

Richardson accused of conflict of interest in provider tax repeal

By **PARIS ACHEN**
Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — The Oregon Nurses Association has accused Secretary of State Dennis Richardson of having a conflict of interest in a proposed ballot measure to repeal a health care tax plan.

The association has asked to Richardson, who oversees all statewide elections, to disclose any and all political and financial ties he has with Rep. Julie Parrish, R-West Linn. Parrish is spearheading the repeal initiative and is a political consultant paid by the Richardson campaign. The association also demanded that Richardson recuse himself from any business involving the proposed repeal.

“It is unusual and possibly unprecedented for a sitting secretary of state and a state legislator who is also a political consultant and chief petitioner of a referendum, which the secretary will oversee, to have significant financial ties,” the association stated in a July 24 letter to Richardson. “This combination of personal, political and financial connections poses a potential conflict

of interest that the Secretary of State’s Office must immediately address.”

Richardson said the association’s “allegation of conflicts of interest are specious and unfounded.”

“I am committed to fairness to all and favoritism to none in the conduct of Oregon elections,” Richardson said in a statement Monday, July 24. He added that his staff in the elections divisions “are fair and unbiased.”

Richardson reported payments to Parrish’s political consulting firm of nearly \$330,000 during his campaign for Secretary of State. His campaign continues to pay Parrish a \$1,000 monthly retainer for political consulting services, ONA noted. Parrish’s firm also donated more than \$20,000 to Richardson’s campaign.

Parrish claimed the association’s accusations of a conflict of interest are politically motivated. She noted that Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, who sits on the legislative committee that sponsored the health care tax plan, is an employee of ONA. The ONA “spent thousands of dollars to seat” Nosse and ONA political action committee board member Rep. Sheri Malstrom, D-Beaverton. “It’s unfortunate to see the

Oregon Nurses Association bring politics to a new low,” Parrish said in a statement Monday.

The Oregon Legislature enacted the \$550 million health care tax plan as a way to offset a \$1.4 billion shortfall in the state’s two-year budget. Lawmakers from both parties supported the tax scheme, saying it would allow thousands of low-income residents to remain in the state Medicaid program.

The plan hikes taxes on hospitals and levies a new tax on health insurance plans. Gov. Kate Brown signed the legislation into law July 3.

Parrish said ONA benefits from the legislation because there is an exemption from the insurance tax for unions that self-insure.

Rachel Prusak, a Portland nurse practitioner and member of ONA, said the association wants all of the correspondence and other documents showing a relationship between Richardson and Parrish to be available for public viewing. She said the letter sent Monday was not a formal public records request, but such a request could be a secondary measure if Richardson doesn’t publicize the records on his own accord.

MOONEY: ‘We have a little healing and rebuilding to do as a staff’

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In 2008, Mooney moved to the Pendleton School District to serve as the director of human resources, and was hired as assistant superintendent there in 2009. She returned to the Hermiston School District last year.

Mooney said her priority for the district was to guide it through a transitional period.

“We have a little healing and rebuilding to do as a staff,” she said.

She cited her familiarity with the district, staff and community as positives, as well as her investment in the schools as both a staff member and parent.

Mooney also discussed her experience with employee handbooks and evaluations, policy review and union negotiations.

“I’m passionate about the district,” she said. “I have the ability to look at things from different perspectives.”

Mooney said it is important to support teachers and staff as they face growing class sizes, while continuing to explore the possibility of re-introducing a bond to upgrade facilities.

“We’ve begun that process and gone out to the community,” she said. “We know we might have some bigger class sizes ... at this point some trust needs to be rebuilt.”

When board members asked Mooney whether she had any questions for them, she asked what they were looking for in an interim superintendent.

Board members said they hoped to find someone who would not just maintain the district, but actively move it forward.

“I want someone who will help us be in a better spot 18 months from now,” said board member Ginny Holthus.

The other two candidates interviewed via Skype. The first, Richard Rundhaug, is an education consultant in Phoenix, Arizona. He had previously served as a superintendent for the Willcox Unified School District, and an assistant superintendent for the Coolidge Unified School District.

