

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

Postal Service a necessary service

The U.S. Postal Service is an essential part of American life, and especially here in rural Oregon. Its financial troubles in the last decade, while understandable, are a serious concern and require serious action.

A federal task force, established in an executive order by President Trump, on Tuesday published a report looking at USPS and suggesting a route to sustainability.

Because, frankly, the current plan will not work. Since 2007, the Postal Service has lost \$69 billion, and is expected to lose tens of billions more in the coming decade.

Its problems aren't a surprise. People are mailing fewer letters every year as technology offers alternative means of communication. Cellular text messaging alone — the ability to send a quick note to far-off friend or relative that they can read at their convenience — makes the hand-written letter seem obsolete. Add the ability to include pictures and videos, and share it all with your entire family tree at once, and it's no wonder the local postal carrier has less in their bag than a decade ago.

On top of that, pension costs are taking their toll and will only get

more burdensome. It's the same problem facing other public entities like schools and governments.

The study does mention the importance of postal service in rural areas, which we're glad it recognizes. About a third of all mail is delivered to rural areas, despite the fact that only about 20 percent of the population lives there.

That points to the fact that we are more reliant on the service than those who live in big cities. And for some, the daily mail is the best connection to the outside world. Not only does it deliver a newspaper and letters, there are often checks, bills and even medication. It's a concept that is likely lost on the vast majority of urban dwellers, many of whom are accustomed to high-speed internet and a 24-hour pharmacy around the corner.

The report's timing is interesting as the Postal Service was closed the next day — Wednesday, Dec. 5 — to honor late president George H.W. Bush. It's been common practice to suspend mail delivery and other federal agencies to honor the deaths of former presidents.

On Thursday the carriers worked to play catch-up with all the holiday mail. If there's one time of year where it's easy to see the value of the



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

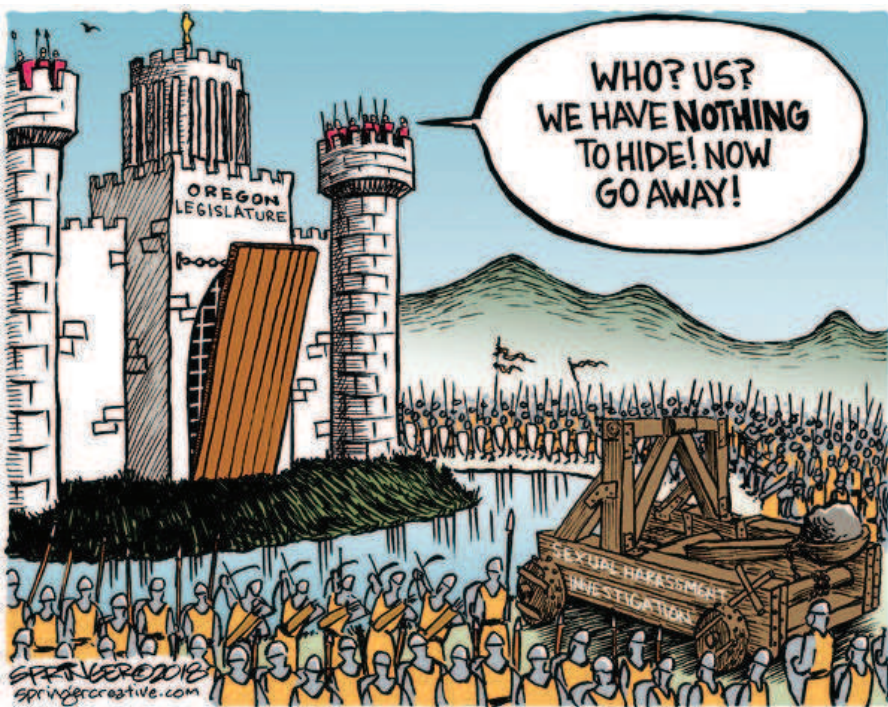
Mail carrier Diane Barton delivers mail to a cluster of mailboxes Thursday on Southeast Cassens Court in Hermiston.

mail service, this is it. It's the month of Christmas cards, which make the trip to the mailbox extra special, and packages.

In order to keep delivering that mail, the study suggests USPS raise prices on package delivery. It's a good idea because it embraces changes in technology — using the boom in online shopping to stabilize revenue. The Postal Service remains the best option for getting

an Amazon purchase to a front door anywhere in the country, and the USPS should leverage that service. It makes far more sense than inching up the price of a stamp for letter delivery.

We need the Postal Service, and we need it to be consistent. It's clear that change must come, and we hope that change means an aggressive pursuit of new revenue and an embrace of emerging technology.



OTHER VIEWS

Oregon politics leave us feeling helpless

I was very sad to see this far left liberal Kate Brown re-elected recently. Disappointed we will continue to suffer from her ridiculous stand on immigration and on the embarrassing sanctuary status she has championed for Oregon.

She is proud of the fact that she has engineered some 15 lawsuits against the federal government, which is trying hard to enforce immigration law. Brown defies that. We saw the results of this attitude as the ultra-radical and terrorist group known as Antifa surrounded the ICE headquarters in Portland.

