

# County ducks state's graduation problem

Recently Oregon's public education leaders predictably tried to spin whatever meager portion of cotton candy they could from the latest set of not-so-sweet statistics confirming the state's continued poor showing in graduating its students. In case you missed the news, Oregon ranks among the nation's least successful states in graduating high schoolers in the allotted four years. The rate held miserably steady at 72 percent with the 2014 graduating class, little changed from 2013.

## EDITORIAL

The voice of the Chieftain

This is one of those times when rural dwellers can feel added incentive to count their blessings, because a problem perceived as affecting all of Oregon isn't always present at the small community level. All three Wallowa County high schools are churning out grads on time at a better-than-90-percent clip, and there's nothing mysterious about their methods for achieving this feat.

According to superintendents at our local schools, it basically comes down to teachers' and other staff members' better knowledge of the young people they serve.

Better, as compared to the more impersonal relationships that tend to take hold in the larger, more institutional-feeling environments of the bigger cities. If you're a Wallowa County high schooler who is contemplating dropping out, chances are pretty good that you won't put that plan into action before school staff members find out. When they do, they'll try to help you solve the problems currently impeding your educational path.

Sometimes reinforcement of the value of hanging in there comes from students' peers as well. At the Alternative School run by Building Healthy Families, the teacher can usually find out rather quickly what's up with any student who doesn't show up. The other students, if they happen to know, don't hesitate to tell her where the absent pupil is, and they may even take it upon themselves to phone the absentee.

Small towns may lack a number of the amenities that are so conveniently close to hand in Portland, Medford and Eugene, but having fewer people sometimes clears the way to pursuing simpler solutions to problems affecting individuals, especially our students.

# Climate change is real, Congress isn't

The politicization of climate change is one of the stranger aspects of recent American history. The big hang-up of many climate deniers is whether mankind caused global warming.

Greg Page says he doesn't know or care whether human activity causes climate change. But as an official with the Midwest grain company Cargill, Page does know that climate change is upon us and that it will cause enormous costs for food producers.

Page is part of a business consortium called the Risky Business Project. It formed last June. Burt Helm of The New York Times profiled the group on Feb. 1. The project's report is "Risky Business: The Economic Risks of Climate Change in the United States."

The striking thing about the Risky Business coalition is that it includes high profile members who do not agree politically. But they do agree that denying climate change would be irresponsible. Its members span a spectrum that includes former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former George W. Bush Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson.

The politicization of just about everything is a benefit to campaign fundraisers and ideological media, but it only yields stalemate. No business would tolerate that approach. In fact, many large corporations have long recognized the dimensions of climate change. The Weyerhaeuser Co. has a climate change strategy. And despite Congress' standoff, the CIA and the Department of Agriculture long ago admitted this was coming.

Congress is failing us on a broad range of pressing matters. None are quite as big as climate change. While the rest of America goes to work and adapts to changing circumstances, Congress collects its salary and awaits its pension while doing nothing.



# Keep ethics laws in Oregon practical

Should ethics laws be strengthened to avoid conflicts-of-interest by elected officials or members of their families? In an ideal world, most of us would probably answer Yes, but how do we answer the question in the world as it really exists?

Let me offer you several examples to ponder. During George W. Bush's first term as president, his brother Neil landed a lucrative contract with a semi-conductor firm that was backed by the son of the former president of China. Neil Bush's compensation was a hefty two million dollars over five years, to be paid in stock options. When asked about his expertise in the area of computer chips, the president's brother candidly admitted that he had none.

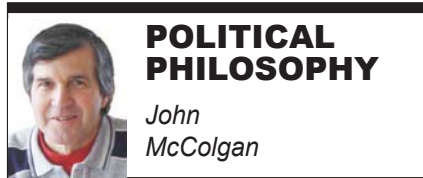
Nice work if you can get it.

In 2014, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie became a good luck charm for Dallas Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones, who repeatedly flew Christie back and forth to Cowboys' home games in his private jet so that the governor could enjoy the games from Jones' family suite.

What would we do without our generous friends?

The public reaction and outrage to these two examples consisted of pretty much: shrug, yawn. What else is new?

But meanwhile, in Virginia, former governor Bob McDonnell and his wife, Maureen, have learned the hard way that accepting lavish gifts from contributors and lobbyists actually violated federal and state ethics laws. And federal and state officials in Oregon are now con-



## POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

John McColgan

ducting investigations as to whether our former governor, John Kitzhaber, and his fiancée, Cylvia Hayes, might have crossed similar lines in their public and private business dealings.

