

Future: Youth-driven climate change movement arrives in Heppner

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The event was spearheaded by Hunter Houck, 13, and his friend Chloe McLaren, who was home with a stomach flu on Friday. Hunter said they were inspired by seeing news of youths hosting similar protests in larger cities around the world.

Thousands of students marched against climate change in Paris, France, on Feb. 22. They were joined by hundreds of thousands more students around the world who walked out of school on March 15 for a global climate strike, and continue to keep the topic in the news through smaller demonstrations and social media campaigns.

While such protests might not raise eyebrows in Portland, the teens acknowledged Heppner — a small rural town of 1,268 in a county where 68% of voters chose Donald Trump in 2016 — might not be an obvious fit.

"It's a conservative town," Amelia said.

In fact, students said they purposely hosted the event on a day without school, outside of school property, because they didn't think they would get permission to do a school-affiliated event. Hunter said a few teachers expressed support, but, overall, climate change felt like a "taboo" topic.

"One of our teachers actually spent quite a bit of

time telling us why climate change is fake," he said.

Heppner Jr./Sr. High School was closed on Friday and principal Matt Combe didn't respond to an email Friday afternoon asking what guidance the school provides staff on addressing climate change.

Hunter noted criticism from adults outside of school, particularly a letter to the editor in the *East Oregonian* telling them to not pay attention to "socialist scare tactics and indoctrination." But he and other teens at the event also spoke of support from parents and friends.

On Friday, the reception from passersby was mixed. As the youths held up signs with messages such as "There is no Planet B" and "This can't wait until I'm older" some adults honked or waved in support, drawing cheers from the band of protesters. Other drivers shook their heads or frowned, and a woman on foot refused to take a pamphlet offered to her.

"Well that was rough," eighth-grader Alexandra Caven remarked as a man looked at her "Honk if you love the Earth" sign and then pointedly looked away.

After about an hour of protesting she said she wished that some adults had taken the students up on their invitation to the public to participate.

"They could make more



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Heppner teens display signs to passing motorists during a climate change rally on Friday afternoon at Heppner City Park.

of a difference," she said.

They did take heart the people liking their livestreamed videos and Instagram photos from the scene, which they hoped would expand their reach beyond Heppner.

Hunter said they will probably stage another event in June, and they were hoping to be able to talk to their state legislators at some point. He threw out

the names of a few bills the group supports, particularly Senate Bill 90, which would ban restaurants from automatically supplying customers with plastic straws.

The group is also circulating a petition to get curbside recycling in Heppner, and have been talking with local business owners about reducing waste. Hunter said the owner of the coffee shop where they staged their

planning meetings said she would be willing to look into biodegradable straws.

The youths stressed the fact that they were worried that by the time they were old enough to run for office or own a business, it would

be too late to reverse mankind's effects on the planet. So they were doing what they could now.

"We're a small group doing big things for a small community," Hannah Green said.

MORE DETAILS

For more information about upcoming events or the recycling petition visit bit.ly/heppnerclimate.

PERS: Conflicting claims linger over PERS reform, education funding

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districts as grants. The rest of the money goes to early learning and state programs with defined purposes, like increasing the availability of school breakfasts.

"We built this specifically so that we have a fairly stable funding source that can go forward that's going to go for those things," said Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay.

Meanwhile, PERS costs for public agencies have been growing over the past decade.

Cities, counties, school districts and other public entities are obligated to pay for the benefits they've promised to their workers, and that's forced many of them to find the money by cutting spending elsewhere. For many school districts, that's meant laying off teachers.

Kim Sordyl, a former member of the state Board of Education and a vocal critic of the PERS system, argues that new money will be swallowed up by the ever-increasing amount that school districts contribute to their employees' pensions.

"Those contributions are snowballing, and they will eat up most of the Student Success money," Sordyl said.

With or without the extra \$2 billion per biennium, school districts will be paying for employee retirement plans, Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, pointed out. He disagrees with the idea that because their PERS expenses are growing, it's not worth

raising revenue for schools.

