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OUR VIEW

Measure 97
bails out PERSGov. Brown sides with unions
over taxpayers and real reform

The bill to provide outsized pensions to government workers in Oregon is coming due.

A new report on the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) says that contributions to the fund will need to increase \$885 million in the 2017-19 biennium. Such massive increases are projected for subsequent years as well.

The increases are the result of providing public employees with pension benefits far beyond Oregon's ability to pay.

The campaign to raise taxes to continue this largess has begun. Gov. Kate Brown last week endorsed Measure 97, a \$3 billion-a-year general sales tax increase disguised as a toll on large corporations.

The governor said the tax is necessary to provide stable support for schools and other government services. If our governor were as transparent as she claims to be, she would admit the obvious: Measure 97 raises taxes to underwrite PERS.

Gov. Brown's smokescreen became apparent in April. She avoided mention of the PERS crisis in her State of the State address then later told a reporter: "There isn't a path forward" to reform the retirement system.

The reality is quite different. Oregon's Supreme Court predictably struck down in 2015 bipartisan legislation that reduced benefits already earned by state employees. However, the justices made clear that future benefits could be changed.

Among the available options:

- Reduce the assumed rate of return on PERS investments. Currently, participants are guaranteed a 7.5 percent return. Returns should match market rates.
- Require participants to contribute to PERS. That's the case in most private-sector retirement plans. While public employees are required to contribute to a second benefits plan, that benefit is often paid by taxpayers via the employer.

- Change the retirement age.

The federal government adjusted the retirement age to protect Social Security. Oregon should do the same. The average state worker retires after 22 years of service and earns a PERS benefit equivalent to 56 percent of their final average salary. Those who retire after 30 years received 81 percent of their final average salary. Astonishingly, 7 percent of PERS retirees earn more in retirement benefits than they did while working.

- Cap earning levels. Mike Bellotti receives \$513,612 annually in retirement benefits as the former athletic director and football coach of the University of Oregon. There's no logical reason state taxpayers should foot the bill for such gold-plated state workers in the future.

These reforms would reduce the cost of PERS and ensure its long-term sustainability. They would also allow our schools and local governments to spend more to address real needs without raising taxes.

Instead, Gov. Brown is doing the bidding of Oregon's public employee unions, who are heavily financing Measure 97. These same unions are pouring money into Brown's election campaign and to those of legislative leaders.

They, not school children, are the true beneficiaries of Measure 97.

At a glance

The average PERS beneficiary receives \$27,881 each year. Social Security benefits add more.

Public employees in Oregon earn richer retirement benefits and contribute far less than those in Washington and Idaho.

The average full-career state government employee in Oregon has a retirement benefit exceeding the earnings of 90 percent of full-time employees in the state.

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.

Culture Corner

Alexie tries writing
for a younger crowd

Noted Northwest writer Sherman Alexie has long been a local favorite. Born in Eastern Washington and based in Seattle, his works — whether novels or short stories or poetry — have strong ties to the Pacific Northwest.

A Spokane/Couer d'Alene Indian, Alexie wrote the screenplay for the 1998 movie "Smoke Signals" and is the author of the widely-read young adult novel "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," which won the National Book Award.

In interviews, Alexie has noted "Snowy Day" as the first book that really spoke to him as a child.

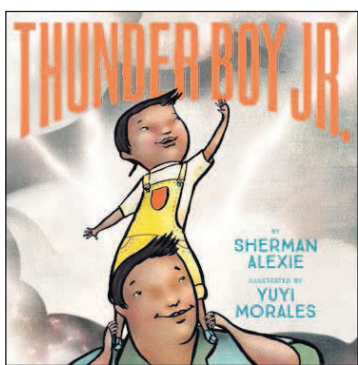
"On the cover was a dark boy in a red coat out in the snow," Alexie told ALAN Review in 2008. "I instantly figured he was Indian, he wasn't, but I thought he

was. I connected to that main character almost instantly in a lot of ways."

Alexie wanted to provide that connection and spark to a new generation of readers. And he didn't want to wait until they were teens. So he wrote "Thunder Boy Jr.," which was released earlier this summer and is geared to beginning readers. It's a picture book mostly, containing just a few dozen words.

