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OUR VIEW

Before any tax increase, ODOT must restore trust

Those who proclaim government agencies should be run like businesses are, in some ways, wrong.

A case in point: If government services and infrastructure were awarded to low-population areas in proportion to the income they produce, large swaths of America wouldn't have paved roads, bridges or anything but one-room schools. Basic politic principles and simple fairness would never allow such overt neglect in the U.S.

When it comes to the Oregon Department of Transportation, however, a valid argument definitely can be made for a somewhat more businesslike approach to such fundamental procedures as setting priorities, seeking out differing opinions and measuring how well goals are being achieved.

With a budget of roughly \$2 billion a year and thousands of employees, ODOT is one of the state's largest organizations. It's no Nike or Intel, but it's big enough — and so crucial to the state's safety and success — that it must adopt at least some lessons from the private corporate world in order to achieve all it needs to do with the resources it has available. It wants even more. ODOT, along with Oregon's counties and cities, suggests they might need up to an extra \$5 billion a year to preserve roads and bridges, ease congestion and bolster public transportation.

A nearly \$1 million performance audit from New York-based McKinsey & Co. — which the EO Media Group/Pamplin Media Group Capital Bureau successfully pressed ODOT to release last month — found the department acts like a complacent family. Nobody in top management rocks the boat by questioning the agency's decisions. Though the audit is couched in the diplomatic code phrases of managerial consultants, the overall picture of top ODOT management is uncomfortably close to the old cliché of a clubby circle of friends standing around leaning on their shovels kibitzing.

Consultant interviews with senior management found “no example of individuals who considered themselves a ‘dissenting voice.’” Government agencies, boards and commissions often go to great effort to ensure such a lack of disagreement within their ranks. However, from a public perspective, too many unanimous decisions within an entity like ODOT are nearly always a sign of trouble. It means no one is really speaking up to question old assumptions or fight for significant changes in budgeting, personnel, project planning and other important matters.

In the case of Oregon's transportation system, ODOT's

management team is supposed to be accountable to the five-member governor-appointed Oregon Transportation Commission.

However, this effort at citizen oversight is not functioning as it should. On Jan. 10, Tammy Baney, the commission's chairwoman, sent Gov. Kate Brown a letter asking for quarterly meetings with Brown, along with an independent staff person to carry out commissioners' requests for information and research. Baney also wants an “active” role in ODOT Director Matt Garrett's performance review. Most Oregon citizens will be surprised that

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such basic elements of independent oversight are not already in place. Without routine contact with the governor or a role in reviewing the ODOT director, the commission becomes

little but a symbolic shell.

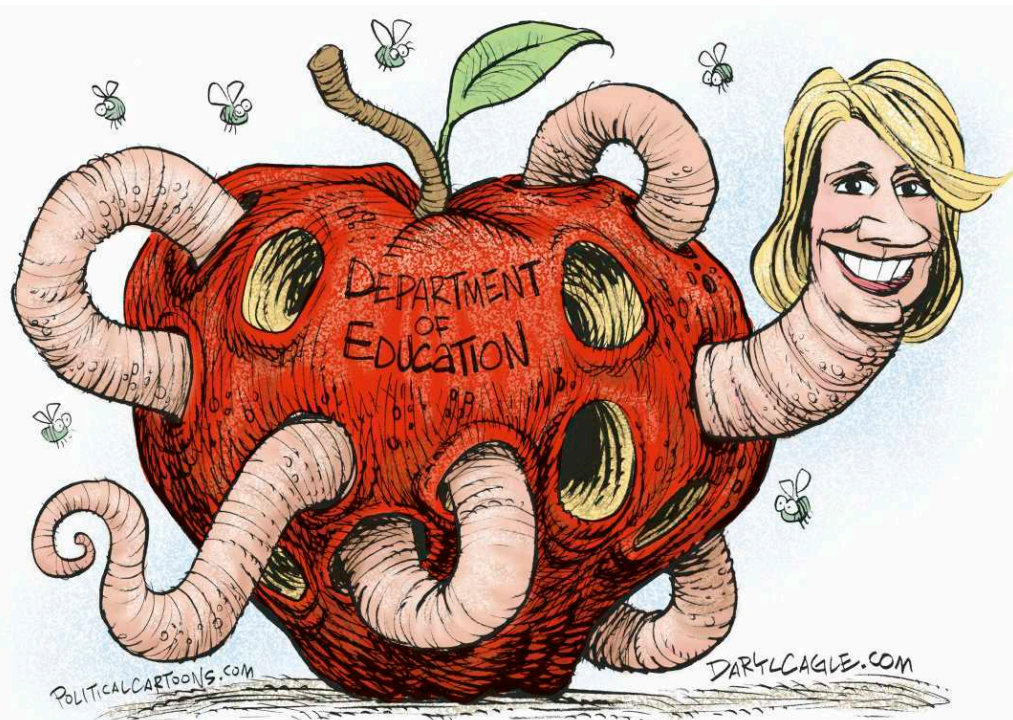
Former commission Chairwoman Catherine Mater said the request for an independent staffer indicates “a complete disintegration of trust” between ODOT and the commission tasked with overseeing it.

