The hole in Gov. Brown's budget

EDITORIAL

From the East Oregonian

There is a gaping hole in Gov. Kate Brown's proposed budget, released last Thursday. Brown's financial road map for Oregon has nothing to say about the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) and its burgeoning costs to local governments and school districts.

To propose a financial plan for Oregon and omit PERS is a bit like offering a battle strategy and leaving out ammunition costs.

In a nutshell, the PERS challenge is about an unfunded actuarial liability of more than $20 billion. To close that gap, school districts and local governments will face extraordinary budget strains. For some school districts, the new PERS payroll burden will mean dismissing teachers in order to pay the retirement liability of those retired from the profession.

In Umatilla County, for example, Gov. Brown's budget calls for closing the state crime lab in Pendleton, costing local jobs and detrimentally affecting the local justice system. It would hold the line for BMCC and local school district — which is a feat — but it still leaves them well below the funding levels where they need to be.

Once more Gov. Brown has failed us. Fortunately there are legislators who are willing to think about solutions that will pass constitutional muster.

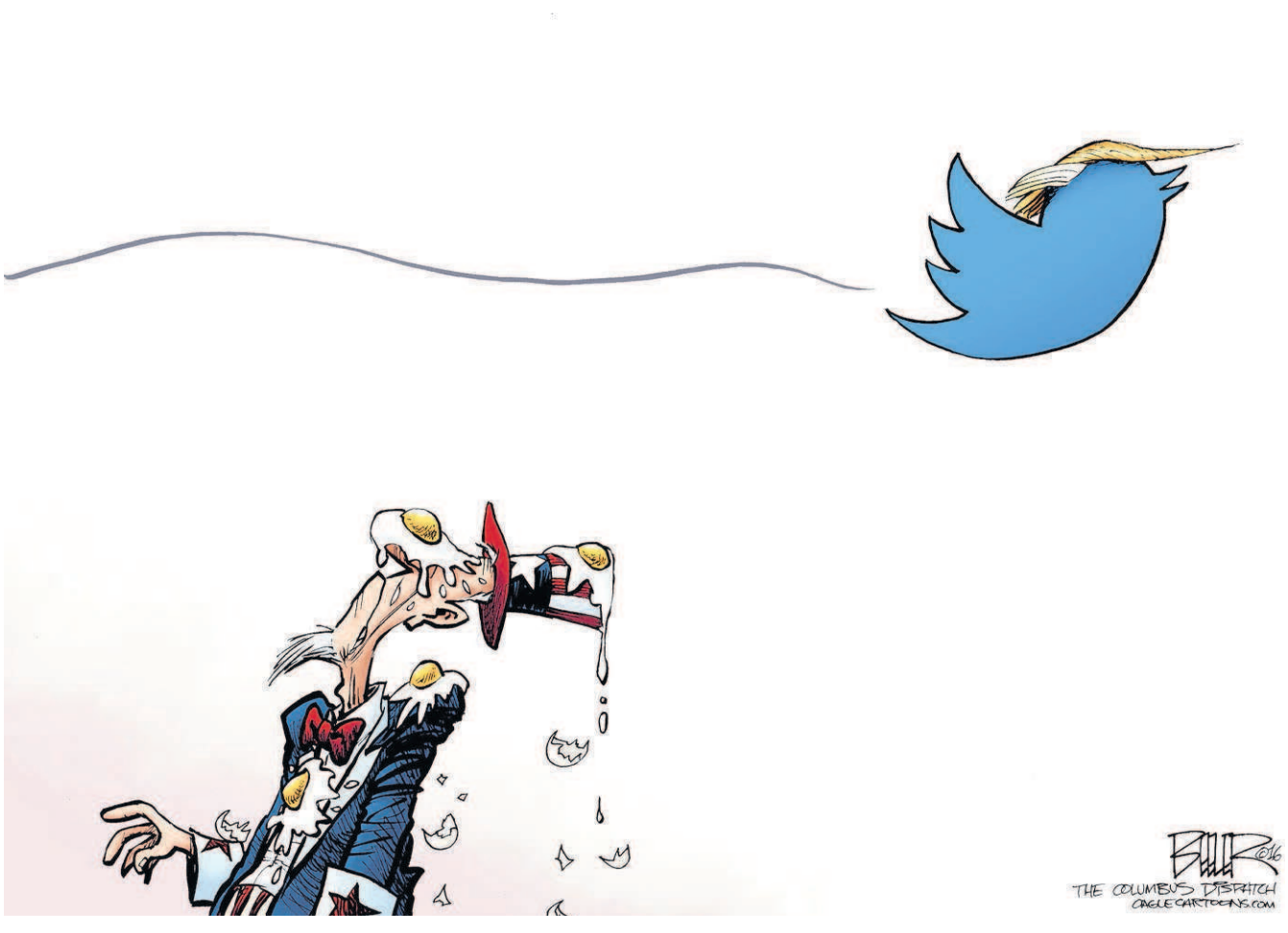
The proposal most actively being discussed would invite three constituencies to participate in a solution: public sector employers, PERS members and Oregon taxpayers. It is a realistic coalition of shared sacrifice.

