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EDUCATION

Auditors sound the alarm

Oregon risks wasting money for schools due to lack of tracking, accountability

By HILLARY BORRUD AND BETSY HAMMOND
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon leaders' hands-off approach to public school spending and results has put the state at risk of wasting taxpayers' investments and failing to improve student success, state auditors warned in a report issued Tuesday, May 24.

State auditors in the Secretary of State's Office addressed their "systemic risk report" to Gov. Kate Brown, the state Board of Education and Oregon's 90 lawmakers. Those officials have sat by for years as the state education agency did little to set meaningfully high standards for schools or districts and did little to intervene when some of them vastly underdelivered for their students, particularly students of color and those living in poverty, auditors found.

The auditors highlighted five risks and potential solutions and said that, based on their extensive reviews of Oregon's K-12 system over the past six years, "a lack of intervention by (Oregon Department of Education), despite significant problems at the school and district level, has been a larger problem than infringement on local control."

Oregon schools are awash in cash relative to recent years. Since the 2020-21 school year, a corporate tax for education has delivered roughly \$1 billion a year for new and upgraded programs and services. In addition, Oregon has received more than \$1.7 billion in federal pandemic relief funding for schools since March 2020.

But policymakers haven't insisted that schools show evidence that money is paying off for students — something auditors said is essential to ensure the money is spent

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Setting a new PATH

Area leaders team up on project to take on homelessness

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — A local transitional housing project to help address homelessness could open as soon as this year.

Local officials are working to create a homeless shelter in Umatilla County. Hermiston City manager Byron Smith said if the efforts are successful, the project would move forward to its opening "this calendar year." That would beat a state deadline to create homeless shelters by about a year.

The Hermiston City Council, the Umatilla City Council and the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners met Monday, May 23, at a special joint meeting to talk over a plan to take on the local homelessness problem. Smith said discussions are centered on 2 acres of county land at the corner of Lind and Benschel roads, which the city of Umatilla would annex.

Members of all three bodies, along with Hermiston's youth advisors, sat before numerous visitors. Other officials from the two cities and the county also were present.

"We have an exciting conversation," Hermiston Mayor David Drotzmann said, as he invited others to speak.

Several participants at the meeting said they had never before seen a joint meeting of the two cities with the commissioners. The commissioners have come in the past, they said, but not together with the Umatilla City Council.

Project PATH

Smith introduced the topic: Project PATH — Practical Assistance through Transitional Housing. He credited the acronym to Umatilla City Manager David Stockdale, who was sitting next to him at the meeting.

According to Smith, the region has sought to solve its homeless problem with at least two "homeless summits" held since 2014.

A September 2018 9th Circuit decision, *Martin v. Boise*, made the issue even more



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

From left, Umatilla City Councilors Corinne Funderburk, Daren Dufloth and Leslie Smith listen with Umatilla City Council President Roak TenEyck at a meeting Monday, May 23, 2022, at the Hermiston Community Center to discuss a project addressing homelessness.

pressing. It requires jurisdictions to provide a location if homeless people are not allowed to camp, Smith said.

"If we're going to move them out of parks, they're going to have to have another location where we allow them to relocate," Smith said.

The city manager continued, saying efforts to place a homeless shelter near the Agape House in Hermiston fell through. Meanwhile, he said, the city of Umatilla and Umatilla County have looked for solutions, too.

With the Oregon Legislature making *Martin v. Boise* provisions state law, the homeless problem became even more urgent. Local governments, Smith said, would have until July 1, 2023, to create shelters.

As the Legislature requested pilot projects from local governments and offered \$1 million grants, Western Umatilla County — the region of Umatilla County, Hermiston, Umatilla, Echo

and Stanfield — was included in a bill.

Two days after the joint meeting, Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said Echo and Stanfield are going to participate in PATH, but how and when remains a question.

"It's going to affect everybody on the west end of the county," he said.

And taking action now, he added, means local governments get in front of the 2023 deadline.

The next step coming up is to seek bids from third parties to operate PATH.

Contracting out

The grant money is to be given to the region to pay for a five-year strategic plan. If there is a remainder, it should help pay for the site and operations, Smith said at the meeting.

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PORT OF MORROW

Looking the other way: Part 3

By ALEX BAUMHARDT, COLE SINANIAN AND JAEAL CALLOWAY
Oregon Capital Chronicle

Editor's note: This is the conclusion of a series that follows the article "Don't Drink the Water," which ran in the May 10 East Oregonian. Other parts ran in preceding editions of the EO.

Permit restrictions alarm port, others

By the fall of 2021, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality was considering an unprecedented action and what Duane Smith, DEQ water quality specialist assigned to Eastern Oregon, now retired, had proposed for years but was told was impossible. DEQ was considering banning the Port of Morrow from dumping wastewater during the winter unless nitrogen levels are low enough to meet federal drinking water standards.

Before acting, DEQ Director Richard Whitman reached out to brief the state legislator representing the Boardman area — Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, who once worked for the Port of Morrow.



EO Media Group, File

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality issued a \$1.3 million fine against the Port of Morrow for applying excessive amounts of nitrate-containing water to some area farmland. The port has appealed the fine.

Smith has a seat on the Legislature's powerful budget committee, overseeing DEQ's budget. He has used his committee position to win millions in special state funding for the port. But he had personal financial ties as well.

He is paid \$144,812 by the Columbia Development Authority, which is redeveloping a former chemical munitions depot near Boardman. The port is a partner

in that entity. The port also helped establish an economic nonprofit that pays Smith's private company \$100,000 a year.

In a recent interview, Smith said he was unaware of DEQ's restrictive new conditions for the port until earlier this year. DEQ records contradict that.

Emails show Smith stepped in to stall DEQ's new conditions for the port.

"It is my understanding

the Port of Morrow is in anticipation of a letter from your office," Smith wrote in an email to Whitman on Nov. 8. "I would respectfully request that you hold off on this until our meeting tomorrow morning."

This was the day the port would be receiving its permit modifications from DEQ.

The paperwork was sent Nov. 8 despite Smith's request, and the agenda for Smith's meeting with

the DEQ boss was set for the following day. Topics included "POM permitting" and "drinking water issues."

The same day as that meeting, Smith's staff pressed Shannon Davis, DEQ's regional administrator in Pendleton, to separately meet with the legislator.

"Rep. Smith has a very difficult schedule for the next week and a half. However, he was hoping you could meet in person with himself and the Port of Morrow" the next day — at the port's offices.

Davis wrote back she couldn't meet but assured Smith's staff the port could immediately request an extension of its November deadline to address the new permit conditions.

Extensions were granted twice while the DEQ put the finishing touches on the final enforcement notice.

Whitman and Smith would meet at least once more in person and once more over Zoom before Jan. 10, when DEQ levied a fine of nearly \$1.3 million to the port for years of violating environmental restrictions.

"I would really like to

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