

Quick takes

Governor sells Measure 97

Education, PERS, housing, infrastructure, employment. It’s all a mess that another tax will not make a dent in.

— Kori Allen-Schmaltz

Only in liberal la la land does giving the government the same amount of money equal the government having less money. Must be common core math.

— Jeremy Padberg

Thompson sells his market

Thanks for always supporting local schools with lollipops for fundraisers!

— Sharla McDonald

My husband and I would stop in there for a Pepsi and peanuts while dating in the ‘80s.

— Kathy Cazares

Pendleton could fine owners of old, burned city hall

Sad it happened but why should taxpayers have to buy it back and then pay to fix it up? Folks this is what happens when you don’t have insurance on your stuff.

— Tory Covlin

Buy it back and restore it. It’s an historical building. It can be done

— Jamaica Brooks

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.

Oregon, Oracle strike \$100M deal

The Oregonian

Few legal settlements are satisfying. The \$100 million deal between Oregon and Oracle to square differences over the state’s failed insurance exchange, announced Thursday, is no exception. But it is a wise and sobering outcome in the face of a high-stakes trial in which the state could have lost everything while paying an estimated \$1.5 million a month to advance its fight against Oracle.

As it stands, Oregonians and American taxpayers will take it in the shins for more than \$160 million over the spectacular failure known as Cover Oregon. That’s disgraceful.

But Oregon managers had paid Oracle \$240 million, much of it in federal funds, to help create Cover Oregon before tossing it in the trash in favor of a tweaked, off-the-shelf federal health insurance exchange. Heads rolled. Bruce Goldberg of the Oregon Health Authority, an overseer, stepped down. Former Gov. John Kitzhaber, embroiled simultaneously in the Cylvia Hayes drama, stepped down — but not before insisting the state sue Oracle to reclaim fees.

Oregon’s official ire over the situation reached the stratospheric level of its embarrassment: The Department of Justice sought more than \$6 billion in a suit that accused Oracle and several of its executives of committing fraud, filing false claims and, even, racketeering.

Those are high stakes — and a high bar to prove in court. And they were accompanied by many fingers wagging in the blame game. With a settlement in hand,

however, nobody will ever quite agree on who’s most at fault.

But it is known that Oregon, with a poor record of information technology project success, had decided it would be its own contractor in developing the massive and complex Cover Oregon website. And it failed in timing and coordinating the project’s many personalities, among them state project leaders who were at odds with each other — even about whether the website was sufficiently functional to launch. Oregon Rep. Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, summed it up well on Thursday in a statement: “While Oracle clearly made mistakes, there is no escaping the fact that the state, too, shares blame for the failure of Cover Oregon. From the very beginning, the project was mismanaged and wracked by the failures of our bureaucracy.” Oracle, meanwhile, was left to run up a tab as it saw fit.

Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, who succeeded Kitzhaber, deserves credit for dissuading the Justice Department from fighting on — at potentially deeper cost to taxpayers and by prolonging the toxic Cover Oregon hangover. It wasn’t easy, apparently.

