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OUR VIEW

Control costs before spending

This seems like a no-brainer: The Oregon Legislature should examine the worth of current programs before starting new ones.

That's an idea put forth last week by several legislators.

Don't public officials do that already? No, at least not always. And that reality shows why the Legislature has failed to curb its spending, regardless of whether the Democrats or the Republicans were in control.

The 21st century opened with Republican Senate President Gene Derfler sounding the alarm about out-of-control PERS costs and unsustainable state budgets. Those issues still confound legislators.

So it was with a bit of hope that five veteran legislators — three Democrats and two Republicans — unveiled on Friday a long list of ways to control future spending. They included something that, to most Oregonians, should be routine: "Review performance and need for current programs and services to determine whether new proposals are a higher priority than current programs and services."

That responsibility lies with the executive branch — the governor's office, which runs the majority of state agencies — as much as with the legislative branch, which writes the state budget. It was disappointing that Gov. Kate Brown ordered a hiring freeze only last week — after back in December asking departments to delay hirings for 60 days — although the magnitude of the state budget hole had been known for months.

But a governor is the CEO of state government, and that role requires as much fiscal discipline and diligence as in any other corporate entity.

However, as Gov. Ted Kulongoski once said, there is little political glory to be gained from the behind-the-scenes, nuts-and-bolts work of streamlining government.

That is why legislative leaders on Friday had high praise for the cost-containment concepts from Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin;

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose; Sen. Jackie Winters, R-Salem; Rep. Nancy Nathanson, D-Eugene; and Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner.

Legislative leaders, let alone public-employee unions and outside interest groups, did not seem keen on some of the ideas. However, Senate President Peter Courtney and House Speaker Tina Kotek deserve credit for appointing the cost-containment group and taking its ideas seriously.

As Sen.

Johnson said in presenting several recommendations, "These should be considered a starting point for discussion and subject to further refinement, analysis and negotiation."

The Legislature, after all, is a political entity. But it also is the state's board of directors. It has the fiduciary responsibility to institutionalize the ongoing cost-benefit analyses of existing agencies, programs, laws and proposals.

As our own Rep. Smith noted, the state budget has grown substantially during the past six years, and will be even larger during 2017-19.

That growth rate not only may be unsustainable but, ironically, it is insufficient to maintain existing programs. Thus, "unspending" should be as important as spending.

As part of that, the Legislature should reach out more to the state workforce — the front-line workers who see what works and doesn't work — and seek their ideas for refining government.

Furthermore, the Legislature should find more self-discipline. When issues arise, the Legislature should undertake a root-cause analysis instead of assuming that a potentially expensive new law, task force or program is the answer.

In fact, the Legislature could make itself a test case: Refocus its priorities to make government more cost-effective, and accomplish that work without adding staff.

As the late Gov. Vic Atiyeh was fond of saying, it's amazing how much you can accomplish when you don't worry who gets the credit.

The Legislature should examine current programs before starting new ones.

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.

100 DAYS OF A TRUMP PRESIDENCY

A reminder: On Saturday Donald Trump will have been president for 100 days.

To mark the occasion, we asked readers to submit 100 words on the president's first 100 days. The response has been excellent, and we want to make sure everyone who wishes to participate gets their submission to us in time.

Tell us what you think of the new president's performance, and if he lived up to the promises he set in the opening months of his term. Keep that response to 100 words so we can run a whole passel of them in the April 29 paper. The deadline for submissions is Friday at noon.

Drop off your thoughts at our Pendleton or Hermiston locations, or email them to editor@eastoregonian.com. Please include a phone number and city of residence, so we can verify your identity before publishing.

OTHER VIEWS

Crime and different punishments

Last week, the state of Arkansas, which had executed exactly nobody since 2005, put to death Ledell Lee for the crime of murdering Debra Reese in 1993. Why now — 11 years after the last execution, 24 years after the crime? Because the chemicals used for lethal injection were about to expire.

Reasonable people can disagree on the death penalty, but everyone should recognize the dark absurdity of an execution timetable set by a drug's expiration date. And that absurdity provides a useful opening for this week's entry in my ongoing series of implausible proposals: Our modern way of punishment should be reconsidered, and punishments long dismissed as inhumane should be pondered as alternatives to medicalized executions and "civilized" incarceration.

