EAST OREGONIAN OPINION

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Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Sweetheart deal for departing HR director raises questions

The Oregon Legislature's long-time human resources director was deservedly criticized for her handling of sexual harassment cases at the State Capitol. Yet Lore Christopher received a sweet deal for retiring at the end of 2018, including the opportunity to work from home at $12,116 a month through August 2019.

Why? The Legislature's elected leaders have mostly been mum. This matters because their silence contradicts their professed commitment to improving the workplace culture around the Legislature, including transparency and accountability.

Christopher announced her retirement last October, writing in part, "I have committed to be here, on board, to manage a successful transition and to help guide the Employee Services team through August of 2019 to complete the pay equity implementation, reconsideration process and other ongoing critical projects during the on-boarding of the next human resources director."

At the time, her retirement seemed a natural occurrence despite the turmoil engulfing the Capitol. Only through the dogged reporting of EO Media Group's Claire Withycombe have Oregonians now learned that Christopher would be paid this year for working from home and that — in the "Retirement and Transition Agreement" she signed in September — she had waived any right to sue for age discrimination.

The Legislature still has made no public announcement about Christopher's circumstances or whom to contact about sexual harassment issues until lawmakers establish their planned Equity Office, which would handle such complaints. Interim HR Director Jessica Knieling did notify legislators and staff on Thursday that two law firms had been retained "to handle any investigations into allegations of harassment or discrimination." (The lawyers are Sarah J. Ryan at Jackson Lewis P.C. and Brenda K. Baumgart at Stoel Rives. Both firms have Portland offices.)

Knieling took over the HR job on March 11, coming from the state Department of Administrative Services, where she was a top HR administrator. Legislators called her "a breath of fresh air" when she met Wednesday with the Joint Committee on Capitol Culture.

The legislative committee is making solid progress on implementing the recommendations of the Oregon Law Commission, as required by the $1.3 million settlement that House Speaker Tina Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney recently signed with the state Bureau of Labor and Industries.

The settlement included this provision: "The offices of Legislative Counsel and Legislative Administration will have no role in handling investigations related to discrimination and sexual harassment." That declaration seems a tacit admission that legislative management, including the human resources office, lacked credibility and expertise. In hindsight, the blame rests not only on the paid management but also on Kotek, Courtney and their predecessors, who failed to recognize or ignored the profound deficiencies in how the Legislature prevented, investigated and corrected sexual harassment.

The retirement agreement with Christopher appears to reflect that attitude. She was to retire as HR director on Dec. 31, 2018, or when her successor was named, whichever was later, in which case her title as of Jan. 2, 2019, would be "acting human resources director." Her last day working in the Employee Services Office was to be Dec. 31, or a mutually agreed date.

Once a new HR director was in place, Christopher was to work from home through August 2019 as an HR special projects coordinator and continue receiving her $12,116 monthly salary, as well as such benefits as medical insurance and vacation.

Questions persist. If Christopher was good at her job, why this sweetheart deal? If she was not good at her job — as was alleged by some who said they endured sexual harassment — why this sweetheart deal?

It also is galling that legislative management made the nice retirement deal with the departing HR director in September at the same time the legislative leadership was fighting BOLI's investigation, claiming it was reckless and political.

Political? To some extent. Reckless? Definitely not. The proof lies in the $1.3 million settlement.

YOUR VIEWS

New gas tax not the only way to fund street repair

Is the proposed 13 cent gas tax a trial balloon? If it is, from the looks of the respondents on the internet, the public says a resounding no.

But just in case it is a real proposal, a few things to remember: The first gas tax for 2 cents proposed in 2005 for street repair was defeated. The then-city manager decided to raise the franchise fee from 5 percent to 7 percent, the state limit. This would have amounted to $555 this year.

The only problem with that was none of the increase ever made it to the street department. Can you see why people are not sure we can trust what has been proposed by the city?

