

WALDEN: Around 100 people attended the Wallowa town hall

Continued from 1A

input, he added “they’re not perfect.”

“It’s important, but it’s not the only tool we use,” Walden said.

A recurring issue raised by the public involved how the AHCA would — or would not — cover patients with preexisting medical conditions. The law does allow states to apply for a waiver to the current rules requiring that insurers accept those with preexisting conditions and charge them the same premiums as healthy people of the same age.

Joe Hayes, 34, of La Grande, attended the hearing in Baker City where he told the story of his daughter born with a rare genetic disorder. Hayes, who served eight years in the U.S. Army from 2002 to 2010, said his daughter spent the first month of her life in the hospital hooked up to medical equipment with a hole in her throat to breathe and a hole in her stomach to eat.

Though she died seven months later, Hayes said the Affordable Care Act helped to extend his daughter’s life and spared their family from financial ruin. Hayes told Walden he is concerned that, under the AHCA, children like his daughter might be denied coverage for having a preexisting condition.

“The last thing you want to worry about is how you will pay for emergency procedures and equipment that cost more than a house,” Hayes said.

Walden sympathized with Hayes and others, but expressed confidence the AHCA would be able to cover vulnerable populations. He said the bill includes more than \$130 billion in federal money set aside to fund high-risk pools over the next decade. Most recently, Republicans added another



Photo by Paul Wahl for the EO Media Group

Wallowa County Sheriff's deputy Kevin McQuead speaks with a woman in the crowd at Monday's appearance by U.S. Rep. Greg Walden in Wallowa. The woman and another individual went nose-to-nose in a shouting match and McQuead intervened.

\$8 billion to help cover preexisting conditions.

More changes to the bill are also likely to come in the Senate, Walden added.

“I care deeply about people with preexisting conditions. I care deeply about people with disabilities,” Walden said. “This bill will take care of them.”

In other issues, Walden continued to advocate for active forest management to reduce the risk of destructive wildfires and create jobs in Eastern Oregon. He also said he does not support an independent investigation for Russian interference in the election at this time, instead preferring the matter be dealt with in the House and Senate intelligence committees.

“I don’t want any country interfering in our elections, period,” he said. “I think the Russians are deeply involved in a lot of this stuff. But they’re not the only ones.”

After his stop in Baker City, Walden traveled to Elgin where he addressed another 100-plus people at Stella Mayfield School, where he again fielded questions and comments about health care.

He said the bill is designed to fix the problems in the individual insurance markets, detailing how rates have gone up 40 percent in 11 states.

“In many states, there are fewer and fewer insurers to choose from,” he said. “I want efficiency, I want choice, I want lower premiums and I want coverage.”

At one point, Walden asked the crowd directly how many people would support a universal, government-run health care system. The auditorium erupted in cheers and applause.

Not everyone agreed. Ted Atkinson, a professor emeritus of business from Eastern Oregon University, said he believes individuals need to start taking responsibility for their own health care. He said too many people suffer from self-inflicted health problems, such as alcoholism or obesity, and expect the government to pay.

Atkinson also agreed with Walden on the need for active management in local forests.

“People in rural areas have been locked out of economic growth for decades,” Atkinson said.

Members of Health Care

for All Oregon, a statewide group advocating for publicly funded universal health care, attended all three Walden town halls Monday. Bill Whitaker, a professor emeritus from Boise State University who now lives in La Grande, argued against the AHCA and said the money Republicans are promising for preexisting conditions is not enough.

“The sum total of these funds is far less than what Republicans are saying they would do,” Whitaker said.

At Wallowa Elementary School, Walden’s last stop of the day, the proceedings reached a boiling point when two women sitting in the same row went nose-to-nose in a shouting match. The two were separated by Wallowa County deputy Kevin McQuead.

Approximately 100 people attended the Wallowa town hall, mostly to protest the AHCA. Questioners accused Walden of voting to scuttle Obamacare to give fellow Republican President Donald Trump a victory and said he lied to Oregonians by voting for a bill that withdrew some protections for people with preexisting conditions.

“Did you read the bill before you voted for it?” asked Ruby Boyd of Joseph.

Walden assured Boyd he had and argued repeatedly that the Republican-sponsored measure was a better plan since it allowed states to tailor health care spending to their unique needs. He admitted that older people pay more for health care under the new law, but explained it was designed to bring younger people back into the plan.

Walden said under Obama’s plan, younger individuals paid a disproportionate share of health insurance costs to subsidize older participants.

Pall Wahl contributed to this report.

ROADS: Plan raises about \$509M per year in additional transportation funding

Continued from 1A

out there for people to respond to.”

The money for the plan would come from a combination of hikes in the gas tax and registration and license fees, tolls and new taxes on payroll and purchases of new vehicles and bicycles.

The plan identifies a few specific projects to ease congestion, but other projects would be prioritized by the Oregon Transportation Commission. Specific projects would:

- Add lanes on Interstate 5 near Portland’s Rose Quarter from Interstate 84 to Interstate 405.