That phrasing sounds too reasonable for the spirit of this series, so here's the more outrageous version: Bring back the stocks and the firing squad.

The tendency in modern criminal justice has been to remove two specific elements from the state's justice: spectacle and pain. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, pillories and stocks and whipping posts became museum pieces, the hangman and the firing squad were supplanted by more technical methods, and punishment became something that happened elsewhere — in distant prisons and execution chambers, under professional supervision, far from the baying crowd.

All of this made a certain moral sense. But the civilizing process did not do away with cruelty and in some ways it could exacerbate it. With executions, the science was often inexact and the application difficult, and when it went wrong the electric chair or the gas chamber could easily become a distinctive kind of torture. During the last century lethal injection, now the execution method of choice, had a higher "botch rate" by far than every other means of killing the condemned. Meanwhile, the lowest rate of failure (albeit out of a small sample size) belonged to that old standby: the firing squad.

Few prisoners face execution, and anti-death penalty activists may yet reduce that number to zero. But botched injections are not the only ways in which we pile cruelties on the condemned. Our prison system, which officially only punishes by restraint, actually subjects millions of Americans to waves of informal physical abuse — mistreatment by guards, violence from inmates, the tortures of solitary confinement, the trauma of rape — on top of their formal yearslong sentences.

It is not clear that this method of dealing with crime succeeds at avoiding cruel and unusual punishment so much as it avoids making anyone outside the prison system see it. Nor is it clear that a different system, with a different and sometimes more old-fashioned



ROSS DOUTHAT
Comment

set of penalties, would necessarily be more inhumane.

This is the (deliberately provocative) argument of Peter Salib, a judicial clerk on the 7th Circuit, in his new paper, "Why Prison?: An Economic Critique." Salib's claim is radical: "We should not imprison people who commit crimes." Instead we should force criminals to work, under monitoring, in the highest-value available jobs in order to make financial restitution, while adding additional deterrence in the form of "nonmonetary sanctions." Writes Salib, "this paper does not endorse any particular nonmonetary sanction," but he notes that "history presents a startling array of options, including: flogging, pillory, running the gauntlet, tarring and feathering, branding, and many more."

The idea that a combination of financial sanctions and corporal punishment could replace imprisonment seems insane, even to a columnist floating slightly crazy ideas. There will always be a group of offenders sufficiently

dangerous to require long-term separation from society. And most of our prisoners, contrary to certain convenient myths, are not nonviolent offenders; they have been convicted of robbery, assault, rape and murder.

But not every violent offender is equally dangerous — a fact already reflected in sentencing, which releases many prisoners relatively swiftly. So there would be room to experiment with Salib's proposal, to offer some of the convicted the stocks followed by supervised labor, without leaping to the abolish-prison stage.

I recognize (and Salib acknowledges) a strong historical reason not to conduct such an experiment: because of the memory of slavery, the role that public violence played in maintaining racial hierarchy, and the fear of resurrecting that violence in a country whose prison population is still disproportionately black.

This argument is powerful, but I still wonder if it is not a little self-deceiving. I would rather face the firing squad than be strapped down and get injected into eternity, and I would choose a strong dose of pain and shame over years under the thumb of guards and inmates and the state.

We tell ourselves that we have prisoners' good in mind, and the higher standards of our civilization, because we do not offer them this choice. But those standards may be less about preventing ourselves from becoming like our sinful ancestors, and more about maintaining the illusion of clean hands — while harsh punishment is still imposed, but out of sight, on souls and bodies not our own.

Ross Douthat, a New York Times Op-Ed columnist, writes about politics, religion, moral values and higher education.

YOUR VIEWS

Pendleton needs new station, but bond builds wrong one

For reasons mentioned in previous letters to the editor, I believe a new fire station is needed in Pendleton. However, the proposed station is not the answer.

The size of the proposed station is excessive. Per the Mackenzie report prepared on behalf of the city (see city website), the main floor office for a typical day-shift staff of three totals 3,350 square feet. This is larger than the vast majority of homes in Pendleton. The meeting room contributes another 2,600 square feet. This exceeds the public space included in any of the seven analyzed facilities in the report by 1,000 square feet.