ODOT's front-line workers clearly understand what is going on. They told the consultants: “We need to ensure accountability for performance and behavior problems. High-level managers can talk the talk, but poor performers and poor behavior is still tolerated. Good employees currently work hard through internal motivation and personal dedication to high quality service, not because the agency rewards them.”

There is no doubt that Oregon needs substantial transportation upgrades and maintenance. In our part of the state, the weather has outfoxed the transportation system more often than not this winter. And while we may never be able to win the war against Mother Nature, we must invest more heavily in highways, bridges and other essential infrastructure. And better planning in the Portland area, the economic engine of Oregon, will help keep its steady expansion from bottlenecking future growth.

Ultimately, even if Congress grants President Donald Trump's wish for major national infrastructure spending, Oregon taxpayers will have to pay much of the tab for the things we need. Deficiencies in ODOT's management system, along with the debacle of the failed Columbia Crossing project on Interstate 5, necessitate a convincing and thorough rebooting of this critical agency's managerial and oversight procedures.

It will be a fool's errand to ask Oregon voters for a major hike in transportation-related taxes until this basic work is done and trust is restored.



OTHER VIEWS

Tom Price, Dr. Personal Enrichment

Each year, a publication called *Medscape* creates a portrait of the medical profession. It surveys thousands of doctors about their job satisfaction, salaries and the like and breaks down the results by specialty, allowing for comparisons between, say, dermatologists and oncologists.

As I read the most recent survey, I was struck by the answers from orthopedic surgeons. They are the highest-paid doctors, with an average salary of \$443,000 in 2015 — which, coincidentally, was almost the exact cutoff for the famed top 1 percent of the income distribution.

Yet many orthopedists are not happy with their pay. Only 44 percent feel “fairly compensated,” a smaller share than in almost every other specialty. A lot of orthopedists aren't even happy being doctors. Just 49 percent say they would go into medicine if they had to make the decision again, compared with 64 percent of all doctors.

I know that many orthopedists have a very different view: They take pride in helping patients and feel fortunate to enjoy comfortable lives. But despite those doctors, it's clear that orthopedics suffers from a professional culture that does not live up to medicine's highest ideals. Too many orthopedists are rich and think it's an injustice that they're not richer.

This culture helped shape Dr. Tom Price, the orthopedic surgeon and Georgia congressman who is Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of health and human services.

Price had a thriving practice near Atlanta before being elected to Congress in 2004. His estimated net worth of more than \$10 million (and possibly a lot more) makes him one of the House's wealthier members.

Yet he hasn't been content to make money in the standard ways. He has also pushed, and crossed, ethical boundaries. Again and again, Price has mingled his power as a congressman with his desire to make money.

So far, the nominee receiving the most attention is Betsy DeVos, Trump's choice for education secretary, and she definitely deserves scrutiny. Still, I think Democrats have made a mistake focusing so much on her rather than on Price. He could do more damage — and his transgressions are worse than those that have defeated prior nominees.

Last March, Price announced his opposition to a sensible Medicare proposal to limit the money doctors could make from drugs they prescribe their patients. The proposal was meant to reduce doctors' financial incentives to prescribe expensive drugs. (And, yes, if you're bothered that your doctor has any stake in choosing one drug over another, you should be.)

One week after Price came out against the proposal, he bought stocks in six



DAVID LEONHARDT
Comment

pharmaceutical companies that would benefit from its defeat, as *Time* magazine reported. At the time, those same companies were lobbying Congress to block the change. They succeeded.

It's a pattern, too. Price has put the interests of drug companies above those of taxpayers and patients — and invested in those drug companies on the side.

Last year, he also bought shares in Zimmer Biomet, a maker of hip and knee implants. Six days later, according to CNN, he introduced a bill that would have directly helped Zimmer.

In his defense, a spokesman for Price said that his broker bought the Zimmer stock and Price didn't find out until later. That's possible, but still not acceptable. Members of Congress bear responsibility for their personal stock transactions, period.