"The logic there is, 'So don't give schools this extra \$2 billion, because it will just go to PERS,'" said Hass, who worked on the tax plan. "If you don't give them the \$2 billion, this PERS bill doesn't go away."

Right now, school districts in Oregon get about three-quarters of their money from the state school fund, and it's up to them to choose how to budget and spend that money, according to Peter Rudy, Oregon Department of Education spokesman. Rudy said the "vast majority" of a school district's expenses, including staffing costs, are paid for with money from the state school fund. Federal money covers most of the rest.

Student Success money is restricted. When they apply for Student Success grants, school districts are required to explain how they will use the money, and they have to report back to the Education Department. There are a number of allowed uses for the grants. Paying for PERS expenses is not one of them, the act's architects say.

"It's not going to go to funding PERS," Roblan said. "It's going to go to funding things in the classroom and making sure our goal of getting to 90-some-percent graduation rate is fulfilled."

The act has an emphasis, Hass said, on "accountability — from application requirements to reports that have to be checked and rechecked by

the department."

That's not to say Roblan and Hass aren't concerned about the PERS dilemma. Both of them voted Thursday, May 23, in favor of Senate Bill 1049, a bipartisan proposal geared toward reining in rising PERS costs. It passed the Senate 16-12, with five Democrats voting against it and three Republicans in support.

Several public employee unions, including the Oregon Education Association, oppose the bill, but it has the backing of Democratic leaders.

"That is the mechanism to try to address the concerns that all the new revenue will go to PERS," said Ken Rocco, the Legislature's non-partisan fiscal officer.

Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, said he voted the bill out of committee Tuesday, May 21, and plans to support it in the House "so that the tax increase that I voted for so proudly a few weeks ago has a chance of making a difference in the classroom and the workforce for our schools."

He explained, "School is teachers and professional assistants and janitors ... and if the cost of your workforce is going up because the retirement costs are going up, that's going to eat into the Student Success pot."

As PERS drains more and more money from school budgets, Nosse added, it becomes harder for districts to hire staff. That, in turn, means classroom sizes stay

large and student needs aren't addressed.

"Better schools means more workers," Nosse said.

The state's largest teachers' union sees it differently.

"You can't improve schools by losing educators, and that's exactly what would happen if this bill passes," said John Larson, a Hermiston High School teacher and OEA president.

Although he believes reforms are needed, Nosse said it's "agonizing" for him to vote to cut future PERS benefits — not least, he acknowledged, because he's earned the backing of unions.

"That is my base," Nosse said. "I mean, I come out of the labor movement in this state."

A former math teacher and principal at Marshfield High School who retired in 2004, Roblan receives nearly \$8,000 monthly from PERS. Despite that, he supports efforts to reform the system, and he said he's hopeful that labor groups will recognize the need to rein in rising pension costs.

"It's going to take a lot of work for people, but I have a belief that people will recognize — including employees — if you don't do it, then you lose people," Roblan said. "Or you get bigger class sizes, or you do other kinds of things, because they've only got so much of their resources that they can spend towards (PERS), and they don't get any of these new resources to spend towards it, so it's

going to affect other parts of the system if we don't figure out how to get it more under control."

Schools have been underfunded in Oregon since voters approved Ballot Measure 5 in 1990, slashing their share of property tax revenue, Roblan said.

Oregon has one of the country's lowest on-time high school graduation rates — in the continental United States, only New Mexico and Washington, D.C., are worse — and also lags behind most other states on the amount of instructional time it requires.

Now, PERS is putting more pressure on school districts across the state.

The Beaverton School District, the state's third-largest, is contemplating layoffs as it stares at a \$16 million increase in PERS costs.

"PERS expenses will continue to challenge all governmental budgets across the state for several biennia," Superintendent Don Grotting warned in his budget message.

To the Oregon School Boards Association, that's all the more reason for the state to grant school districts more money to spend specifically on education — reducing class sizes, adding instructional hours, providing more electives and college preparatory courses, and beyond.