The city of Pendleton did manage to pass two gas taxes, one for the overpass behind Walmart. This started out as a underpass and ended up as an expensive overpass. The other one was the notorious Road To Nowhere — who can forget that one? It passed with a small majority because of a threat to add the cost to our property taxes, which the city could not do.

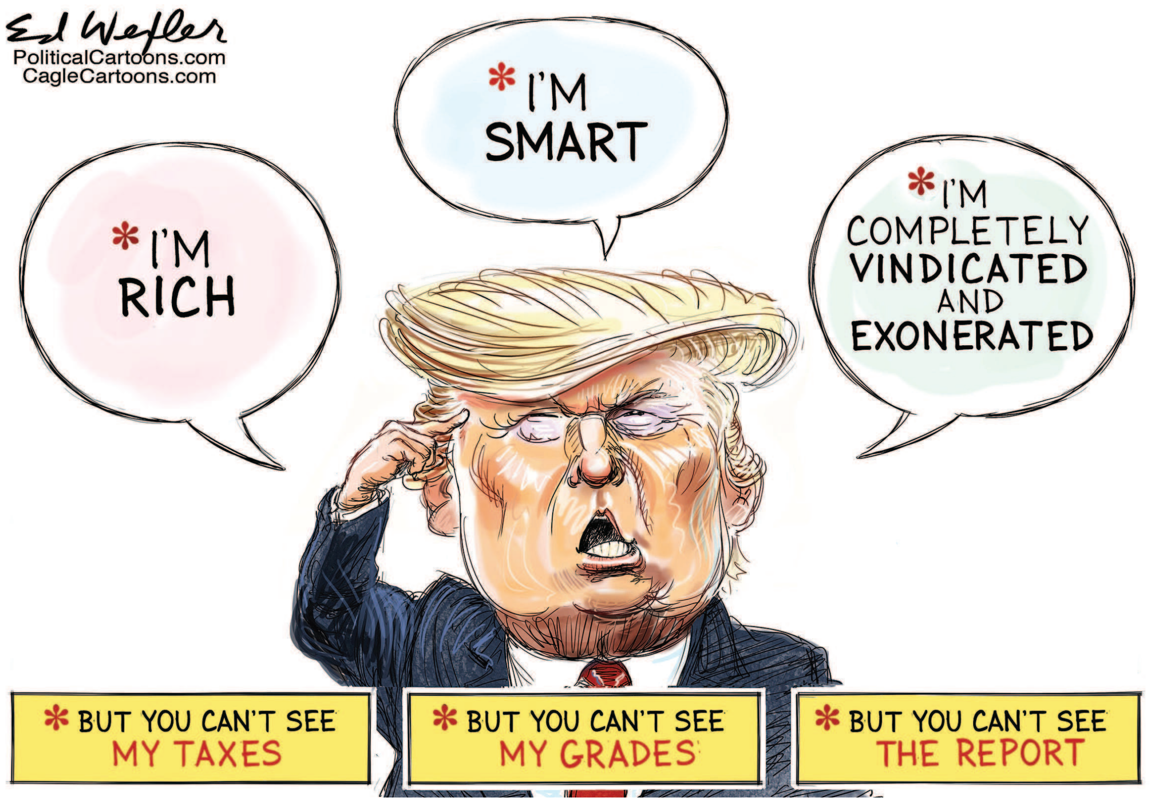
There are other options to fund street repair. There are cuts that can be made and revenue sources that could be tapped without putting an undue burden on residents of Pendleton.

One I could support would be a $ 2 city fee on all events in Pendleton. I don't think that much would keep anyone from going to the Round-Up or any other event.

Rex J. Morehouse
Pendleton

OTHER VIEWS

The Mick Mulvaney presidency



This should have been one of the best weeks of Donald Trump's presidency — a week when the shadow of impeachment lifted, when his fiercest critics were dramatically wrong-footed, when the NO COLLUSION! tweets came with a certified-by-Robert-Mueller stamp.