Believe it or not, Brown's new \$22.6 billion general fund budget includes \$2 million for legal counseling for illegal immigrants in Oregon. Get that? Legal counseling for illegal immigrants — isn't that an oxymoron? So our tax money is now going to pay legal fees to help Kate Brown defy federal laws (15 lawsuits she has filed against the government) and to support illegal aliens (legal counseling). Also, after running one of the most expensive — well funded — campaigns in Oregon history, now she has decided to offer a constitutional amendment limiting funding of future Oregon elections? She didn't mind spending a horrendous amount of money to get re-elected, but she doesn't want anyone else to.

I remind the good people of Eastern Oregon of a graph that really expressed the

nature of Oregon politics. The great majority of Oregon voters live within just a few miles of the Willamette River. The votes and feelings and opinions of us here in Eastern Oregon don't count for much on major issues like illegal immigration. Feel a little helpless? I sure do.

David Burns
Pendleton

New education funding is encouraging sign

With the 2019 legislative session just around the corner, I was encouraged last week to see Gov. Kate Brown's proposed education budget and hear her call to raise new money to invest in our students.

For nearly three decades we have underfunded schools and left our local school boards, such as the Pendleton School Board on which I serve, scrambling every year to make do with ever-scarcer resources. It is so refreshing to finally hear a meaningful proposal to fund our schools in a way that will allow our children a chance to reach their potential.

I salute the governor's vision and call on our elected legislators to find a way to reverse the downward spiral of underfunding our schools. The Joint Interim Committee on Student Success is working on a blueprint to pay for a high-quality education system, and we cannot let this opportunity get away from us.

Dale Freeman, board chairman
Pendleton School District

OTHER VIEWS

The deadly soul of a new machine

By TIMOTHY EGAN
New York Times

Try to imagine the last 11 minutes of Lion Air Flight 610 in October. The plane is a new machine, Boeing's sleek and intelligent 737 Max 8, fitted with an advanced electronic brain. After takeoff, this cyberpilot senses that something is wrong with the angle of ascent and starts to force the jetliner down.

A tug of war follows between men and computer, at 450 miles an hour — the human pilots trying to right the downward plunge, the automatic pilot taking it back from them. The bot wins. The jetliner crashes into the Java Sea. All 189 onboard are killed.

And here's the most agonizing part: The killer was supposed to save lives. It was a smart computer designed to protect a gravity-defiance machine from error. It lacks judgment and intuition, precisely because those human traits can sometimes be fatal in guiding an aerodynamic tube through the sky.

We still don't know the exact reason the pilots of that fatal flight couldn't disable the smart system and return to manual control. It looks as if the sensors were off, instigating the downward spiral. A report by the Federal Aviation Administration in 2013 found that 60 percent of accidents over a decade were linked to confusion between pilots and automated systems.

But it's not too much of a reach to see Flight 610 as representative of the hinge in history we've arrived at — with the bots, the artificial intelligence and the social media algorithms now shaping the fate of humanity at a startling pace.

Like the correction system in the 737, these inventions are designed to make life easier and safer — or at least more profitable for the owners. And they do, for the most part. The overall idea is to outsource certain human functions, the drudgery and things prone to faulty judgment, while retaining master control. The question is: At what point is control lost and the creations take over? How about now?

It was exactly 200 years ago that Mary Shelley published a story of a monster who is still very much with us. Her book "Frankenstein" is about the consequences of man playing God. You can see permutations of the monster, a not-unsympathetic patchwork of human parts, in characters like Dolores,

the host who rebels in the television series "Westworld."

Shelley's concerns were raised at the peak of the Industrial Revolution, when the Western world was transformed from sleepy agricultural societies into a frenetic age of factories, machines and overcrowded cities.

All the helpful inventions also produced mass dislocation, life-killing pollution, child labor and — as per the invention of the cotton gin in the American South — an expansion of human enslavement.

Today we are close to creating a human brain inside a computer — an entirely new species. In his book "Sapiens," Yuval Noah Harari takes us through a mostly upbeat tour of humanity since the cognitive revolution of 70,000

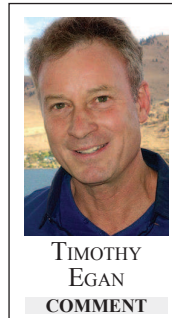
years ago. At the end of the book — our time — he warns about the new being, the cyborg now taking shape in a lab near you.

The CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella, hit a similar cautionary note at the company's recent annual shareholder meeting. Big Tech, he said, should be asking "not what computers can do, but what they should do."

It's the "can do" part that should scare you. Facebook, once all puppies, baby pictures and high school reunion updates, is a monster of misinformation. And Facebook's creator is more clueless than Dr. Frankenstein about the dangers of what he has unleashed on the world.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, has glibly assured us that building advanced artificial intelligence systems will root out the hate speech, lies and propaganda passed among the 2 billion active users of Facebook. But fake news — whether gossip shared by family members or the toxic kind spread by Russians in basements — is the mother's milk of Facebook. The AI may only make it easier for mass manipulation. In that sense, Facebook is headed for its own crash into the sea.

Driverless cars will soon be available for ride-sharing in the United States. If they can reduce the carnage on the roads — more than 70 million people killed and 4 billion injured worldwide since the dawn of the auto age — this will be a good thing. Except that this year a bot-car killed a woman in a crosswalk in Arizona, and others have been slower than humans to react. There shouldn't be any rush — except from the profit drivers at the ride-sharing companies — to hand over the steering wheel to a driver without a heartbeat.



TIMOTHY EGAN
COMMENT