Brazeau was the principal of Hermiston High School from July 2007 to June 2012, and recently retired as the superintendent of the Central School District 13J in Independence.

WEDDING: Couple will live in Hermiston

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Sunday morning as the two professed their love.

Abell said she and Cripe first got to know each at the tender ages of four and six. Later, they shared a fleeting stint as boyfriend and girlfriend during their seventh- and eighth-grade years at the Hermiston Junior Academy in Hermiston. They stayed pals for decades. Abell lost her husband to cancer a couple of years ago. Cripe, hoping to buoy her spirits, invited his friend to last year’s Bike Week.

By Saturday of Bike Week 2016, their relationship had shifted into overdrive. Neither quite understood how it happened and they didn’t waste much time trying to figure it out.

“It just is,” Cripe said. It seemed natural, he said, to tie the knot during Bike Week amid leather-clad bikers and the throaty growls of their motorcycles eddy around them.

Though the wedding was unconventional, when officiant Sandy Smith pronounced the couple husband and wife, Abell and Cripe responded in the time-honored way. They embraced and kissed. Then they fist-pumped, and the guests cheered.

The couple will live in Hermiston, where Cripe does custodial and grounds maintenance work at Hermiston’s branch of Blue Mountain Community College.

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PENDLETON New events provide summer boon for local businesses

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

One event has dominated Pendleton for so long that the town’s nickname is the Round-Up city.

Although no event is likely to match the cultural importance of the world-famous rodeo, the one-two punch of the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest and Pendleton Bike Week is starting to see the same kind of tourism impact outside of September.

Pendleton Bike Week co-founder Eric Folkestad was still crunching the numbers the day after the multi-day motorcycle rally ended, but he estimated that there was a 25 percent increase in registrations from the year before. In 2016, 16,000 people participated in bike week over four days.

By the time whisky fest welcomed Maroon 5 and a slew of openers July 15, the concert’s organizers had already announced it was sold-out show, the 16,500 tickets sold representing a 30 percent increase from the inaugural event.

Some local businesses are

reaping the rewards from the larger crowd.

Prodigal Son Pub & Brewery owner Tim Guenther said there’s always been more to Pendleton than Round-Up, with whisky fest and bike week representing the latest addition to the event calendar.

Since whisky fest is mostly condensed into one day, Guenther said the concert was the closest to matching the fervor of the Round-Up, although bike week was also creating business that was competitive with the rodeo.

Guenther said both the motorcycle rally and the concert are all-hands-on-deck events that require Prodigal Son to pare down its menu to meet the demands of the customer surge.

“They’re focused more on production and less on your creativity,” he said.

For Pendleton Convention Center Manager Pat Beard, these are exactly the type of events he would like to see in Pendleton.

“It’s how I would like it to function on a regular basis,” he said.

The convention center hosted bike week and is also next door to the whisky fest venue at the Round-Up arena. Regardless of whether the convention center hosts anything or not, the fact that both events attracted significant out-of-town visitors meant the center saw a benefit through the city’s two hotel room taxes.

Beard compared the July events to the ongoing wheat harvest — it might be noisier and busier than usual around the area, but the outcome means more economic benefits for Pendleton.

With both events still relatively new (whisky fest is two years old while bike week just wrapped up its third year), Beard said there are still some kinks for Pendleton to work out, like some of the traffic issues and convincing local businesses to stay open longer during the events.

In the meantime, organizers for both bike week and whisky fest are happy with their 2017 results.

Folkestad, the bike week organizer, said both new sponsor Harley Davidson and concert

headliner Grand Funk Railroad were pleased with the reception they got at the rally.

Bikers were apparently happy as well, filling the convention center to a standing-room only capacity for the final day of the poker run drawing, Folkestad said.

The 2018 bike week is already set to start July 18.

Whisky fest co-organizer Doug Corey said it was unclear how Pendleton would react to a non-country act, but with a sellout crowd showing up for Maroon 5, organizers are already planning for another whisky fest in 2018.