But the rule of the Trump administration is that even political victories must be followed by egregious acts of self-sabotage. And so it was that the White House took the opportunity afforded by the Mueller investigation's wrap-up to back a lawsuit against Obamacare that even the health care law's conservative critics believe is frivolous, reviving a debate that tanked Trump's approval rating during 2017 and that no Republican of consequence wants to reopen today.

Ross Douthat
COMMENT

Then just to add an extra self-inflicted wound, the administration also endorsed defunding the Special Olympics — a position that lasted all of 48 hours before Trump reversed it, blaming "my people" rather than himself.

What unites both of these blunders, apart from simple political stupidity, is that neither has much to do with actual policymaking. There is little chance that John Roberts, having declined to do away with Obamacare when the law faced a reasonable constitutional challenge, will rule in favor of a more implausible attack. There is zero chance that the Special Olympics will be defunded; the budget that imagined doing so was a symbolic statement that gets ignored by Congress every year.

So why revive the Obamacare debate? Why set yourself up for "Trump Defunds Special Olympics" headlines? The answer is that there are effectively two Trump presidencies. One offers something like what the president promised on the campaign trail — a break with Paul Ryan's approach to entitlement reform, a more moderate tack on health care, an indifference to Obama-era conservative orthodoxies on fiscal and monetary policy.

The other offers a continuation of the Tea Party's insistence on spending cuts and Obamacare repeal, and appropriately its present leader is a former Tea Party congressman — Mick Mulvaney, whose zeal is apparently the main reason that the Obamacare lawsuit now has administration support.

The first presidency is mostly real; the second presidency has been mostly imaginary ever since the failure of Obamacare repeal left Ryanism neutered. Trump hasn't done some of the biggest things he promised. But he has ended austerity budgeting, ignored entitlement reform, reformed Obamacare around the edges while leaving its coverage guarantee intact, embraced protectionism and jawboned the Federal Reserve to be more inflationary.

At the same time, though, he has relied on personnel who are associated with 2010-era Republican orthodoxy, rather than seeking the kind of conservatives who have actively theorized for a more populist right. Trump's choice of Steve Moore to the Federal Reserve is a recent case study: Instead of elevating a principled inflation dove, Trump picked a hack who was obsessed with imaginary inflation under Obama, and only flipped to back a looser monetary policy because, well, it was the Trumpy thing to do.

But at least with Moore, Trump is getting someone whose official views now line up with his administration's political interests. With Mulvaney he has something stranger: A subordinate who plays let's-pretend-to-be-the-Tea-Party whenever he gets the chance, limning an essentially fictional version of the Trump presidency in budget documents and pushing the president to publicly back forays like the Obamacare lawsuit that have little chance of changing anything.

You could describe the cut-the-Special-Olympics budgets and anti-Obamacare efforts as just classic Republican hypocrisy, the tribute that big-spending vice plays to small-government virtue. But Trump campaigned in 2016 as the guy who would get rid of this charade, who would actually identify as a free-spending populist rather than a movement conservative, who would enable the GOP to be a "worker's party" in its self-conception rather than just in its compromises with political reality.

Instead, thanks to his "people" and his own rhetorical shifts, he's ended up in a weirder position. The Trump record would justify campaigning in 2020 the way he did in 2016, claiming to have governed as a populist, taking credit for reforming Obamacare rather than eliminating it, taking credit for Congress' guns-and-butter budgets and all the popular spending they contain.

But right now Trump is letting the mostly imaginary version of his presidency, the Mulvaney version, define his priorities and public rhetoric. Which makes him look like a guy who didn't keep his promises, who promised to be a different kind of Republican and then kept trying to defund the Special Olympians and throw people off their health care coverage.

That's the most unpopular version of Trumpism, which is saying something. And his chances in 2020 will turn, in part, on whether he realizes it. His real economic record, however haphazard and under-theorized, could still win him re-election. The Mulvaney fantasia guarantees defeat.

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