A third episode may be the worst. Price accepted a special offer from an Australian drug company to buy discounted shares, as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Kaiser Health News*

For decades, doctors used their political clout to help block universal health coverage.

reported.

He told the Senate that the offer was open to all investors, although fewer than 20 Americans actually received an invitation to buy at the discounted price. The stock has since jumped in value, and Price underreported the worth of his investment in his nomination filings. It was a “clerical error,” he says.

Even without any larger context, his actions are disqualifying. He's repeatedly placed personal enrichment above the credibility of Congress. The behavior is substantially worse than giving money to an illegal immigrant (which defeated a George W. Bush nominee) or failing to pay nanny taxes (which scuttled a Bill Clinton nominee).

But of course there is a larger context. Price has devoted much of his political career opposing expansion of health insurance. His preferred replacement of Obamacare would reduce health care benefits for sicker, poorer and older Americans.

His views have a long history within the medical profession. For decades, doctors used their political clout to help block universal health insurance. They offered many rationales, but money was the main reason. Many doctors feared that a less *laissez-faire* health care system would reduce their pay.

It's to the great credit of today's doctors that they have moved their lobbying groups away from that position and helped extend insurance to some 20 million people. They understand that some principles matter more than a paycheck.

Or at least many of them do.

David Leonhardt is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*.

YOUR VIEWS

EOTEC a success, as long as donations continue to flood in

The Umatilla County commissioners appear to be finally concerned that the EOTEC board has no concrete plan for long-term operations.

With the shortfall in the county's budget I would hope that they were aware that, since the center has turned a profit of \$36,000 according to a recent article in the *East Oregonian*, they really have nothing to worry about. Besides, one of those commissioners is on that board to ensure the success of the center.

Rumor has it that since it has been so successful, the city of Hermiston, after hearing this unexpected news, is considering buying out the county's share and renaming it after those commissioners that have been so instrumental in its success. Additionally, though this could not be verified by any reliable source, the city may propose a gas tax to fund the center and pay for the reconstruction of the entrance road, forgoing a request to the state for funding and thoughtfully assisting Governor Brown in balancing the state budget. Perhaps this kind gesture will convince her not to close the crime lab in Pendleton and the new mental

health facility in Junction City.

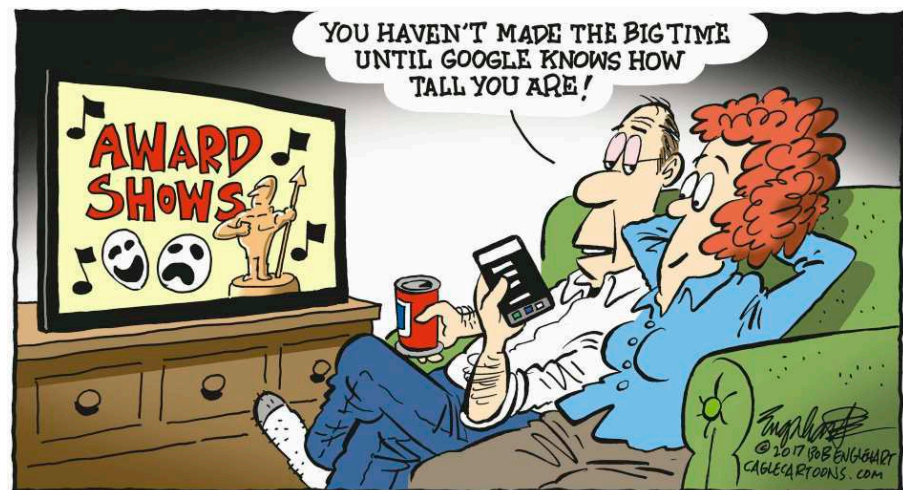
The county, for its part, has instructed all departments not to ask for personnel increases in their budget requests, and the commissioners have promised to stop “frittering” away public funds. I wonder if this means no money for the desperately needed “food hub” in Pendleton. They also have recognized the need for increased staffing at EOTEC.

I'm sure they will, as good stewards of the entire county, decide to continue funding the center since county residents are desperate for a tax increase to ensure Hermiston's continued success. Meanwhile, the city has approved up to \$300,000 in incentives for the Ranch and Home project rather than invest more in EOTEC because of the county's expected generosity. Evidently, it seems the EOTEC board and the Hermiston city manager already have some sort of long-range concrete plan.

News Flash: After generous funding from both the city of Hermiston, the county, and the flood of donations, EOTEC lost less than \$5,000 last year instead of a profit recently reported in the *EO*. Those continued generous donations will make the difference.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

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