The building costs also seem high. Per the probable cost estimates in the report, consulting fees are estimated at nearly \$800,000, contingencies as high as \$969,000, and as much as \$440,000 is budgeted for inflation. Counter tops are estimated to cost \$51,000, interior doors \$100,000, decorative street lamps \$80,000, and a staggering \$64,800 for trees (\$1,500 each).

Fire stations appear to consist of three basic segments: office, living quarters and storage bays. Does the wheel need to be re-invented each time a station is designed? Is the Eastgate site so unique that it necessitates spending over \$600,000 on architectural and engineering fees? Has the city explored the possibility of purchasing an existing plan from another municipality or architect?

To be fair, the station has been designed for growth and the cited costs include both labor and material. The city must also pay prevailing wage. Still, it is difficult to ignore the significant amount of fat in this project.

Look to the two stations of similar size referenced in the Mackenzie report. The Buckley, Washington and Hood River stations each are very similar in size to Pendleton's proposed 21,000-square-foot station. The total construction cost of these stations per the actual bids at the time of construction were approximately \$160 and \$140 per square foot of building area respectively. The Pendleton station is estimated to cost \$209 per square foot (excluding consulting fees and owner costs).

Granted, construction costs likely have increased since these stations were built, but this is a sizable difference — approaching 50 percent versus Hood River. This doesn't even account for the likelihood of building costs being higher in Seattle and Hood River.

I encourage the city to rein in the size and cost of the station and return to the voters with a more reasonable request.

Steve Richards
Pendleton

Fire station is a clear need for the city of Pendleton

The ballot you receive in the special election this May is for one issue only: Are we to build a new fire station or not? Much has already been written in support of replacing the old and obsolete fire station with a new up-to-date facility. After 57 years of use it is well past the time for replacement of the present structure.

Do we really need a new facility? The simple answer is yes.

I commend Mike Ciraulo, John Turner, Robb Corbett and others who have worked diligently to explain to the fullest the shortcomings of the existing facility. The reasons are well documented — why the present site cannot and should not be

considered, the reasons the old theater site is not the best place for a new facility, and the problems with the Pendleton Grain Growers site.

The public has been invited, on many occasions, to view the present fire station and to attend any number of information meetings with regard to its shortcomings. There is a great deal of responsibility that comes with this ballot as the new fire station use, based on past fire station history, will go well into the future. And here, as any property owner knows, if you delay construction to some later date the cost will have increased dramatically.

All that is needed now is your well thought out yes vote on the ballot.

Ron Gavette
Pendleton

Hermiston schools need bond to remain a top district

On May 16, voters will be asked to consider a \$104 million bond for the Hermiston School District.

The bond will address three challenges that the district is facing while trying to provide a premier education for our students. The issues are enrollment growth, safety and security and an aging infrastructure. The current predicted growth trends indicate that the district's population will increase 24 percent in the next seven years. If new construction and renovation does not happen, by 2023, one fifth of the students would be served in temporary, modular classrooms. The funding for these would have to come out of the general fund, taking away the ability to hire additional staff, cutting current programs and putting pressure on a very limited maintenance budget.

The safety concerns at Rocky Heights and

Highland Hills are realities that need to be addressed.

In 2015, the Hermiston Police Department's independent safety audit found these two schools to be inadequate to meet current safety standards due to their design, age and lack of life-safety alert systems. Replacing both of these schools would be the most prudent and cost effective measure.

The third challenge has to do with aging infrastructure at the two elementary schools and at Sandstone Middle School. Roofs, mechanical units and utility mechanisms need to be replaced.

The projects to be completed if the bond passes would be: replace Rocky Heights and Highland Hills at their present sites, build a new elementary school on district-owned property on Theater Lane, expand Hermiston High School, make improvements on the district owned fairground property and address deferred maintenance and obsolete, failing heating and cooling systems.

The board is very much aware that the bond amount seems quite large. The estimated cost being 90 cents per \$1,000 of taxable value. After much study, discussion and consideration, the board unanimously voted to place the bond on the May ballot. Hermiston has always been a community that strongly supports its young people and by voting for the bond this support will continue for students in the future.

Your consideration to vote in favor of the bond is greatly appreciated.

Karen J. Sherman, chair
Hermiston School District Board

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less for publication. Send letters to 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.