"Passing (the Student Success Act) allows them to pay their PERS obligation and also make significant investments into areas ... that

have potential for success," spokesman Alex Pulaski said.

Democrats and groups like the OSBA were ebullient after House Bill 3427 passed the Senate and was signed into law, with several key senators describing it as one of the most important votes they have taken. Brown officially signed the bill May 16.

"From our perspective, this is the biggest win for Oregon students, for the future of Oregon, that we could have possibly imagined," Pulaski said.

Roblan and Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, who co-chair the committee that developed the Student Success Act, said they made a conscious decision not to address PERS in their legislation.

"We didn't tie doing the Student Success work to PERS reform, because as I have said publicly and privately, we've done PERS reform twice in the last 15 years; we haven't done revenue reform in almost 30," Smith Warner said. "That was the highest-priority need."

However, the Senate moved quickly to pass SB 1049, the PERS reform bill, less than two weeks after approving the Student Success Act.

"I think for a lot of us, that was kind of an implicit logic that we need to do both of these," Hass said. "They're both hard votes for everybody."

Fire: Deal nearly done to create fire authority

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overcoming some shared history, he said, and not all of it good. Some cases required acknowledgment of past wrongs while others needed the willingness to move on and try harder.

"What's really nice is everybody is cooperating, everybody is here," he said, "and we're just trying to provide good public service."

The four districts often respond to the same fires, vehicle crashes and more. The agreement reduces response times, Baty said. Fire district personnel now have to wait until a minimum crew of three shows up and the station, but the proposal allows personnel instead to leave right

from their homes to get to the emergency. And East Umatilla Fire and Rescue will have two staff on duty to respond to fires and other calls for help.

The deal also allows the agencies to share resources, which would make paying for the cost of vehicle repairs or capital improvements easier to afford. Given how often they have mutual responses, Helix, for example, getting a new engine in its fire truck would benefit East Umatilla, and vice versa.

The formation of the new fire authority does not reinvent the wheel. Baty said this is akin to what happened in Hermiston with the creation of Umatilla County Fire District No. 1. But this plan does

not need voter approval nor is it changing what anyone pays in taxes.

Baty and other fire staff have held public meetings about the effort. The second-to-last was Friday night at the Medic 400 headquarters in Athena. Klaus and Mary Hoehna of Weston were among the few non-fire district personnel to attend. Klaus Hoehna serves on the Local Emergency Planning Committee and said he supports the four agencies teaming up.

"I like the idea of quick response," he said. "That's a big selling point for me."

He and Mary Hoehna also agreed locals like to see public agencies cooperate and find smart ways to use public money.

Baty said some of the meetings have had good participation, and the one criticism he heard was why this has not happened sooner.

"I really didn't have an answer for that," he said.

Pending the approval from Helix, East Umatilla Fire and Rescue would go into effect July 1. The last public meeting takes place June 10 at 7 p.m. at the East Umatilla County Rural Fire Protection District office, 103 W. Main St.

Baty said if someone has a good reason not to go forward, they should present that. Getting this far has taken considerable effort, he said, and if residents don't want it, the four districts need to know.

Streets: Pendleton streets could get \$3 million shot in the arm

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the city is set to spend more than \$1.6 million on street maintenance in 2019-20.

But the city would have to spend that amount year-in and year-out to make a dent in improving road quality, and if the city wanted to eliminate the road maintenance backlog and bring every road into good condition, it would need to spend \$4.1 million per year over the next decade.

In past meetings, Fairley has said that the council can't be content to raise street funding enough to just stop the bleeding and members need to imple-

ment bold ideas to solve the problem.

But both Marks and Fairley said they're going to reserve judgement on the \$3 million urban renewal boost until they hear all the facts and public input.

Tuesday's meeting comes amidst an ongoing effort from the council to poll the public on what kind of long-term revenue source it would find palatable to fund street maintenance.

Among the ideas the council has debated is a gas tax, a new hotel room tax, and a fee on event tickets.

Mayor John Turner has imposed a December deadline for a final proposal.