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OUR VIEW

Tip of the hat; kick in the pants

A kick in the pants to the continuous stream of bad news and wasted tax dollars emanating from the Oregon Health Authority.

The state program has an annual budget of \$10 billion per year — and not all that money is going to provide quality health care to Oregonians.

The authority is on the hook for \$74 million in overpayments to Medicaid providers in three years, problems that may have been caused by technical glitches that kept the organization from verifying eligibility for federal health benefits. And that's not all: OHA officials also hatched, though failed to carry out, a plan to discredit a Portland-area medical provider with negative stories in the press. That dastardly plan helped bring about a change in management at the agency, which we would argue came none too soon. And all of these mishaps are under the specter of the colossal Cover Oregon failure, where hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars went down the tubes.

Understandably, Oregonians have lost much of their trust and faith in the OHA. That's when political opponents can pounce, and Republicans are.

Oregon Secretary of State Dennis Richardson said last week that an audit of the state's Medicaid program, expected to be complete by early December, will highlight management problems. And you can bet the leading Republican candidate for governor, Knute Buehler, will use the millions of dollars wasted or misused by OHA high up in his talking points.

Many experts, both partisan and nonpartisan, blame Oregon's one-party Democratic rule for the OHA's poor management and refusal to correct or own up to mistakes. The culture of protecting one's "team" to the detriment of Oregon as a whole must end.

A tip of the hat to Oregon State Police for donating old bomb-detecting robots to the Umatilla Robotics Team.



The crew of students will get hundreds of hours of education out of them — learning as they dissect, rebuild and operate the machines. And these robots were no longer useful to OSP, as they have since been replaced by newer technologies.

So instead of gathering dust in government storage somewhere, the robots will have a positive effect on the lives of area students. That's the best outcome for outgoing technology, and we appreciate when we see government entities look for ways to help each other.

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

National park fees rising too quickly

Baker City Herald

Wepine for the halcyon era when America's national parks were known for the grandiosity of their mountains and cliffs and trees rather than the size of their fee increases.

These days, though, you're more likely to read about how many bills you'll have to slide from your wallet to enter a national park, not the elevation of Mount Rainier's summit, or how many feet there are between El Capitan's base and its top.

The latest proposal from the National Park Service is to boost the entrance fee during the busiest five-month period at 17 parks, most of them in the West, from \$25 or \$30 per vehicle to \$70.

This comes while the ink is still fresh on the new lifetime passes that people 62 and older can buy to gain admission to national parks and other recreation sites managed by federal agencies. On Aug. 28 the price for those passes rose from \$10 to \$80.

In both cases the purpose is to give the Park Service more money to maintain its visitor centers, trails and other facilities. The agency, which is part of the Department of the Interior, estimates its deferred maintenance tally was \$11.3 billion as of September 2016.

Our chief complaint about both the lifetime pass price hike and the proposed higher entrance fees is the scale of the increases.

Most vacationers, we'd wager, would at most mumble something about "inflation" if they had to pay, say, 5 or 10 bucks more to drive into Yosemite or Grand Canyon or Mount Rainier, which are among the national parks where the entrance fee could jump to \$70 next year.

But the prospect of shelling out an additional \$40 to \$45 likely would

prompt some people to turn back at the park entrance.

Which makes Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's words, which are intended to justify the fee increases, ring hollow.

"We need to have a vision to look at the future of our parks and take action in order to ensure that our grandkids' grandkids will have the same if not better experience than we have today," Zinke said.

"Shoring up our parks' aging infrastructure will do that."

Trouble is, people who can't afford or aren't willing to pay the drastically increased fees won't have much of an experience at all, since they won't be seeing anything of the parks except the entrance gates in their rear-view mirrors.

We don't question the need for more money to maintain national parks. But it's not the public's

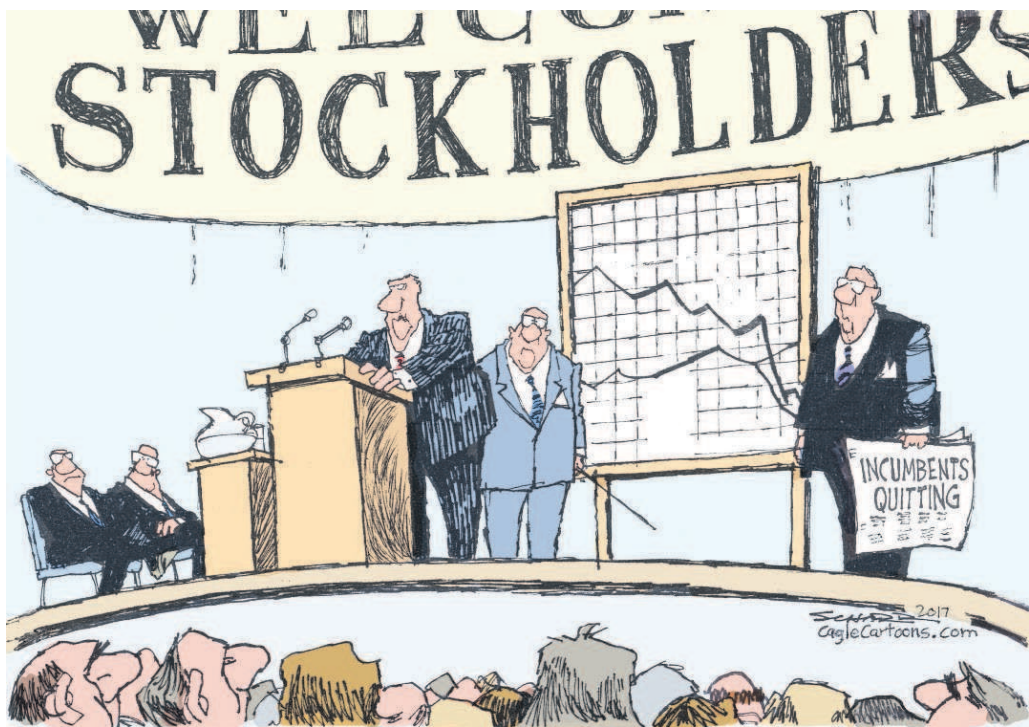
fault that that work has been deferred so long that Parks Service officials have concluded it's necessary to nearly triple entrance fees at some of the more popular parks.

