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OUR VIEW

Pain in the 21st century to fix problems of the 20th

THE GOVERNOR CALLS HER PROPOSAL
“SHARED RESPONSIBILITY.”
SHARED PAIN IS MORE LIKE IT.

The good news is Gov. Kate Brown finally has a plan for putting PERS on solid financial footing. The bad news is that it includes pushing SAIF off that solid ground, as well as taking most of Oregonians' tax “kicker” refund next year.

Brown says her proposal has something for anyone to like and to dislike. She is correct. The Oregon Education Association immediately screamed that she was trying to cut teachers' salaries. That is false. Brown wants public employees to accept a slight reduction in their future pensions so as to help pay the unfunded actuarial liability of the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System.

The governor calls her proposal “shared responsibility.” Shared pain is more like it.

PERS' inadequate funding is not the fault of everyday Oregonians or of current public employees. No, the blame lies with the 20th century legislators and union leaders who disregarded how bloated PERS retirement obligations possessed the potential to undermine state, school and local government budgets.

Brown's suggestion to take all

but \$100 of each Oregonian's kicker refund will draw howls from taxpayers. It certainly is one way to spread the PERS solution — and pain — among all Oregonians. But it smacks of class warfare, just like many other ideas in the Democrat-dominated Oregon Capitol. Any person, any business and any organization that makes much money seems to be under attack.

The governor's suggested raid on the State Accident Insurance Fund is a perfect and unfortunate example. Legislators in 1982 illegally raided the semi-public workers' compensation carrier, taking \$81 million to prop up the state budget.

After being forced to repay that money with interest, the Legislature learned from its mistake by subsequently making it legal in the future to raid SAIF surplus reserves. Brown and legislators considering her plan apparently didn't learn much else.

They are seduced by lawyers' advice that the new raid would be legal, just as then-Rep. Peter Courtney, D-Salem — now the Senate president — and

other legislators were assured in 1982 that their bipartisan raid on SAIF was legal.

As now, state officials at the time said SAIF had far more reserves than necessary for future claims and thus could easily weather the Legislature's intrusion. Maybe. But SAIF's sales plummeted, sending it into a years-long tailspin. It turns out that companies don't like to do business with an insurer whose money can be taken on a whim by the Legislature. Meanwhile, SAIF's top officials were so angry — for good reason — that they quit and formed a competing, private workers' compensation carrier that took a significant share of SAIF's business.

As justification for a new raid on SAIF, the governor and her cohorts point out that Oregon has some of the lowest workers' compensation rates in the nation and the highest rate of dividends being paid back to employers.

Isn't that what we want — accident prevention being more effective,

employers paying less for coverage and SAIF customers getting rebates on some of their premiums, plus interest earned. That sounds like a well-run program, unlike PERS.

A legitimate argument can be made for SAIF to work with school districts on lowering their workers' compensation premiums. However, school districts are not the only governments facing soaring PERS rates. Rural public employers, especially fire districts, are especially hard hit.

Meanwhile, Brown is dead-set against offering current and future public employees a defined contribution plan, like a 401(k), as a complete alternative to PERS' defined benefit. She is wrong. So, too, are the legislators whose solution is to merely extend PERS' debt over more years, holding down the yearly cost to employers but increasing the overall cost.

There is more to Brown's plan, including her idea of diverting estate and capital gains taxes to pay for PERS. Such taxes are absurdly high in Oregon, but at least this way they would go for a good purpose.

Still, the best that can be said about Brown's proposal is that it is ... a proposal, not necessarily a wise or innovative proposal.

YOUR VIEWS

We cause street damage, we should pay for repairs

By now just about everybody agrees the streets of Pendleton are worn out and breaking apart. The cause of such wear and tear is obviously due to the vehicles we all drive on these streets day after day.

Over the past 30 years the size and weight of our cars and trucks have increased substantially, which has hastened the street damage. The most direct way to pay for street repair is to tax the vehicles that create the problem. A gasoline tax is equitable, as the heaviest vehicles that do the most street damage also use the most gasoline, so they will pay a little more at the pump. But a fuel tax on all vehicles means everybody chips in.

No one likes taxes, but let's face it, folks, we created the problem, so it's up to us to pay for its solution.

Terry Templeman
Pendleton

Show the taxpayers you're serious

According to the city officials, that 13 cent gas tax won't solve our street problems in itself. The public works director, Bob Patterson, who previously suggested streets be reclassified as a utility and residents billed accordingly, has proposed a street light fee. The city, rather than paying its electric bill, currently \$16,000 monthly, from the \$1.1 million annual PP&L franchise fee, is actually using the street maintenance fund. When queried, the city manager explained that all franchise fees go into the General Fund, and paying that power bill from that fund would require cuts in other programs. The room went silent and the subject quietly died.

Mayor Turner presented a list of possible taxes and fees and promised to lobby all major civic organizations to get some consensus of their views. It's a pretty smart move considering these groups tend to have a higher percentage of people that vote than the general public. Remember, only 22% of the voters turned out for that vote on the new fire station, so don't look for any town hall meetings that include the general public.

