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OUR VIEW

We need solutions, not possibilities

The best idea to come from Gov. Kate Brown’s PERS task force was creating a matching fund to help schools and local government pay for their pension liabilities.

The Oregon Public Employees Retirement System serves some 900 public employers in addition to state government. A state match — say, 25 cents on the dollar — could encourage faster action by those cities, counties, school systems, fire districts, community colleges, public universities and other entities.

These governments and the state need to come up with \$25.3 billion to fully fund PERS’ obligations to retirees.

They range from non-starters such as privatizing state universities to reasonable proposals like setting up the matching fund and selling surplus state land.

Except the state doesn’t know what it owns. Individual agencies do, or at least they should. But the task force discovered there is no overall inventory of state-owned land and property.

That underscores the weakness of the task force. It convened in July but no one acted to have that inventory created by the time the task force held its fourth and final meeting in October.

Meanwhile, the gap in PERS reserves continued to grow by billions of dollars.

With a complete inventory in hand, the task force could have made — or at least explored — the often-difficult decisions of which surplus lands to sell and which to hold for future use. That work had seemed a key role when Brown appointed the task force. Members did come up with a few possibilities, such as selling the State Office Building in Portland and replacing it with less-expensive real estate.

As Brown and legislators prepare legislation for the 2018 Legislature, workable ideas may yet develop. But what the task force provided was a broad picture of PERS possibilities. What Oregon needed was a deep examination of PERS solutions.

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.

OTHER VIEWS

Oregon’s education system lacking direction

Corvallis Gazette-Times, Oct. 26

We’re still a little puzzled over Gov. Kate Brown’s firing of Salam Noor, the state’s deputy superintendent of public instruction.

Brown said that she was not satisfied with Noor’s ability to carry out her vision for Oregon’s education system and asked for his resignation. The firing came a little more than two years after Brown picked Noor to oversee the state’s K-12 schools. Colt Gill, Brown’s education innovation officer, was picked to be Noor’s interim replacement.

Of course, we don’t dispute Brown’s ability to fire her cabinet members at will.

We were curious, though, about the reference to Brown’s vision for the state’s educational system, so we were pleased to read a copy of a letter the governor sent earlier this month to members of her “education cabinet.”

The letter purports to outline Brown’s vision for Oregon education. It’s awfully light on specifics — although, to be fair, it does highlight some promising areas that the governor has consistently supported, such as an emphasis on early education.

It also ignores the biggest financial threat facing Oregon public schools, but more about that later.

Brown outlines two “overarching guiding principles” in the letter: One asks for a “high standard of accountability” in existing and new programs. The other, which refers to the state’s “equity lens” for education, is a commitment that all children, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, get the full benefit of programs.

There’s not much to argue with in those goals, although they’re plenty vague.

The specific goals have a little more meat:

- Brown wants her cabinet to work toward developing a unified education budget for 2019-21 that helps improve school readiness, attendance and completion rates. That has promise, but if it’s not implemented properly, it could turn into a major mess. Color us skeptical right now.
- She wants to develop a new statewide early learning plan — and it is true that investments in programs such as Head Start and quality preschools could pay off handsomely down the road.
- She wants to achieve what she calls “aggressive high school graduation goals.” She’s seeking a 90 percent four-year cohort graduation rate by 2025. In some areas, to be fair, that is aggressive. But it’s a step back from the state’s goal that every adult Oregonian have a high school degree by 2025.
- She wants to develop career-connected learning that’s aligned with workforce needs. The passage of Ballot Measure 98 freed up some money for these programs, although we still object to the fact that the measure came without a funding source.

What goes unmentioned in the letter is any effort to deal with the growing unfunded liability from the state’s public pension system, something that threatens the ability of school districts to provide any kind of service to students.

The unfunded liability in Oregon’s Public Employees Retirement System was up to \$25 billion at last report. Brown is awaiting a report from a task force that may include suggestions to trim \$5 billion from that amount.

Let’s assume for the time being that the group is successful in that goal, a highly dubious assumption. But we still would have no plan to manage the remaining \$20 billion shortfall. What’s the governor’s vision for handling that? Educators and students around the state will want to know about that.

OTHER VIEWS

Trump, Niger and connecting the dots

It is easy to ignore the recent story of four U.S. servicemen killed in Niger, the giant state in central Africa, because the place is so remote and the circumstances still so murky. That would be a mistake. Niger highlights a much larger problem — just how foolish, how flat-out dumb President Donald Trump is behaving.

Trump is a person who doesn’t connect dots — even when they’re big, fat polka dots that are hard to miss. Rather, he thinks inside narrow little boxes built from his own simplistic impulses and applause lines — and that tendency is leading us into a web of contradictions abroad. Niger is a perfect example.

THOMAS FRIEDMAN
Comment

I know something about Niger because I did a documentary there last year for National Geographic’s “Years of Living Dangerously” climate series and wrote several columns about it for The New York Times. To understand why groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaida are popping up in that region of central Africa, you have to connect a lot of dots and recognize the linkages between a number of different problems — not just say, in effect: There are bad guys there. I will call “my generals.” They will kill them. I will take credit.

As defense systems expert Lin Wells once put it: To ameliorate problems in places like Niger, you must never think in the box. You must never think out of the box. “You must always think without a box.”

