

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSH
PublisherKATHRYN B. BROWN
OwnerANDREW CUTLER
EditorWYATT HAUPT JR.
News EditorJADE McDOWELL
Hermiston Editor

Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Blight isn't just a Pendleton problem

The Pendleton Development Commission made the right decision last week when it directed its advisory committee to go back to the drawing board on a series of proposals to address city blight. The issue in question is the committee's housing loan proposal in which a homeowner inside the urban renewal district could acquire a no-interest loan up to \$16,000 fix the outside of a structure determined to be a blighted house.

For a homeowner, the key to the loan would be the fact the city will forgive 20% of the loan each year the owner passes an annual inspection until the loan is paid up. Rental home owners are also eligible for the program, though they can only qualify to have up to 50% of their loan forgiven.

Charles Denight, the associate director of the commission, said if the commission issued 30 such loans, the urban renewal district will shell out \$353,850 to the loan program over two years.

Downtown blight came into sharp focus when a study revealed 25 residential properties in the downtown area showed symptoms of blight, such as fading paint and little yard maintenance.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The city of Pendleton is examining a variety of proposed options for cleaning up and renovating blighted homes in the downtown area.

At a glance the loan program idea to encourage homeowners to provide upkeep on their property has some merit. Handing out cash to get people to do things they have already demonstrated they don't want to do may work. Money, after all, talks.

Yet the loan program isn't guaranteed to be effective. Some homeowners may not exhibit what President Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" and, instead of using the loan to

fix their home, could take the money and run.

The loan program, in short, can't fix human nature. Pendleton Mayor John Turner suggested the city go beyond the loan program and buy blighted houses and then link up with local people who specialize in restoring and "flipping" houses and then selling them. Turner's idea also has merit, but only because it is a clear example of an elected leader thinking out-

side the box. Entering a program with private individuals — with taxpayer money — who flip houses isn't a wise, long-term solution. In the end, it could create more problems than it solves.

Blight isn't just a Pendleton problem. For reasons that are varied — and to some extent, unclear — city blight impacts cities across the region. We all want our town to look good and be a place where visitors can remember as beautiful and welcoming. Walking down a street of homes with weeds for yards and shuttered, unattractive buildings doesn't make good memories.

That means our elected leaders need to do more to address this issue, and the development commission's focus on the issue is encouraging. Area lawmakers could just as easily ignore the blight issue and place their attention elsewhere. That they are trying to find a solution should be good news for voters.

The loan program has some promise but, as explained last week, isn't ready for prime time. We all want to eradicate blight but if any taxpayer funds are going to be used for such efforts then our elected leaders must tread very carefully.

OTHER VIEWS

Dems 2020 task: Convince voters to overlook economy

On Oct. 28, 1980, in the final debate of his race against Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan asked a question that has come to define presidential politics.

"Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls, will stand there in the polling place and make a decision," Reagan said. "I think when you make that decision, it might be well if you would ask yourself, are you better off than you were four years ago?"

The answer for most voters was no, and Reagan won the election with 489 electoral votes to Carter's 49.

The question, or some close variation of it, has popped up many times since. "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" asked Bill Clinton in 1992. (In 1996, seeking re-election, Clinton declared, "We are better off than we were four years ago.")

"Are you better off than you were four years ago?" asked Barack Obama in 2008.

It worked for Clinton, and it worked for Obama. Now, the question is whether it will work for Donald Trump.

The president's Democratic 2020 challengers face a daunting problem: Unless there is a serious economic downturn, the answer to the are-you-better-off question will work in the president's favor, not his opponent's.

The unemployment rate, 3.7 percent, is the lowest it has been in half a century. June's employment report — 224,000 new jobs — brought another strong performance. The economy is growing at a slightly better than 3% annual rate. Most important, in the con-

text of an election, wages have grown 3.1% over last year with low inflation — improvement that has not been seen in years.

Any commentary on the 2020 election should include the warning that things could change. But barring a significant reversal, in 2020 most voters would likely answer yes when asked if they are better off than they were four years ago. And then they would vote to re-elect the incumbent president.

That leaves Democrats with the task of convincing millions of Americans to vote against their economic interests, to choose a Democrat over the president, during a time of economic satisfaction.