There are a lot of angry people out there. They're tired of hearing that our only path to success is new taxes and fees, tired of hearing our managers have again received glowing performance reports and deserve a raise, especially when there is not a single suggestion or recommendation on any budget cuts. A reasonable gas tax is probably the fairest of any proposal, but 13 cents? The parameters used by the city manager to arrive at that 13 cents, 24.5 mpg from your automobile (in pickup country?), and 40% provided by tourists are simply not realistic, making it difficult to take his proposal seriously. Remember, a percentage of that tax goes to the retailer for collecting that tax, but I doubt it will make up for revenue lost when customers go elsewhere.

Try throwing the people a bone or two. An offer to use all the marijuana tax for streets would be a good start. Quit funding the Downtown Business Association. Agree to remove those ridiculous speed bumps when Main Street is repaved. Sell that 40 acres along the road to nowhere that has no utilities. Get rid of the old Eighth Street Bridge once and for all, and for heaven's sake, quit dumping our tax money into money pits like the Rivoli Theater. Voters might then be a little more sympathetic to a tax proposal.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

OTHER VIEWS

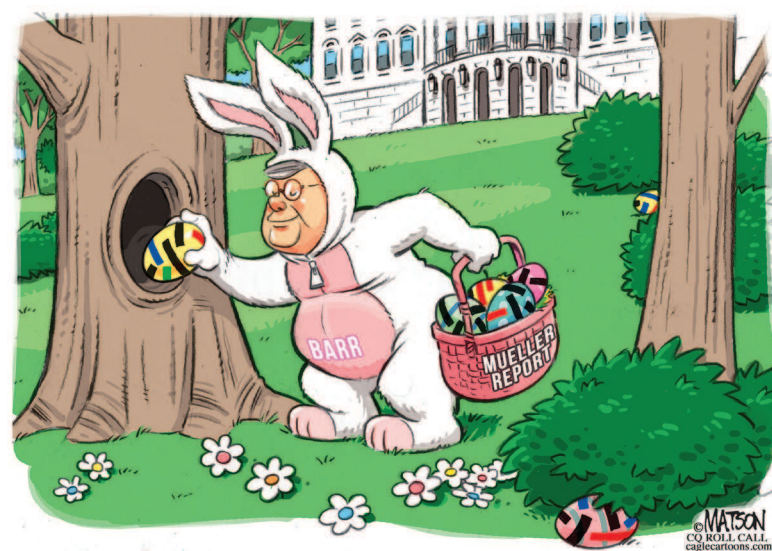
Five arguments the Mueller report won't settle

Attorney General Bill Barr will release a redacted version of the Mueller report this week. It will consume the political conversation for days, but even now it is clear that as much as the report might be talked about, it will not settle the main arguments that have raged about the Trump-Russia affair for more than two years. Here are five debates that won't be resolved, no matter how much of the report Barr makes public:

1. Collusion. On the face of it, Barr's summary of Mueller's conclusion could not be clearer: The evidence gathered by the special prosecutor does not show that the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with Russia to fix the 2016 election. So on the question “Will Mueller show that collusion occurred?” the answer seems a pretty straightforward no.

But that is not the end of it. Immediately upon the release of the summary, some of the president's accusers began moving the goalposts. Perhaps Mueller said the evidence did not establish beyond a reasonable doubt that there was no conspiracy or coordination. So maybe there is some evidence that shows some sort of collusion by some sort of standard that Trump's critics might adopt.

2. Obstruction. This is a guarantee: Some readers of the Mueller report will swear that it proves the president obstructed justice, while others will swear he did not obstruct justice. Mueller himself has made sure that will happen by not making what Barr called a “traditional prosecutorial judgment” on the obstruction question. Why Mueller did that is not clear; perhaps it will be revealed when the report is released. Barr



included this from Mueller on obstruction: “While this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him.”

That alone will be enough for Trump's adversaries to conclude that he obstructed justice: Look! Mueller specifically declined to exonerate Trump!

3. Impeachment. Some Democrats had hoped that the Mueller report would give them cover for impeaching the president. Some of those Democrats also hoped that the Mueller report would serve as a road map to impeachment, in effect doing for Congress the work of discovering and organizing evidence against the president.

But it appears Mueller won't make it easy for Democrats and it seems unlikely the Mueller report will make impeachment an unavoidable conclusion. It's more likely the Democrats who want to impeach Trump will want to impeach Trump after Mueller's report, and the Democrats who oppose impeachment will continue to oppose it.

4. Investigating the investigation. Many Republicans have sought to uncover the events surrounding the decision by U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies to investigate the Trump campaign in 2016. It's been hard find-

ing out what happened.

Rep. Devin Nunes, when he was chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, shook loose a lot of information, but much remains unknown to the public. Now those Republicans are counting on an investigation by the Justice Department to reveal more. And they are hoping that President Trump will declassify documents that could shed new light on the matter. One place they are not looking for answers is in the Mueller report.

5. Why a special counsel? Some question whether there was really a need for a special counsel to investigate Trump-Russia. First, they cite the fact that there was no underlying crime. Second, they point to the circumstances of Mueller's appointment, when fired FBI director James Comey leaked confidential documents in order to set off an uproar that he hoped would result in the appointment of a special counsel.

As it turned out, things went according to Comey's plan. But was a special counsel really necessary to investigate the crime that did not occur? Like so many others, don't look for that argument to be resolved by the Mueller report.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.