal agency mishandled the creation of Oregon's health insurance enrollment website, with the

Democratic governor's political advisers making decisions based on his re-election campaign.

In a staff report released Wednesday, the Republicans on the committee said they are asking the Justice Department

and state attorney general to conduct criminal investigations into the actions involving Cover Oregon.

"More than \$305 million in federal taxpayer dollars were sent to Oregon state for purposes of implementing a state exchange to benefit the people," the committee said in a letter to

U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch. "The state exchange never came to fruition, and the money is gone."

The Republican-controlled Committee on Oversight and Government Reform said its investigation showed state offi-

See KITZHABER/8A

As spending on lobbying increases, transparency remains murky

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Businesses, special interest groups and governments have increasingly invested in lobbying Oregon lawmakers and other state officials over the last nine years. And based on spending data from the state, those groups appear to have concluded lobbying is a good investment: reported annual spending on lobbying increased 15 percent from 2007 to 2015, when adjusted for inflation.

Yet despite the millions of dollars involved, it's nearly impossible for Oregonians to get details on how lobbyists spend that money to achieve payoffs for their clients, because Oregon law allows lobbyists and their clients to disclose little information about how they influence state laws and spending.

The EO Media Group/Pamplin Media Group Capital Bureau categorized lobbying spending in Oregon by industry and sector using data from the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks spending on lobbying by industry at the federal level. In total, groups spent more than \$251 million on lobbying over the last nine years, according to state data.

The health care sector — whose ranks include nurses, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and doctors — reported spending the most on lobbying from 2007 through 2015, a total of \$36.5 million. Next was the business sector, which spent \$30.8 million, followed by finance, insurance and real estate interests that reported spending a total of \$27.3 million on lobbying during the same period.

Unlike several other states including Idaho, Oregon does not require lobbyists to disclose the specific bills or executive branch actions they seek to influence. Oregon lobbyists are only required to disclose food, drinks and entertainment purchased for a specific lawmaker or other state official if the cost exceeds \$50 on a single occasion, and lobbyists do not have to report individual expenses reimbursed by their clients.

Until this year, the only way to know how much lobbyists and their clients were spending to entertain Oregon state officials was to request a copy of the paper reports filed with the Oregon Government Ethics Commission.

The agency launched a new electronic filing system for lobbyists late last year, but that system is not displaying certain spending details due to technical glitches. Even if the system were working correctly, however, it would likely provide only a small sample of lobbyists' activities. Of the \$35.9 million in reported spending last year, only \$93,189 was explained in detailed reports.

These minimal reporting requirements contributed to Oregon receiving one of the lowest rankings in the nation for transparency in lobbying activity.

See LOBBYING/2A

Simmons Insurance renovating historic Hermiston building



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Joshua Simmons, left, and Alden Jemmett, with Jerry Simmons Construction, remove wooden paneling from the walls of the RoeMark's building on Wednesday in Hermiston.

Old RoeMark's in new hands

Hopes to attract dining establishment

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

After sitting empty for nearly four years, the former RoeMark's Men's and Western Wear building in downtown Hermiston has a new owner.

Simmons Insurance Group

purchased the building Tuesday and has already started renovations. The company plans to maintain offices on the eastern half of the building while leasing out three different retail spaces on the side facing Second Street.

Since RoeMark's closed in 2012, the historic brick building

down the street from city hall has become a symbol of Main Street's struggles. Revitalizing downtown was one of the top priorities that Hermiston residents named in a recent survey about livability, and it is rare to hear a conversation about revitalization that doesn't invoke the RoeMark's building.

It's something that Simmons Insurance managing partners and

brothers-in-law Justin Simmons and Jacob Neighbors are aware of.

"We care about this community," Simmons said. "We were both raised here and RoeMark's was part of where we went and shopped."

The large space was a good fit for the growing company's needs, but Neighbors said that the partners also recognized the opportunity to help revitalize downtown. Once renovations are finished they hope to welcome a winery, restaurant, bistro or other promising business to the

See ROEMARKS/8A

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— Justin Simmons, Simmons Insurance managing partner

BOARDMAN

More than just industry

Port of Morrow donates land for community projects

By GEORGE PLAVERN
East Oregonian

The Port of Morrow is already Eastern Oregon's industrial engine. It is home to power plants, food processors and an increasing number of data centers along the Columbia River.

But Gary Neal, the port's general manager, says they are focused on more than just big business. Their mission is to improve the quality of life in Boardman and Morrow County, which is why they recently donated land for both the new Boardman Recreation Center and Blue Mountain Community College Workforce Training Center.

BMCC broke ground on its facility — one of three projects approved by last year's \$23 million bond measure — on Wednesday, while construction on the recreation center began on May 12. The buildings will be located next to each other as part of their own campus on Olson Road, just north of the SAGE Center. The port even moved Les Schwab's tire storage and maintenance shop to the neighboring East Beach Industrial Park to make room for the school and gym.

"We do a lot of things like this for the benefit of our regional partners," Neal said. "If we can help raise support for all their services, it benefits

See LAND/8A



Staff photo by George Plavern

Officials broke ground on BMCC's new Workforce Training Center Wednesday in Boardman. From left: Tony Turner, BMCC Board; Rob Dreier, bond project manager; Ed Taber, BMCC Board; Tyson Furstenberg, McCormack Construction; Chris Brown, BMCC Board; Louis Carlson, bond campaign volunteer; Susan Plass, BMCC Board; Kim Puzey, BMCC Board; Cam Preus, BMCC president; Jerry Healy, Port of Morrow commissioner; and Gary Neal, Port of Morrow executive director.