- Add northbound and southbound lanes on Highway 217 through the Portland metro area.

- Widen Interstate 205 to six lanes from Oregon City to Stafford Road.

- Widen and seismically reinforce Interstate 205’s Abernethy Bridge.

The plan raises about \$509 million per year in additional transportation funding. A transportation package that failed in 2015 would have raised considerably less, about \$300 million a year.

The money would come from increases in the gas tax and vehicle fees and a set of new taxes over the next 10 years, including:

- Gas tax increase from 30 cents to 44 cents.

- Tiered increase in title and registration fees, with higher increases for fuel-efficient vehicles, which pay less in gas taxes.

- Statewide payroll tax of one-tenth of 1 percent to pay for mass transit.

- Tolls to be determined.
- Bicycle excise tax of 5 percent.

- Dealer privilege tax of 1 percent on new vehicle purchases.

The state spends about \$1.3 billion a year on transportation system maintenance and upgrades. This proposal would bring that amount up to about \$1.8 billion.

The proposal came on the same day a KATU-commissioned poll indicated tepid interest in raising the gas tax, which is the mechanism for funding transportation in Oregon.

Forty-nine percent of 675 adult respondents indicated a gas tax hike was a step in the wrong direction, while 30 percent showed strong support for an increase, according to the poll conducted last month by Survey USA.

The 14 lawmakers on the Joint Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization will convene on Wednesday, May 10, to discuss potential changes to the proposal before it is written into legislation. Public hearings on the proposal would likely be held in June.

SCHOOL: Board voted to formally offer superintendent position to Fritsch

Continued from 1A

report cards and graduation rates, all of those documents and figures would be under the Pendleton High School name.

Yoshioka said that a reconfiguration had other questions that a procedural move wouldn’t answer, like whether Hawthorne would retain its name, or if it would stay in its current location at the Pendleton Technology and Trades Center or move down the hill to the main high school campus.

In an interview after the meeting, Yoshioka said district staff hadn’t calculated the cost savings of combining the two programs under one building, but he estimated it would be “minor.”

Despite the uncertainties, Yoshioka would need an answer from the board soon if they wanted to start the reconfiguration process this year — the Oregon Department of Education’s deadline is May 15.

With several question marks surrounding the

merger, the board was reticent to take action.

“I don’t like voting on something in the 11th hour,” board member Steve Umbarger said.

Keeping Hawthorne as it is, at least temporarily, also received a passionate defense from people associated with the school.

Hawthorne student Mikeighla Velasquez explained to the board how she struggled with anxiety and following directions as a PHS freshman.

Since switching to Hawthorne as a sophomore, Velasquez said she has taken an interest in robotics and completed 13 credits in a year. That’s more than half the amount needed to meet Oregon’s minimum graduation standards.

Velasquez argued that maintaining each school’s separate identities was important to Hawthorne students.

Hawthorne paraprofessional Teri McCoy said Hawthorne was important to students who didn’t fit in or

had trouble excelling in the same way other high school students do, and thanks to school staff, 16-18 students were set to graduate this year.

McCoy said Hawthorne students had already been through a couple of moves in the past few years and wanted input from the incoming superintendent before the district committed to uprooting students from a newly renovated facility.

Dale Freeman, a board member and retired teacher, sympathized with the argument.

“I’ve worked with a lot of those kids for a long time,” he said. “And three years of my teaching experience with those kids, they need that separate identity. They really do.”

With no other regular board meetings scheduled before the deadline, Hawthorne Alternative High School is all but assured another school year.

Yoshioka said the board

can reconsider reconfiguration again ahead of the next deadline in 2018.

In other board action, the board unanimously voted to formally offer Longview Public Schools assistant superintendent Chris Fritsch the vacant superintendent position. Although he wasn’t present for the meeting, Fritsch is expected to be in town Tuesday to further meet with district staff and attend the board’s strategic planning meeting.

With Fritsch expected to accept the district’s offer, he’s set to earn \$135,500 per year when he assumes the position July 1, taking over for interim superintendent Matt Yoshioka.

The board also approved a new collective bargaining agreement between the district and the classified employees union, which will run from 2017-2020. Classified employees include educational assistants, paraprofessionals and secretaries.



Vote Yes For Kids

- 1. Enrollment Growth**
Proposed Solution: Expansion of Hermiston High School and addition of new elementary school on district owned Theater Lane property.
- 2. Safety & Security**
Proposed Solution: Replace Highland Hills Elementary School on same site; improve emergency access and parking at HHS.
- 3. Old Buildings**
Proposed Solution: Replace Rocky Heights Elementary School on same site; address deferred maintenance and obsolete, failing heating and cooling systems at Sandstone Middle School

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Bike ride/walk, garden planting event: Good Shepherd
Thursday, May 11 • 6pm
registration starts at 5:30
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