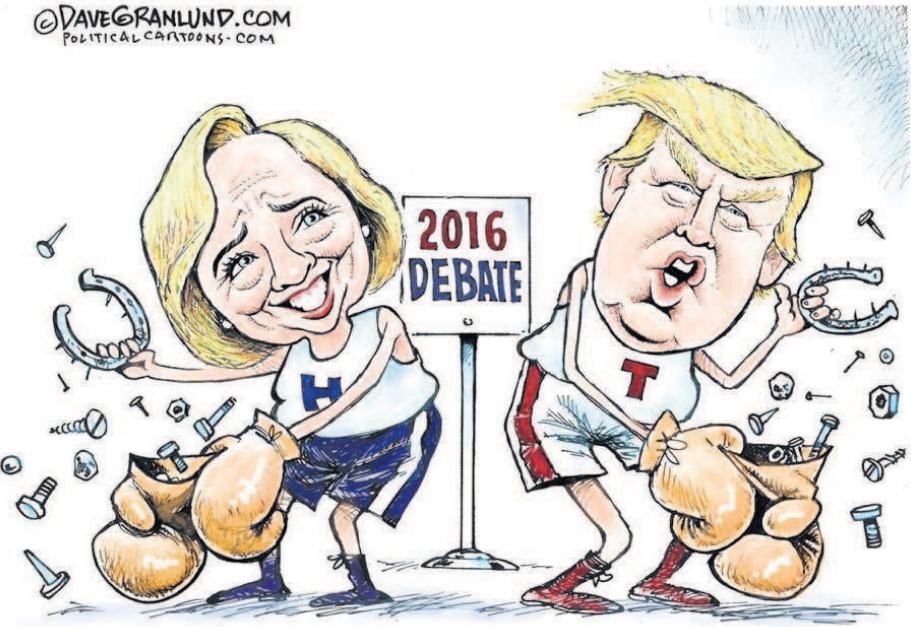
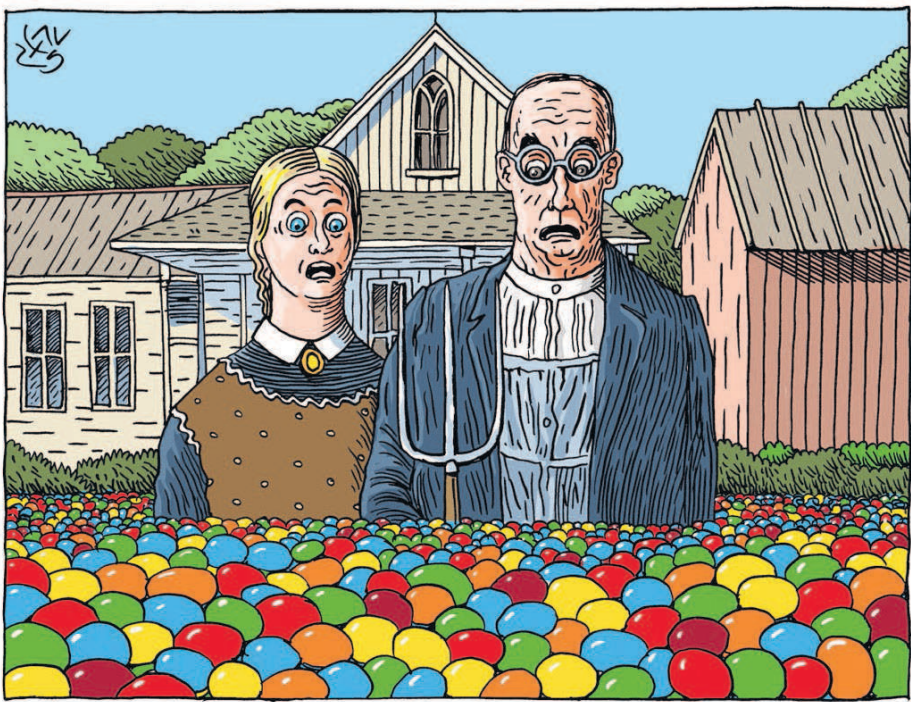
Jeff Manning of The Oregonian/

OregonLive reported that Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum had at one point refused Brown’s directive to settle, an action Oracle saw as unconstitutional. As things dragged on, meanwhile, it was a fine day for lawyers. By this summer, Manning reported, Oregon had spent more than \$16 million at the firm Markowitz Herbold and three other firms hired to handle different aspects of the case. The ironic result of the settlement is that the bulk of its terms comes in the form of services and software to be provided by the vilified Oracle.

Fine. The hard lesson is that state government leaders do not get to be cavalier, even cocky, in deciding they automatically know how to do what they have never done before. Oregonians do deserve aspirational visions from leaders; Cover Oregon might have been one. But Oregonians also deserve the confidence that newfangled projects will be managed prudently and transparently, with metrics for success built in at the front end. In this sense, Cover Oregon was an organizational debacle with Oracle at the center.

Nobody’s innocent. Everybody pays. The settlement, however unsatisfying, is proof of it.

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What an old firefighter knew

By FORREST WHITMAN
Writers on the Range

An old logger and firefighter I got to know pretty well passed away recently. You might be wondering why this should matter to you. Well, his advice might just come in useful today. He was in the forestry business for nearly 70 years, and I think his perspective is needed. After all, he worked on fire crews all over the West. I used to walk with him and our two dogs along the railroad bed, and I loved listening to him reminisce.

“Sawdust,” as he called himself, contended that the weather we’re experiencing these days has changed, and we need to go back to an older way of firefighting to cope with it. We know that throughout the West, the monsoon rains aren’t as dependable as they used to be. The same is true for those traditional summer-afternoon rain sprinkles. He said that it had become hotter and drier too, and felt a lot more like the 1930s.

He was convinced that the Forest Service made the right decision when the agency abandoned its long-held — suppress at all costs — policy. Not that he thought every blaze should be left alone, but for a few decades there, many fires were just left burning till the snow fell. Sawdust had little pity for folks living “up in the woods,” either.

He thought those people just needed to accept the risk of living where they’d chosen to live, and shouldn’t expect firefighters bail them out. If homeowners cleared the trees and brush around their places, all the better. That used to be the understanding, he said.

