

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEWS

State needs to fix faulty buying practices

Oregon state government has been stunningly inefficient when buying computers and other technology.

In fact, agencies' buying habits are so bad that the state unnecessarily spent an extra \$400 million to \$1.5 billion during the 2015-17 budget period, according to a recent report from the state Audits Division.

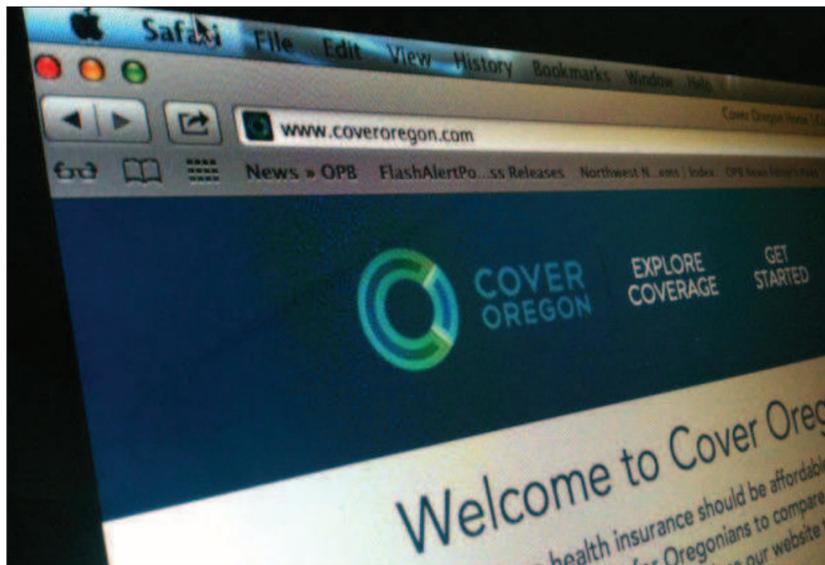
The problem is ironic: antiquated systems of purchasing goods and services for information technology. Some of the purchasing systems date to the 1990s.

As a result, whereas one agency might pay \$176.40 for a 24-inch Dell monitor, another paid \$241.15. The state bought 1,300 such monitors during the study period, according to the audit report, and could have saved more than \$16,500 if it bought at the lowest price.

In another example, agencies paid 131 different prices for the same Ricoh surge protector, ranging from \$65.90 to \$173.98. Prices also fluctuated widely for some software licenses and service contracts.

The state's woes in managing IT projects have been well-known, and the audit report says more improvements also are needed there.

National studies have shown that the majority of IT projects run into significant issues, whether in the public or private sector. The technology itself



EO file photo

is not to blame. The problems arise from human faults: arrogance in decision-making, internal rivalries, unrealistic expectations of what technology can do, equally unrealistic timelines, changing desires, mismanagement, lack of oversight and inadequate attention to testing.

All those showed up in the infamous Cover Oregon debacle.

As for buying IT products and services, the audit report criticizes technology as well as procedures. We are well into the 21st century, but unlike most corporations, the state lacks an overall purchasing system for prod-

ucts, whether computers or those little adhesive notes known as "stickies."

The lack of a viable eProcurement system is indefensible and illustrates how public officials' claims of cost-efficiency do not always match reality. Technology purchases represent a fraction of the state's multi-billion-dollar budget. But if the lessons learned from this audit were applied to all state purchasing, the estimated savings could average from 5 percent to 20 percent.

The state is making progress, having launched OregonBuys as a pilot program for eProcurement in 2017. Ten state agencies participate so far. It

won't be fully implemented until mid-2021. Secretary of State Dennis Richardson, whose Audits Division performed the IT purchasing audit, and Republican legislators are outraged about the long timeline. Gov. Kate Brown and Democratic lawmakers should be, too.

Brown proposed some expansion of OregonBuys, but the state should move much faster. Investments in eProcurement will save money and potentially time.

There are all sorts of reasons to oppose centralized purchasing. It limits choice and reduces personal decision-making. Some jobs might become unnecessary. The technology of such a system is fallible. But so is the current decentralized approach. The audit report said, "purchase-level data is only available for approximately 12.5 percent of procurement expenditures."

The report also noted, "Without the ability to analyze detailed purchase data for all procurements, Oregon is unable to identify opportunities for potentially millions of dollars in cost savings." In contrast, states such as Georgia have achieved significant savings by tracking and analyzing such purchase contracts.

If the governor and Legislature truly are serious about saving money without harming services, as they should be, the audit report is a good place to start.

OTHER VIEWS

Useless knowledge begets New Horizons mission

In October 1939, as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin were plunging the world into war, an American educational reformer named Abraham Flexner published an essay in Harper's Magazine under the marvelous title, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge."

Noting the way in which the concerns of modern education increasingly turned toward worldly problems and practical vocations, Flexner made a plea for "the cultivation of curiosity" for its own sake.

"Now I sometimes wonder," he wrote, "whether there would be sufficient opportunity for a full life if the world were emptied of some of the useless things that give it spiritual significance; in other words, whether our conception of what is useful may not have become too narrow to be adequate to the roaming and capricious possibilities of the human spirit."

I thought of Flexner's essay while following the New Horizons flyby of minor planet 2014 MU69, better known as Ultima Thule. This comes right on the heels of NASA's Osiris-Rex probe entering into orbit around the asteroid Bennu, barely a month after the InSight lander touched down on Mars, and not six months since the Parker Solar Probe began its trip toward the sun.

