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OUR VIEW

Forensics lab put on chopping block again

We know we give up a few things when we choose to live in Eastern Oregon. We trade in some convenience, some comforts of urban life in exchange for a little elbow room. If you wonder why there isn't a Costco, amusement park or hospital with a neurosurgeon at the ready in Umatilla County, it's simply a numbers game. We don't have the population to support them.

The same thinking goes into state services. It only makes sense that state funding, taken in from taxpayers, is spent as proportionally as possible among the population.

But when it comes to matters of public safety, the state has an obligation to protect its citizens as equally as possible, regardless of geography.

Yet again, the state forensics lab in Pendleton has been placed on the chopping block in an effort to save some money in the state budget. And that threat, yet again, doesn't take into account the impact that would ripple through our justice system.

In the modern age of investigating and prosecuting crimes, science labs play a critical part in the process. "CSI" and its various television show spinoffs would lead us to believe those labs are some kind of magic factory, turning a strand of hair, drop of blood or patch of cloth into a surefire conviction within a matter of minutes — or at least in time to advance the plot before the

commercial break. In reality, they are bureaucratic entities that collect, sort and examine evidence on a need-to-have basis, which often takes weeks and sometimes months. Forensic scientists are also needed to testify if the case goes to court.

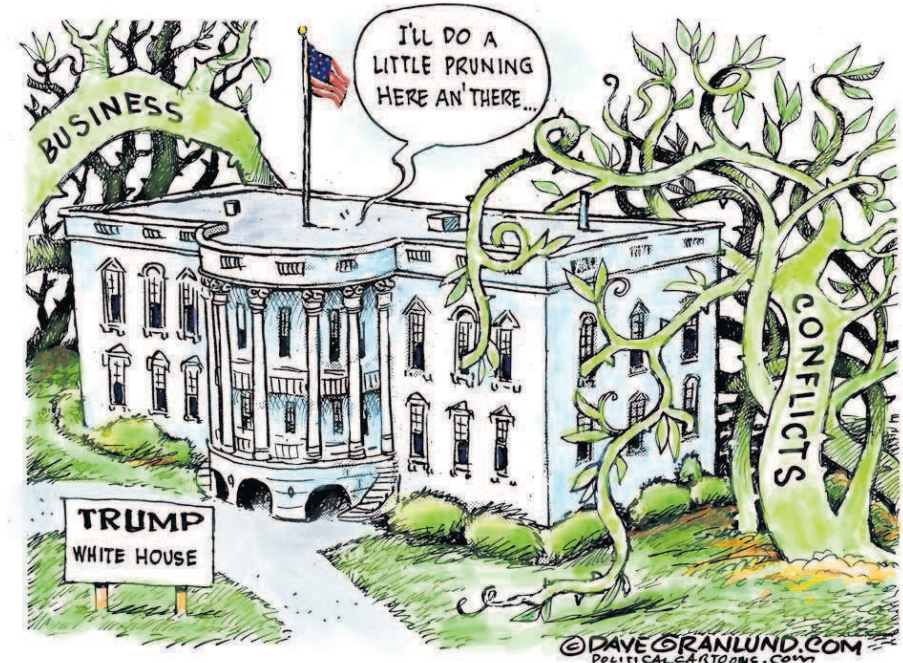
The case of Nika Larsen — a lab tech in Pendleton and Bend who pleaded guilty to stealing drugs from the labs — should help prove the point. The labs where she worked stopped testing drugs as a precaution while prosecutors gathered evidence against her and the backlog of needed tests now goes back to the spring.

A lab in Eastern Oregon should be considered an essential service. Local agencies should not be expected to bear the cost of transporting evidence all the way to Clackamas (212 miles away) to be processed, or wait those extra hours for lab techs to arrive from the metro area to collect evidence at a crime scene.

We'd like to think the question of whether the Pendleton lab is necessary could be answered once and for all, rather than it being pulled in as a bargaining chip each time the state budget is looking a little tight. But instead our district attorney, police chiefs, sheriff and county commissioners will again have to spend time explaining the value of having a lab on the eastern half of the state, and wait for legislators to decide if it's an amenity or a necessity.

When it comes to matters of public safety, the state has an obligation to protect its citizens as equally as possible, regardless of geography.

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.



YOUR VIEWS

Let it snow (it's good for the economy)

Have you ever noticed when it's time for parades during Round-Up, parades that only disrupt traffic for a few hours each time? The city goes to great lengths to clear all cars from the parade route. With the advance notice from the weather bureau of a major snowstorm, you'd think the same could be done for our major city streets.

The public works director explained on the KUMA Coffee Hour that the city has no snow removal program due to the shortage of off-street parking, a problem perpetuated at city hall by approving projects like Pendleton Heights. Approved construction variances by our Planning Commission have created a problem there that has yet to be addressed.