Sawdust also talked about fire lines in the old days. Those were built well back from the fire, and everything up to the line was left to burn. Now there are airplanes to do tanker drops and lots of other elaborate tactics that are risky for firefighters. He’s not sure any of that makes sense when it comes to stopping a galloping, crown-type fire. Even if it does, he questions the kind of money it costs.

In his day, firefighting was a kind of local industry. Young men could lie about their age and go to work cutting firebreaks when they were 13 or 14. He never quite admitted that he’d done that, but I have my suspicions.

As he got to reminiscing about fire seasons from long ago, he suddenly started talking about the food. There would be whole fire camps where men would be fed big breakfasts and dinners. How big was breakfast? Well, there were stacks of flapjacks as big as a 20-gallon can, he said, and heaps of pork sausage as big as a half-barrel. There would be coffee in 20-gallon pots. That’s how he remembered it anyway, and for a hungry kid, this was heaven. The pay wasn’t much, but then nobody had any money back then.

In those days, there were camps to thin the forest, too. Armies of young men, and a few women too, would be needed. A whole camp would attack a forest and thin it out, selecting the best trees to get down to the railhead for lumber. There was Forest Service money for the operation, and way back when the Denver, Rio Grande and Western Railroad, which Sawdust called “dangerous and rapidly growing worse” didn’t want to switch the railroad, the Interstate Commerce Commission just told them to do it.

He had some reservations about smokejumpers. While he sort of liked the idea of catching the first flames, he also thought it made more sense to wait till a crew got there to contain it. He also thought jumping out of a plane into a dangerous area just about guaranteed injuries and maybe loss of life.

Sawdust remembered the Mann Gulch fire of 1949. A radio transmission from that day was later posted in the Rocky Mountain News: “Say, Earl. The air’s sucking us into the gulch. I’m going to climb and drop the men from above the ridge at 1,200 feet. I can’t get them any lower. And we’ll drop the cargo, too.” That was the last radio transmission made by the pilot who dropped 16 men into Mann Gulch to fight a fire. Only three came out alive, and just maybe proved Sawdust’s point.

The reminiscences of my old friend may not apply to questions of public policy today. But sometimes we ignore the advice of the old-timers when we should pay attention.

Forrest Whitman is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News. He hangs out in Salida, Colorado.

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A Charlotte we didn’t recognize, but should have

The Charlotte Observer

These are the streets we walk during weekdays, the intersections we pass on the way to our uptown jobs. These are the streets we walk with our families on the way to basketball and football games, or with friends who come to see the place we live. “What a clean city,” they tell us.

Did you recognize those streets, Charlotte? We watched them on national news Wednesday night from our living rooms and other safe places. Tear gas popped and windows shattered. Analysts commented on the best police tactics to disperse rioters. “This is not the Charlotte I know,” people tweeted. “This is not who we are.”

But it’s who we are right now. This week, Charlotte became one more visibly troubled city in America, another place that’s endured violent protests in the wake of a shooting involving police and a black person. Our city may be different from Ferguson or Baltimore, and our police have been progressive in building relationships with communities here. But Charlotte shares something with so many U.S. cities and towns — that blacks feel threatened in their interactions with law enforcement, and powerless in other ways.

No, that shouldn’t be expressed with lawlessness, as it was in uptown and elsewhere this week. But we shouldn’t dismiss those

who protest peacefully because of the senselessness of those who don’t. The pain behind those legitimate protests is real, and we must confront it with real dialogue and real prescriptions on issues like economic mobility and school achievement gaps.

We are equipped to do that here. We’ve long brought people together in Charlotte to tackle difficult challenges and engage in difficult conversations. We’re continuing many of those conversations even now.

That’s important, that last part. We are a city that perpetually tries to be better, not only in constructing those uptown buildings but in working on foundational issues like diversity and equality. There’s a lot

of that work to do, of course. But for the most part, we at least want to try.

We saw that in moments this week. We saw it in police who behaved with courage and restraint in the face of antagonistic, destructive demonstrators. We saw it in people like Toussaint Romain, a public defender in Charlotte who put on a white shirt and tie Wednesday and placed himself between the protesters and police in an effort to calm the growing tension.

Those aren’t isolated things in Charlotte. Our police department and black leaders have done the right kind of work to encourage dialogue. Our city and county officials care about fixing the core

problems that plague distressed neighborhoods. So do many other Charlotteans.

That’s who we are, too. Maybe that’s not the Charlotte that America took away from the coverage they watched this week, but we probably spend too much time worrying about that.

Now is the time to spend on ourselves. The uptown protests will end eventually, and these streets will clean up nicely soon enough. But the pain behind the legitimate protests will remain. We can’t ignore it. We shouldn’t dismiss it. We should understand that what we’ve seen this week is a reminder, and an opportunity. We need to walk these streets, together.