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OUR VIEW

PERS reform still vital

The state pension system is the toughest challenge Oregon faces that our leaders in Salem are likely to diligently avoid. The \$24 billion debt of the Public Employees Retirement System is complicated. It is paid off in some abstract future. Taxpayers don’t feel the impact of it very directly. And there’s no way to fix it without making taxpayers and people who get the pensions unhappy. So lawmakers in Salem and governors have been dodging reforms.

There have been notable exceptions, of course. State Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, has consistently tried to compel his fellow legislators to take on PERS.

Also, the 2019 reform by the 2019 Legislature and signed by Gov. Kate Brown was worth admiring. It put off payments of the debt more than it cut costs. Still, the state’s leadership did something. Democratic lawmakers, in particular, have taken considerable heat from unions for voting for the bill. Unions have said they won’t be making contributions to some political campaigns because



OPB Photo/Bryan M. Vance
The Oregon Public Employees Retirement System building in Tigard. The \$24 billion debt of the Public Employees Retirement System is complicated.

of it.

Now there’s a new danger that the state’s leadership will lapse back into its diligent efforts to avoid PERS challenges. 2019 was a good year for PERS, as *The Oregonian’s*

Ted Sickinger reported. Investment returns came in at just over 12%. Other forms of investment also showed improvement. The end result is that the \$27 billion PERS future liability may only be a \$24 billion

future liability.

The reduction in liability can make a big difference in budgets — for everything from state government to school districts like Pendleton or towns like Pilot Rock. When the liability goes down, so does the money government employers have to pay into PERS to cover the future liability of the retirement costs of their workers. In schools, when districts have to pay more to cover PERS, they can’t use that money to hire more teachers or buy new computers. Across PERS, “employers are paying an average base pension contribution rate of about 25% of payroll and about 18% of payroll after they receive rate offsets from any side accounts,” *The Oregonian* reported. Because, in part, of the reduction in the liability, those contribution rates may not have to climb in 2021.

That’s great news. It doesn’t mean PERS is not a big deal any more. Investment returns don’t always behave in a way that helps PERS.

Oregon will still have a huge unfunded debt that many of our state leaders would rather not talk about.

OTHER VIEWS

Family landlines better than smartphones for teens

When my childhood home got a phone call, it was an event. That was partly because my father, a longtime phone company employee, installed four brass-belled phones throughout our home. The phones rang so loudly it sounded like crooks were breaking into Fort Knox.

It was also because we were eager to discover who was calling — though I was always disappointed when I answered and it was a young man calling for one of my sisters.

You see, before Caller ID became common in the late 1980s, I was our home’s Caller ID.

“Who is it?” one of my sisters would whisper.

“Bill,” I’d say.

“Tell him I’m not here!”

I lied to dozens of young men, which filled me with anguish, because the brothers of the girls I called did the very same thing to me.

That’s why I read with interest an article in *The Atlantic* on the negative impact the declining use of landlines is having on family life.

Since today’s family members no longer experience the shared phone as a “space of spontaneous connection for the entire house” — they conduct private communication on their private phones — family interaction and togetherness is declining.

Our landline afforded zero privacy. If I wanted to ask a girl out, I had to use the kitchen phone, as its extra-long cord let me retreat down the basement steps, praying my sisters wouldn’t find out.

But they always did — and picked up one of the other three phones to listen in or say something to embarrass me.

Threatening to use their toothbrushes was the only way I could stop them.

Our old landline certainly promoted spontaneous connection.

On the rare nights my sisters weren’t mad at me for not replacing the toilet paper roll when the toilet paper ran out, we’d sit in the kitchen and they’d egg me on to participate in the lost art of the harmless prank phone call.

“Is Bob there?” I’d ask a friend, knowing Bob, his dad, was at work.

“He’s not home.”

I’d call back and ask again, “Is Bob there?”

“He’s not home!”

Calling back a third time, I’d say, “This is Bob. Do I have any messages?”

My sisters and I would roar with laughter, as though this was the funniest thing we’d ever done.



TOM PURCELL
COMMENT

The kitchen phone was the one we most used and it was our primary source of important family news. My mother’s reaction to whoever was on the line signified a range of emotions from joy to sadness.

We’d sit at the kitchen table, waiting for her to complete the call and share the news that an aunt had given birth or that a close relative had just passed.

In any event, today’s digitally connected teens spend way too much time on their smartphones isolated in their bedrooms, disengaged from family and face-to-face meetups with friends — a worrisome trend that has grown rapidly since smartphones became widespread.