We think a series of smaller, annual or every-other-year entrance fee increases is a more reasonable approach, and one that doesn't unduly punish park visitors.

The publicity that the Park Service's proposal provoked might serve one useful purpose — alerting Americans to the maintenance backlog in some of our more cherished pieces of public land. The prospect of having to pay so much more to visit those places might convince people to lobby their representatives in Congress to allocate more money to the agency.

Because if you follow the money, as the saying goes, you'll find a lot more of it in Washington, D.C., than in the cars and campers of families wanting to see Half Dome or Old Faithful.

It's not the public's fault that work on our national parks have been deferred so long.



"...THERE WON'T BE ANY DIVIDENDS THIS QUARTER DUE TO INCREASED OPERATING EXPENSES... WE HAVE TO BUY A WHOLE NEW BUNCH OF CONGRESSMEN..."

OTHER VIEWS

The clash of social visions

Every tax plan is a social vision and a statement of values. The social vision embedded in the House Republican tax plan is straightforward: to take money away from affluent professionals in blue states and to pump up corporations as the engine for broad economic growth.

Or to put it more bluntly, Republicans think the whole country would be better off if we take money away from the Democrats' rich people and give it to their own (more productive) rich people.

The plan raises taxes on affluent professionals in blue states in several ways. First, it caps the mortgage interest deduction at loan principal of \$500,000 instead of \$1 million.

According to an analysis by Christopher Ingraham at *The Washington Post*, only about 2.5 percent of Americans are paying off mortgages on homes valued over \$500,000. These are mostly in places like California, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C.

Second, the Republican plan cuts the deduction for state and local taxes. In 2014, according to *The Economist*, nearly 90 percent of the benefit from this deduction flowed to those making more than \$100,000 a year. Once again, this tax hike hits mostly those in high-tax blue states.

Third, the bill taxes investment income earned by private universities with at least 500 students and assets not directly tied to educational objectives of more than \$100,000 per student. It imposes a 20 percent excise tax on nonprofit executives who make more than \$1 million.

This is the beginning of the full-bore Republican assault on the private universities, which are seen as the power centers of blue America — rich, money-hoarding institutions that widen inequality and house radical left-wing ideologies.

Fourth, the bill preserves high top marginal tax rates on individual income and even raises rates in some cases on the very rich. Over the past few decades when Republicans have talked about tax reform, they have generally talked about sharply cutting the top marginal rate to 25 percent or even 15 percent. But this plan keeps the top rate at 39.6 percent. And then it throws in some peculiarities. As *The Wall Street Journal* noted, under the plan a married couple would face a 45.6 percent top rate on earnings between \$1.2 million and \$1.6 million.

These changes could leave the rich paying an astonishingly high percentage of their income in taxes. Scott Sumner of *EconLog* calculates that when you throw in state and local taxes, rich Californians would face a tax rate of 62.7 percent.

Republicans would take the revenue from these tax hikes (and much more) and they would use it to lighten the load borne by corporations.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

The intellectual case for general corporate tax reform is strong. Countries across the world have been cutting corporate rates. The United States now has the highest corporate rates in the OECD and the third-highest rates in the world. Cutting those rates would attract investment, unlock money trapped abroad and increase wages for many families. Economists vary widely in their estimates, but Larry Kotlikoff of Boston University estimates, on the high end, that a lower corporate tax rate could increase working-household income by roughly \$3,500 annually.

None of this is to say that the Republican plan is worth supporting. I personally oppose

The Republic vision is that the corporate sector is more important to a healthy America than the professional and nonprofit sector.

it because of the way it explodes the deficits. Second, the level of largesse to corporate shareholders is frankly ridiculous. It piles one corporate tax cut on top of another like piling a chocolate sundae on top of a chocolate cake on top of a Toblerone bar.

This is not a column about the workability or advisability of this or that plan. This is a column about the sort of social vision that serves as a predicate for that plan.

The Republicans have a social vision. The

Republican vision is that the corporate sector is more important to a healthy America than the professional and nonprofit sector. The Republican vision is that companies that thrive in the red states, like manufacturing and agriculture, are more important for the country than the industries that thrive in blue states, like finance, media, the academy and the movies.

What, by contrast, is the Democratic vision? Are Democrats going to spend the next few months defending the mortgage interest deduction and other tax breaks for their own rich?

It could be that economic policy is becoming tribal just like everything else in our politics. In that world, parties use their time in power to nakedly shift the tax code for the benefit of their own donors.

It would be nice if our tax code wasn't red or blue but distinguished between social goods and social bads. I'd love to see a tax code that rewarded investment and discouraged consumption. That would mean cutting taxes on earnings but raising revenue through a progressive consumption tax. I'd love to see a tax code that punished pollution but encouraged social cohesion. That would mean taxing carbon but increasing tax credits for working people and families with children.

You may or may not like my vision, but it's more elevated than the visions that are now emerging, which are a dressed-up version of the spoils system: more money for my political friends and less for my political foes.

David Brooks has been a New York Times Op-Ed columnist since 2003.



LETTERS POLICY

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