You don't have to be a space geek to appreciate the awe and wonder involved in these missions: New Horizons' stunning close-ups of Pluto and its moons; the breathtaking ambition of Osiris-Rex to collect rocks and dust from Bennu's surface and return them to earth. The marriage of disinterested science and technological wizardry on the farthest-flung adventures of the human race is what John Adams had in mind when he wrote that he had to "study Politicks and War that my sons may have the liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy." It is among the greatest fulfillments of the American dream.

It is not, however, among the most commonly understood ones. Typically, we

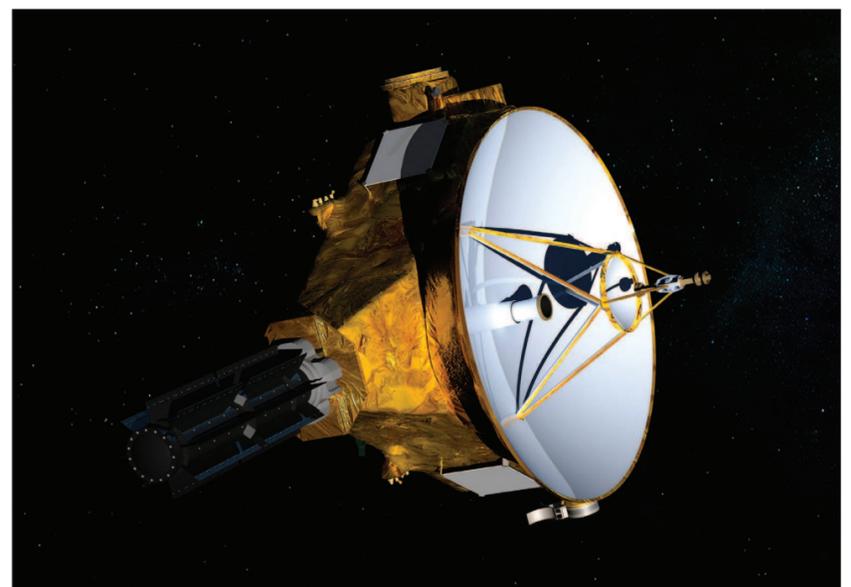
think of the American dream in materialistic terms — a well-paid job; a half-acre lot; children with better opportunities than our own. Or we think of it in political terms, as an ever-expanding domain of ever-greater freedom and equality.

But prosperity, freedom, equality for what? The deep critique of the liberal society is that it refuses on principle to supply an answer: Each of us lives in pursuit of a notion of happiness that is utterly subjective, generally acquisitive and almost inevitably out of reach — what psychologists call the "hedonic treadmill." Religious cults and authoritarian systems work differently: Purposes are given, answers supplied, questions discouraged or forbidden, and the burdens of individual choice and moral agency largely lifted. They are dictatorships of meaning.

Flexner was acutely aware of this. "In certain large areas — Germany and Italy especially — the effort is now being made to clamp down the freedom of the human spirit," he wrote. "Universities have been so reorganized that they have become tools of those who believe in a special political, economic, or racial creed. Now and then a thoughtless individual in one of the few democracies left in this world will even question the fundamental importance of absolutely untrammelled academic freedom."

Flexner's case for such untrammelled freedom isn't that it's a good unto itself. Freedom also produces a lot of garbage. His case is that freedom is the license the roving mind requires to go down any path it chooses and go as far as the paths may lead. This is how fundamental discoveries — aka, "useless knowledge" — are usually made: not so much by hunting for something specific, but by wandering with an interested eye amid the unknown. It's also how countries attract and cultivate genius — by protecting a space of unlimited intellectual permission, regardless of outcome.

All of this, of course, has its ultimate uses — hence the "usefulness" of Flexner's



NASA via AP

This illustration provided by NASA shows the New Horizons spacecraft.

title. Newton's third law of motion begets, after 250 years, the age of the rocket; the discovery of the double helix delivers, several decades later, Crispr. It's also how nations gain or lose greatness. The "reorganized" universities of fascist Italy and Germany had no place for Leo Szilard, Enrico Fermi or Albert Einstein. They became the Allies' ultimate weapon in World War II.

Which brings us back to New Horizons, Osiris-Rex, InSight and every other piece of gear flying through the heavens at taxpayer expense and piling up data atop our already vast stores of useless knowledge. What are they doing to reduce poverty? Nothing. Environmental degradation? Zippo. The opioid crisis? Still less.

And yet, in being the kind of society that does this kind of thing — that is, the kind that sends probes to the edge of the solar system; underwrites the scientific establishment that knows how to design and deploy these probes; believes in the value of knowledge for its own sake; cultivates habits of truthfulness, openness, collabo-

ration and risk-taking; enlists the public in the experience, and shares the findings with the rest of the world — we also discover the highest use for useless knowledge: Not that it may someday have some life-saving application on earth, though it might, but that it has a soul-saving application in the here and now, reminding us that the human race is not a slave to questions of utility alone.

There are plenty of reasons to worry about the state of the American mind today, as well as the state of the university. Speech is not as free; gadflies are not as welcome; inquiry is dictated as much by the availability of funding as it is by the instincts of curiosity, and funding itself is often short. But let's start 2019 on a happier note. Even in the midst of the shutdown, the New Horizons mission was still considered an "essential" activity of government. If Flexner were alive to witness it, he might say, "most essential."

Bret Stephens is a columnist for the New York Times.

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