I gifted it to my new niece Cora. And while not yet at reading age, she was enthralled by the large colorful pages and the work of illustrator Yuyi Morales. Soon enough it may speak to her, and a life-long love of reading is something worth supporting. As are central characters of all different colors and creeds.

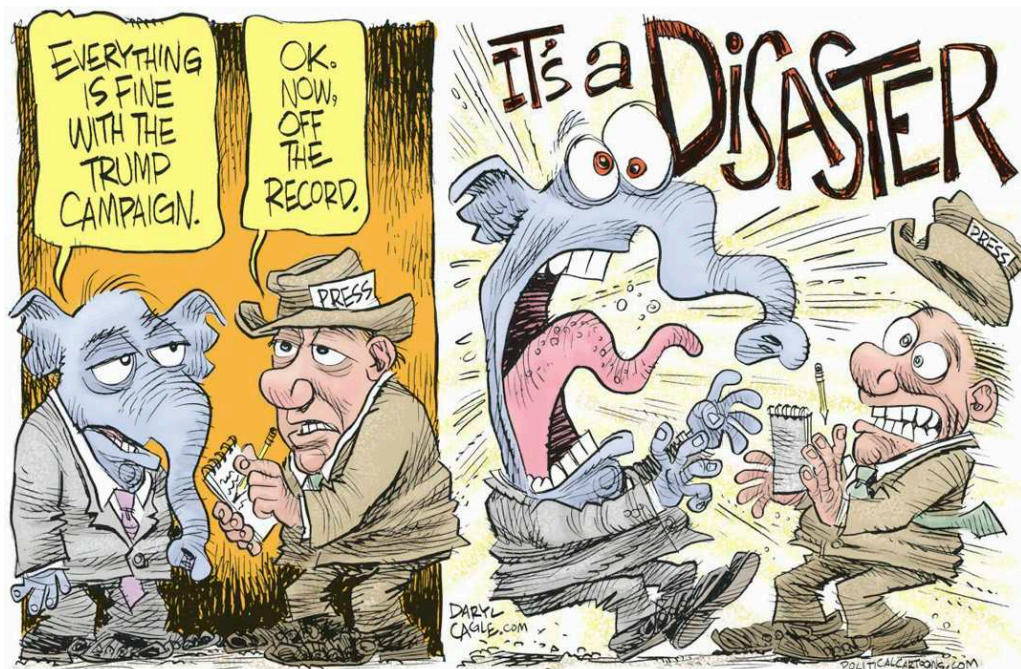
— Tim Trainor is opinion page editor of the East Oregonian.



LETTERS POLICY

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OTHER VIEWS



Hillary's summer of love

It's looking more and more like Donald Trump is the best thing that ever happened to Hillary Clinton.

He's definitely the strangest.

With his fits of pique, spasms of ignorance and flashes of demagoguery, he has turned the GOP's favorite boogeywoman into its summer crush. I haven't seen a love story this unlikely since "Harold and Maude."

Dozens of prominent Republicans have come out and said that they'll vote for her or consider it, including, just last week, the Silicon Valley titan Meg Whitman, the Jeb Bush confidante Sally Bradshaw, and Maria Comella, a former spokeswoman for two of Trump's most pugnacious promoters, Chris Christie and Rudy Giuliani.

You can expect that list to grow. The Clinton campaign clearly does. As Bloomberg Politics and *The Washington Post* reported last week, Clinton's aides have gone so far as to set up something of a special operation — a defection watch — to monitor news accounts and any other public hints that a Republican leader is thinking of renouncing Trump, so that someone on Team Clinton can reach out and ask him or her to take the next step. *The Times'* Jonathan Martin revealed that Clinton herself called Whitman a month ago.

I envision a box of cigars en route to Colin Powell, long-stemmed roses for Condoleezza Rice, a brand-new smartphone for Sen. Lindsey Graham. Hallmark should consider a line of come-to-Clinton cards, with a donkey and an elephant gazing into each other's eyes against the setting sun of Trump's orange head.