Psychologist Jean Twenge writes in *The Atlantic* that the “portrait of iGen teens emerging from the data is one of a lonely, dislocated generation.” Twenge notes that Steve Jobs knew the negative effects and limited his own kids’ smartphone usage. Business Insider reports many tech-elite parents do likewise.

The Atlantic says some parents are maintaining landlines and limiting smartphone use to promote family connectedness. One parent provides her three daughters with a shared, “dumbed down” smartphone that limits privacy.

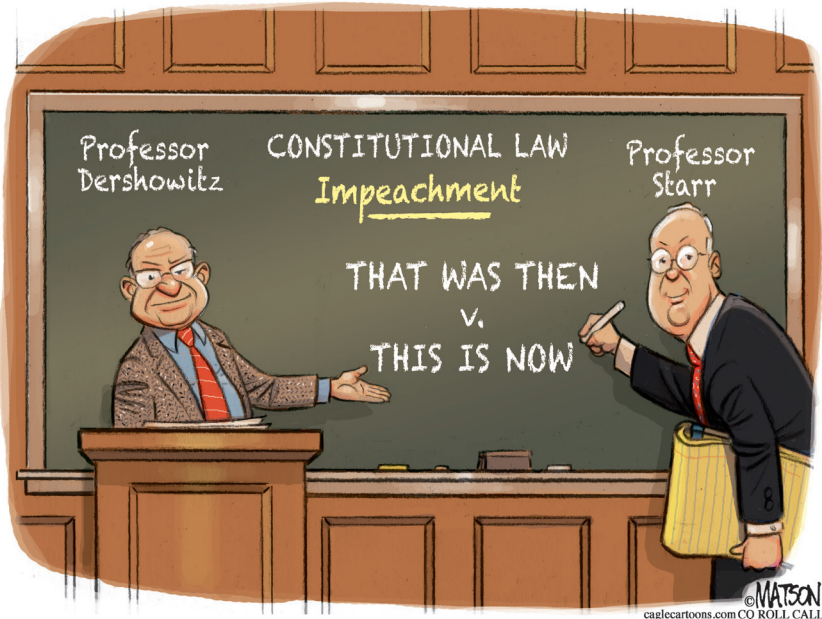
Who knows, with such common-sense solutions, family togetherness might be strengthened anew by lighthearted prank calls, such as this ’70s classic:

“Is your refrigerator running?”

“Yes.”

“Then you better catch it!”

Tom Purcell is a nationally syndicated columnist.



YOUR VIEWS

It’s time for decency to prevail in politics

Isn’t it curious how fast the concern for the runaway deficit vanished once Trump took office? \$2.6 trillion has been added since 2016, more than Obama’s entire second term. The tax cut that was supposed to pay for itself hasn’t panned out like we were told would happen. Or the new health plan that would be implemented on day one, the wall that Mexico would pay for, North Korea giving up its nukes, Maduro out of Venezuela, on and on the list goes.

Trump’s record of dishonesty is easy for anyone to find, if your head isn’t buried in the sand. Fraudulent Trump University, a \$25 million settlement, a \$2 million settlement for stealing from his own charity, his son’s hunting club in New York state managed by an illegal alien. Illegals working at all of his hotels and casinos. He does like to boast about his unemployment numbers for minorities, but black unemployment went from 17% to 7% and Hispanic unemployment from 13% to 5% under Obama.

All of the Democratic candidates and the Republicans trying to primary Trump all possess something Trump has never had or isn’t capable of ever obtaining: a sense of decency and/or honor. That this person could ever be elected as president is a scar that won’t ever be eradicated from the national

psyche. Shame on us if we allow this to happen again in 2020.

David Gracia
Hermiston

Courthouse time capsule includes Monroe calendar

In the Jan. 11, 2020, newspaper J.D. Smith wrote about calendars. He had stacks of them. One of the calendars was his and his friend’s favorite. He described it in amazing detail. This brought back a memory that I would like to share with you.

In 1950, I started working in the sheet metal trade. I worked for Thews Sheet Metal. Thews was located across the street from the courthouse in an old church where the Hachler Building is now.

At this time, the courthouse that we have now was being built. The county asked Thews to make a time capsule. The capsule would hold items about the county — photos, newspapers, maps, whatever. This capsule I assumed would be put behind the cornerstone and remain for 100 years.

We made the capsule, the county filled it, and we sealed it up.

The worker who sealed the capsule told me that before he sealed it, he added one more important item. So when it comes time after 100 years, and the capsule is opened, the first thing that will be seen is J.D. Smith’s favorite calendar — the nude of Marilyn Monroe.

Don Orton
Pendleton