Besides selling more tickets, organizers were also able to iron out the alcohol vendor wait times and accessibility issues that sometimes plagued the concert last year.

Having already received questions about how whisky fest will top this year’s event, Corey said the goal is to at least match the experience.

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OMSI: Plans to return to the SAGE Center next year

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blueberry juice change in color. Rebecca Reilly, OMSI’s food science educator, has a background in middle school education, giving her experience coming up with science-themed activities in short time frames.

Reilly said this was OMSI’s first year coming to Boardman and was using their SAGE Center trip as a trial run for its new agricultural exhibits. They’ll continue to tour with these exhibits at the county fairs in Lincoln and Benton counties before returning to Portland.

Using feedback from the first year, OMSI plans to return to the SAGE Center next year with bigger and better exhibits. Reilly said this was all in the interest of getting kids interested in where their food comes from.

Although not officially apart of its food science exhibits, a digital upgrade to a classic school science project was also taking its first tour around the state.

Instead of grocery store-bought products and the potential for mess, OMSI’s egg drop incorporates weighted, plastic eggs that kids are instructed to drop onto a swatch of carpet. Once the egg is dropped, sensors in the egg transmit information on the height and velocity of the egg to a computer that provides a readout on whether the egg survived the fall or not.

The egg drop rarely saw time where it wasn’t being used, as kids tried to use the paper plates, pipe cleaners and other protective products to try to save their plastic eggs from digitally cracking.

Along with some of its new exhibits, OMSI also displayed some of its old favorites like an animal fur and skeleton touching station, a small replica dinosaur skeleton that can be taken apart and reassembled and a variety of brain teasers



OMSI outreach educator Brad Alston helps reassemble a replica dinosaur skeleton model at the SAGE Center Saturday.



Conner Bureson of Hermiston looks at his dropped eggs as his father Josh watches at the SAGE Center Saturday.

that stump adults and children alike.

OMSI outreach educator

Brad Alston said some adults will stick with a brain teaser — like an exhibit that requires

people to try to fit a bunch of T-shaped plates into a square — all day to solve it.

“They’ll come up to me and say, ‘Please tell me the answer so I can go home,’” he said.

Regardless of their difficulty, parents and children alike signaled their approval for the OMSI event.

Abbigail Bureson, 7, of Hermiston said she liked the berry ink exhibit and the egg drop in addition to the tractor downstairs in the SAGE Center museum.

As Jane Waldher of Athena watched her two-year-old son Luke play with some magnetic rings in an exhibit, she said agricultural education was a must for the children of the region.

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PERS: Gov. Brown has suggested selling state assets

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The group faces one aspect of what’s been a pernicious point of contention for state policymakers in the past two decades.

The 2017 legislative session concluded earlier this month without significant modifications to PERS — a casualty of a contentious session where many Republicans called primarily for spending reforms, including curtailing public employee benefits, while many Democrats sought business tax increases.

Legislators, for their part, can only make changes to the system going forward.

The governor’s task force, though, is not addressing the issue of what public employees will receive in the future.

Rather, it is looking at how the state can pay down a chunk of what it expects to owe, a sizable amount of which public employees have already earned and lawmakers cannot modify.

The group has divided the system into roughly seven “buckets” — universities and community colleges; K-12 schools; public corporations such as the Oregon Liquor Control Commission; state agencies; cities; counties; and special districts, fire districts and transit.

Brown has suggested selling state assets, although she has said certain properties, such as prisons and state parks, are off the table. Possible assets could include properties such as the “buffer zones” around state prisons or youth correctional facilities.

It’s also possible that the state could also enter into public-private partnerships or cut back on property costs in other ways, such as by moving certain state offices to lower-rent areas.

And the task force is also looking at the financial feasibility of specific revenue streams, such as a dedicated surcharge on certain license fees, to help pay down the system’s obligations.

Task force members appeared to agree Monday that they should focus their work — expected to culminate in a report due to the governor by Nov. 1 — on big-ticket items that can reduce the liability significantly, in order to get to the \$5 billion figure.

The next meeting of the PERS unfunded actuarial liability task force is scheduled for Aug. 28.