The breadth of GOP affection for Clinton shouldn't be overstated. The grudging nature of it can't be overlooked. If Trump stormed off and a more appetizing Republican was put on the menu, these Clinton converts would most likely revert to their usual diet. And there's a real limit to the number of Republicans who will publicly embrace her.

But many, many more Republicans are privately rooting for her. By making clear that they won't vote for Trump, they intend to throw the election her way. After decades of demonizing her and all those Benghazi hearings, a noteworthy contingent of Republicans are giving her a degree of active and passive help that less polarizing Democratic presidential nominees never received. She's gone from Republican voodoo doll to Post-Partisan Barbie.

To appreciate the surprise of this, flash back on four words: "vast right-wing conspiracy." That's what Clinton labeled the political enemies who exposed her husband's sexual involvement with Monica Lewinsky and who pressed, successfully, for his impeachment. The phrase was larger than that ugly chapter. It traced the magnitude of suspicion and animosity that the Clintons felt toward many Republicans, and vice versa.

And remember that toward the end of her husband's administration, she provoked the fury of pro-Israel Republicans with a public kiss of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's wife, Suha. Now many of those same Republicans are the ones most disposed toward her and opposed to Trump, whose geopolitical naiveté and isolationist talk worry them more than anything in her past.

Clinton isn't unschooled in appeasing the other side. For all the floundering that her husband did with congressional Republicans, he also moved rightward on occasion, famously signing welfare reform legislation.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when she was finishing her first year in the Senate, I did a long magazine story on her and Chuck Schumer's effort to get help for New York,

and several Senate Republicans told me how surprised and impressed they were by her work ethic, warmth and willingness to cooperate.

For many months now, she has been sending signals that a second Clinton administration would differ from President Barack Obama's in the earnestness and aggressiveness of its bid for bipartisan cooperation. Her pick of Sen. Tim Kaine as a running mate fit into that framework. He's liked and respected by Republican

colleagues, a dynamic that Clinton surrogates immediately stressed.

What hasn't happened, though, is the construction of a substantive, policy-based bridge across the aisle. She moved leftward during the primaries to deal with Bernie Sanders' challenge, and many of her positions are anathema even to those Republicans who prefer her to Trump.

Does she change that over the next months or, if elected, upon taking office? Does she

have to? There are some fascinating forks in the road ahead — some big decisions — all created by the singular mess of Trump's candidacy and the possibility, suggested in the latest polls, including one that showed her ahead in Georgia, that he'll lose the election by a devastating margin.

Many Democrats smell a rout, hope that a slew of Republicans go down with Trump, and fantasize about a subsequent Democratic dominance in Washington that will allow the party to enact laws without much if any Republican input and assistance. After all the Republican obstructionism that they've put up with, they ache for such liberation.

But such a rout would presumably require Clinton to campaign stridently against endangered House and Senate Republicans between now and Nov. 8, an approach at odds with

her current entreaties to the Whitmans of the world.

It would also be a huge, risky bet on sustained Republican disarray and a durable Democratic advantage, without which Republican revenge would be swift and merciless. Obama defied Republicans during the first two years of his presidency, only to be tormented by them for the remainder of it.

That's why I'm hoping that Clinton takes a different, big-tent tack, and combines passion projects with attention to areas of common Democratic and Republican interest: tax reform, immigration reform, maybe even education reform.

Yes, a big Democratic victory in November would give Democrats both the right and the imperative to implement their most deeply cherished ideas. But it would reflect the unpopularity of Trump as much as any sweeping, compelling mandate for a particular program.

And we've seen, in recent years, what sharply drawn lines and perpetual warfare between the parties bequeath: legislative paralysis, debased discourse and the precise public disgust with politics and politicians that has given rise to Trump. Here we are, stuck and miserable.

Clinton's summer of love isn't merely a stunning narrative twist. It's an opportunity, in the nick of time. Despite our supposedly intractable partisanship, a swelling group of highly visible leaders is putting country before indiscriminate allegiance to their party. That's an invitation for Clinton to do a bit of the same. Of all politicians, she could be the one with the best chance to move us a few crucial inches beyond this wretched sclerosis. Who would have ever predicted that?

Frank Bruni has been an Op-Ed columnist for *The New York Times* since June 2011.

FRANK BRUNI
Comment

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