How to do it? Some Democrats have chosen to argue that there is something so wrong with the president — he's a racist, or he is an agent of Russia, or he is something equally terrible — that the traditional measures of a successful presidency do not apply.

Look at Democratic front-runner Joe Biden's entry into the race. Biden's announcement video focused entirely on the August 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which a counter-demonstrator was murdered.

"We are in the battle for the soul of this nation," Biden said. "If we give Donald Trump eight years in the White House, he will forever and fundamentally alter the character of this nation — who we are — and I

cannot stand by and watch that happen."

Fast-rising Democratic contender Kamala Harris chose another approach. "I know predators," the former prosecutor said recently, "and we have a predator living in the White House."

Other Democrats have portrayed Trump as a threat to American values, a threat to the rule of law, and a threat to the "norms" that guide our politics and lives.

Together, the message could be characterized as: Yes, the economy is growing, unemployment is low, and wages are rising. But America under a re-elected Trump would become a racist dystopia in which all the beliefs Americans hold near and dear would be under constant siege. How could any decent person vote to re-elect the president?

Beyond that, Democrats hope educated voters will be susceptible to anti-Trump social pressures, to being shamed out of voting for the president. The idea is that those voters will focus on their objections to the way Trump has conducted himself in office — the tweets! — and not on the economic results of his presidency. Indeed, a number of polls have shown that a significant group of voters who are happy about the economy still plan to vote against Trump.

"Trump's tenure is straining one of the most enduring rules in presidential politics: the conviction that a strong economy benefits the party holding the White House,"

BRYON
YORK
COMMENT

wrote analyst Ron Brownstein in *The Atlantic*. "Across many of the key groups in the electorate, from young people to white college graduates, Trump's job-approval rating consistently runs at least 25 points below the share of voters who hold positive views about either the national economy or their personal financial situation."

Of course, Democrats can't ignore the economy. So far, when they have addressed it, they haven't been terribly creative, relying on the standard-issue Democratic critique of Republican presidents — that Trump is creating an economy that benefits only his rich friends.

"Who is this economy really working for?" asked Elizabeth Warren at the first Democratic debate. "It's doing great for a thinner and thinner slice at the top."

It's not clear how well that will work. As *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board pointed out recently, under Trump, "wages are rising at the fastest rate in a decade for lower-skilled workers, and unemployment among less-educated Americans and minorities is near a record low." The result of the president's policies, the *Journal* argued, "has been faster growth and less inequality."

Another way to say that is that millions of Americans are better off than they were four years ago. The question in 2020 will be whether that matters.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.

Any new carbon bill should return money to Oregonians

The 2019 session of the Oregon Legislature was a doozy. With supermajorities in each house, Democrats didn't have to worry about passing most tax bills, which they did with abandon.

Republicans stewed until those in the Senate found a way to force their Democratic counterparts to the bargaining table. They picked up their papers and left the Senate, once in early May and again in late June. By doing so, they shut down the Senate by denying a quorum.

Senate President Peter Courtney says for the short 2020 legislative session he wants a bill that would cap and trade carbon emissions to "be ready to go on day one. It's got to come out of the Senate in five seconds."

It's a nice dream. But it presumes Democrats and Republicans can reach a deal. The second walkout by Senate Republicans was caused precisely because they could not. Even some Democrats didn't support the bill.

There are dangers for both parties if their only communication is shouting at one another across a crowded Senate floor. The last thing Oregon

needs is a Legislature as dysfunctional as Congress has become.

Democrats should remember they don't represent everyone. They picked up only a single seat in the Senate in the 2018 election. While they've been the majority party there for the last decade, their edge has fluctuated. Were they to lose the single seat they gained in 2018, their voting supermajority would be gone.

As for Republicans, they have received considerable flak for the walkouts. Legislating by walkout may cause some voters to walk away.

The best starting point for a new cap-and-trade bill is to stipulate that any revenue raised by it to be returned directly to Oregonians. House Bill 2020, the cap-and-trade bill that died, gave the money to the government to redistribute. Oregon government has a terrible track record when it comes to government programs designed to compel Oregonians to go green. A new carbon bill will be a lot more ready to go if it's ready to return the revenue raised to Oregonians.



Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published.

Send letters to the editor to editor@eastoregonian.com, or via mail to Andrew Cutler, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801