The real reason that we don't have a snow removal program is that the city has sold all the snow removal

equipment, dumping gravel all over town that will eventually have to be cleaned up in lieu of a removal program. But there is a silver lining within this dark cloud: Accidents and injuries provide insurance companies, our hospitals and doctors, auto body repair shops and tire alignment shops (ever hit one of the ice-covered manhole covers?) with a surge of much-needed revenue, not to mention those city employees trying to unplug those drains the street sweeper failed to keep clear of leaves and other debris. My ward representative, I'll let you guess which one, explained to me that the city had much more important matters to worry about than keeping the gutters clean.

There is a glimmer of hope with a change in city leadership. Perhaps we will have a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton



OTHER VIEWS

The plague of 'early decision'

As the moment of judgment neared, they barely slept, convinced that their very futures were on the line. Dread consumed them. Panic overwhelmed them.

I don't mean Americans awaiting the Electoral College's validation of Donald Trump.

I mean students (and their parents) awaiting actual colleges' verdicts on early-decision and early-action applications.

One friend of mine canceled our dinner plan because he hadn't realized that it fell around the time when his daughter expected word from her top Ivy League choice. He and his wife couldn't leave her home alone in such a tremulous state, at such a terrifying juncture.

Another friend's daughter, also vying to get into a highly selective school, repeatedly burst into tears as she berated herself for a 3.9 grade-point average instead of a 4.0. What if the difference spelled her doom?

As I've written before, the college admissions process has become a dignity-ravaging frenzy, illustrated by the plot of a recent episode of the TV drama "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit." It asked whether a man assuming a fake identity to seduce women could be prosecuted for rape. What identity do you suppose he chose as the most potent and irresistible? Not a Hollywood director who could make the women stars. Not a Wall Street titan who could drape them in jewels. He impersonated a dean of admissions who could give their kids slots at an elite university. And one after another, these helicopter moms whirled into the boudoir.

Early decision and early action, which are offered by some 450 colleges, are a special and especially disturbing part of the frenzy. They refer to a process by which, broadly speaking, a student applies in November to just one, most-desired school, which answers in December. If the school practices early decision and says yes, the student is obliged to go. Early action isn't binding.

At least since 2001, when *The Atlantic* published a definitive article by James Fallows titled "The Early-Decision Racket," there's been fervent discussion of the downsides of the process. But it's more prevalent than ever, with some selective schools using it to fill upward of 40 percent of their incoming freshman class.

The biggest problem by far: It significantly disadvantages students from low-income and middle-income families, who are already underrepresented at such schools. There's plenty of evidence that applying early improves odds of admission and that the students who do so — largely to gain a competitive edge — come disproportionately



FRANK BRUNI
Comment

from privileged backgrounds with parents and counselors who know how to game the system and can assemble the necessary test scores and references by the November deadline.

These students also aren't concerned about weighing disparate financial-aid offers from different schools and can commit themselves to one through early decision. Less privileged students need to shop around, so early decision doesn't really work for them.

"That's just unfair in a profound way," said Harold Levy, the executive director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which has pushed to make elite colleges more socioeconomically diverse.

Early decision moves the admissions process forward on the calendar, so that

high school students start obsessing sooner. They press themselves to single out a college at the start of senior year, when they may not understand themselves as well as they will toward the end of it.

"How many 17-year-olds know what they really want to do in life?" said Micheal McKinnon, an independent educational consultant in the Chicago area. The more

time they have to figure it out, the better.

He added that students who win early admission often feel that "they can slack off for the rest of senior year," rendering the last semester pointless.

But what worries me more is how the early-application process intensifies much of what's perverse about college admissions today: the anxiety-fueling, disappointment-seeding sense that one school above all others glimmers in the distance as the perfect prize; the assessment of the most exclusive environments as, ipso facto, the superior ones.

That's hokey, but it's stubborn hokey, as the early-application vogue demonstrates. Marla Schay, the head of guidance at Weston High School, in an affluent suburb outside Boston, told me that while 60 percent of the seniors there submitted early applications seven years ago, it's above 86 percent now.

And Williams College just admitted nearly 47 percent of next fall's freshmen through early decision. That benefits the college, which has locked in much of the Class of 2021. Maybe it also benefits the students who were admitted and can now calm down, although I wonder how many felt rushed to identify Williams (or Duke or Vanderbilt or Colgate) as their truest love.

I wonder, too, how many came to regard higher education as one big board game that's about attaining prestige rather than acquiring knowledge.

Frank Bruni, an Op-Ed columnist for *The New York Times* since June 2011, joined the newspaper in 1995 and has ranged broadly across its pages.



LETTERS POLICY

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