Why? Because what is destabilizing all of these countries in the Sahel region of Africa and spawning terrorist groups is a cocktail of climate change, desertification — as the Sahara steadily creeps south — population explosions and misgovernance.

Desertification is the trigger, and climate change and population explosions are the amplifiers. The result is a widening collapse of small-scale farming, the foundation of societies all over Africa. And that collapse is leading to a rising tide of “economic migrants, interethnic conflicts and extremism,” Monique Barbut, who heads the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification and guided me in Niger, explained.

A few numbers: Niger, with rampant poverty and poor access to contraception, has one the highest birthrates in the world: 7.6 children per woman. I met a man there who boasted of 17 kids. Neighboring Nigeria is growing so fast it will replace the U.S. as the third-most-populous country in the world by 2050. Nigeria is a third bigger than Texas.

Meanwhile, climate change in the region is so severe that nearby Senegal’s national weather bureau says that from 1950 to 2015, the average temperature there rose two degrees Celsius and the average annual rainfall declined by about 2 inches. The Paris climate accord was designed to keep global average temperatures from rising 2 degrees Celsius

above preindustrial levels by 2100.

In other words, parts of sub-Saharan Africa are already at heat levels that Paris was supposed to prevent by the end of the century — and the region is heading for a 4-degree rise, which will lead to the collapse of even more small farms and lead to a mad scramble of refugees toward Europe, competition for food and more unemployed males ready to join ISIS for \$50 a month.

Barbut, as I reported, reinforced her point by showing me three maps of Africa with dots concentrated in the middle of the continent. Map No. 1: the most vulnerable regions of desertification in 2008. Map No. 2: conflicts and food riots in 2007 and 2008. Map No. 3: terrorist attacks in 2012. All the dots of all three maps cluster around Niger and its neighbors. Hello?

And what is Trump’s response to this reality? It’s to focus solely on using the U.S. military to kill terrorists in Africa while offering a budget that eliminates U.S. support for global contraception programs; appointing climate-change deniers to all key environmental posts; pushing coal over clean energy; and curbing U.S. government climate research.

In short, he’s sending soldiers to fight a problem that is clearly being exacerbated by climate and population trends, while eliminating all our tools to mitigate these trends.

That’s just stupid, reckless and irresponsible — and it evinces no ability to connect the dots or think without a box.

But this is not only in Africa: Trump was obsessed with defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq — but with as few U.S. troops as possible. The only way he could do that was by tacitly allying with Iran, Syria’s regime, Russia, pro-Iranian Shiite militias and pro-U.S. Kurds, who were the main anti-ISIS forces on the ground. We could not defeat ISIS or stabilize Syria and Iraq without all of them.

And what is Trump’s strategy now? I have no clue. We’ve distanced ourselves from the Kurds, moved to tear up the nuclear deal with Iran and added U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a country we also can’t stabilize without the tacit help of Iran next door. If you know how these dots connect, please write.

Nothing Trump ever says has a second paragraph. His whole shtick is just a first paragraph: Build a wall, tear up the Iran deal, tear up TPP, defeat ISIS, send troops to Niger and Afghanistan to kill terrorists, kill climate policy, kill family planning, cut taxes, raise military spending. Every box just marks an applause line he needed somewhere to get elected. Nothing connects — and we will pay for that.

■ Thomas Friedman, a New York Times columnist, was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes for international reporting in Beirut and Israel and one for commentary.

YOUR VIEWS

City manager explains compost policies

In response to Beverly Stoddard of Echo regarding her letter to the editor about Stanfield’s “garden waste dump” being closed to non-residents, please let me explain our policies regarding access to our Compost Yard.

Ms. Stoddard requests that access to the site be given to all who pay Stanfield taxes. This is already our policy. Anyone who wishes to have a permit to access the site need only show proof of residency or property ownership within Stanfield city limits. This can be in the form of a utility bill or property tax bill, and proof of identity.

However, I suspect that what Ms. Stoddard really wants is access given to all who have the word “Stanfield” appearing on their property tax bill. Properties that pay taxes to the Stanfield School District or Cemetery District may have the word “Stanfield” on their bill, but may not pay taxes to the city of Stanfield. Similarly, persons with a mailing address with the 97875 ZIP code, like Ms. Stoddard’s friend, will have the word “Stanfield” in their

address, but this may be news to them: They don’t live in Stanfield. At least, not within the city of Stanfield. The city of Stanfield only receives taxes from properties within Stanfield city limits. These properties will have the “City of Stanfield” listed among the entities that their property taxes go to. If Ms. Stoddard owns property within Stanfield city limits, we would be happy to issue her a permit and gate code.

The city is the sole owner of our compost yard. We receive no funding from any other agency to pay for the maintenance of that site. Last year, use of the compost yard shot up exponentially, causing our costs to balloon. We have addressed this by closing the site to residents only, or to paying commercial customers. We regret that this step was necessary, but unfortunately, a few bad actors have made it necessary to restrict access to the site.

I should add, however, that even though access to the compost yard is restricted, we are still giving away the compost to whomever wants it. Just give us a call at City Hall and we will arrange for you to get some.

W. Blair Larsen, city manager
Stanfield

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.