As an ardent Democrat, I admit that I am saddened and also somewhat surprised that Governor Kitzhaber stepped down over possible ethics violations that would seem to pale in comparison to others that the public has yawned at, especially when the voters of Oregon seemed to shrug off these very concerns just a few months ago. Believing that anyone deserves to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, I would have preferred to see the ethics and criminal investigations run their course before a resignation was prematurely offered. On the other hand, from a purely political point of view, I accept that Kitzhaber might have made a wise choice by resigning.

Oregon's new governor, Kate Brown, has laid out her position unequivocally on this matter, by pledging that she, members of her staff, or members of her household, "will not seek or accept any outside compensation, from any source, for any work related to the business of the state of Oregon. That simply will not happen."

Most Oregon voters will probably accept her pledge by saying, Bravo. But I'm more inclined to say, Whoa, hold your horses a minute.

In an ideal world, a promise like Brown's would be easy enough to keep. And speaking strictly for herself, she might very well be able to keep it. But when she speaks on behalf of the members of her staff and her family, now that pledge might be all but impossible to maintain.

Politics is largely about power and relationships. It necessitates making deals. There is simply no getting around that, and we should not expect anything different.

Oregon already has one of the strictest ethical codes in the country. But as Governor Kitzhaber and Ms. Hayes can attest, it is not always easy to segregate public and private business dealings. And in a state where legislators receive very modest public compensation and often work as consultants in their private businesses, and where many of them employ their own spouses as staff members to meet their household needs, tougher ethical restrictions would be difficult to navigate and enforce. They might not even be desirable.

I'm glad that Oregon has stricter standards than New Jersey or Texas, but even here, politicians still need to get things done, and their family members still need to make a living in a complex, interrelated world.

John McColgan writes from his home in Joseph.

# Food insecurity a major roadblock

## GUEST COLUMN

Lauren Johnson

grumbly stomach, the lack of a snack, the 15 minutes before dinner is ready. If I say that 49.1 million Americans are hungry, it sounds like a whole lot of Americans haven't had lunch yet. I'm not at all downplaying the problem — I believe that it's a nationwide crisis — I have a personal tiff with the term. Hunger is a physiological state that happens to everyone; it's uncomfortable, but it's easily fixed by eating again.

"Hunger" doesn't describe the psychological pain parents undergo when they can't feed their children enough food and the negative health effects whole families experience when they live in food insecure households. I think relief organizations continue to use the term "hunger" because "food insecurity" sounds distant and a little incomprehensible.

So if I say that 49.1 million Americans are food insecure, a figure from Feeding America's website, what exactly does that mean? Food insecurity is a constant balancing act between the many expenses of modern life — rent, car repair, gas, clothing, medical care — and food.

Feed America reports that "84 percent of [the households our food banks serve] with children report purchasing the cheapest food available, even if they knew it wasn't the healthiest option, in

an effort to provide enough food for their household." This statistic begins to describe why food insecurity is so terrible for people's health. The truth is, calorie for calorie, junk food filled with sugar, simple carbs and starch is cheaper than fruits, vegetables, protein and whole grains. In a household where the budget is already stretched, buying healthy food can get really difficult. Not having enough money to buy food often translates into an unhealthy diet, which translates into chronic diseases and high medical costs. The USDA reports that "adults in food insecure households are at a higher risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease." Food insecurity is also closely tied to obesity because the quality of food purchased often declines with available food budget dollars.

In children, the problem is arguably even more impactful. A report from the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, an ongoing nationwide survey of low-income children done by Children's Health Watch, reports that: "Babies and toddlers from food insecure families are 76% more likely to be at developmental risk than babies and toddlers from food secure families... Preschool children from food insecure households have more emotional and behavioral problems such as aggression, anxiety, depression, and hyperactivity." Food insecurity is a major roadblock on a child's road to success.

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# Baker County standing firm on forest access

## To the Editor:

Integrity — "An adherence to moral principles, honesty." Where has that gone, and why can't we find it in the discussion on the motorized access restrictions to The Blue Mountains.

Some work in shades of gray, elected to positions they feel they need to protect to continue their paychecks and their positions of power. Some work in backdoor deals to protect their business venture to access resources they need to keep themselves afloat. Some work in "partnership" with groups that strive to see general mo-

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

torized use removed from the forest under some moral calling of protectionist dogma that inflates their egos and swells their pocket books with lawyer fees. When companies begin to state "why does the public need to be there" and civil servants tell businesses that "any interference or preventing the Forest performing road closures will jeopardize timber

outputs on the Forest," we see the lack of integrity from both elected officials and civil servants alike.

For the record, the counties do not "lose their seat at the table" if they refuse to sign the MOU accepting cooperating agency status with the forest service. This narrative has been passed around by county officials far too long. What it does require is elected officials doing their jobs and being held personally accountable for their actions.

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