The greatest political advances in history have occurred when a leader goes against his or her native values to break new ground. President Richard Nixon, the arch anti-Communist, opened diplomacy with what was then called Red China. President Lyndon Johnson, a Southerner, passed landmark Civil Rights legislation.

For there to be a breakthrough and a remedy on PERS, a similar act of courage must come from Oregon Democratic leaders, because they are most beholden to the public employees unions.

Gov. John Kitzhaber did that in 2013. Kitzhaber proposed PERS reforms, which the Legislature enacted. Elements of that package were subsequently thrown out by the Oregon Supreme Court.

Gov. Kate Brown seems to lack the courage to take up that fight and win new ground. Leadership on PERS must come from someone or some group in the statehouse. To ask local governments and school districts to strip services because of a flawed pension system is unacceptable, yet it is the current predicament that looks to only get worse in the future.



Post-election bliss and anger

AND FURTHERMORE

Jon Rombach

A lot of people seem to have frowny faces about this Trump presidency situation. You've just got to look on the bright side, people. He's not even in office yet and already job reports are way up for Russian hackers. On another bright note: the Affordable Care Act hasn't even been repealed yet and already I'm much healthier, getting outside more often in the brisk Wallowa County air and enjoying a lot more exercise, staying busy with chores, hard physical labor, staring at the sun, anything that keeps me from watching or listening to news in any way. It's so great.

With all this free time I decided to join a book club. We're reading "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers" right now — it's kind of a Choose Your Own Adventure story — and next month we'll dip into Cormac McCarthy's "The Road," which I gather is kind of a how-to manual for wandering a post-apocalyptic landscape after the crumbling of civilization. Sounds whimsical. I can hardly wait.

The voting for book selections leaned toward drastically different titles, genres and subject matter, but the book club uses a system where the most votes aren't really what decides what you end up with, so I guess that's just how it goes. Ah, well. Makes sense.

Astronomy and bird watching are two more activities I've taken up recently, kind of by accident. Sitting in my super-fancy wood-fired Rubbermaid water trough hot tub the other night, I heard and then saw a small herd of Snow Geese flying over in the moonlight. That was worth seeing. Then a while later a meteorite flared up, streaking in slow motion across the sky, heading from the Joseph Airport vicinity toward Ruby Peak. It winked out somewhere above Scotch Creek, from the vantage point of the astronomy hot tub observatory. I checked the fireball reporting page on the American Meteor Society website to see if anybody called this one in, but no dice. Somebody should run up there and poke around. That thing might still be smoking. Looked pretty warm last time I saw it.

Tell you what else was warm lately. My temper, after seeing that photo of poached elk over toward Elgin. The poaching is maddening all on its own, but then leaving the animals to waste cranks up the outrage meter to 11.

Here's a proposal for what to do with poachers. Get a judge to hand down a sentence of mandatory gardening and then move some town deer from Joseph into their yard. Convicted poachers would be legally required to maintain a large vegetable and flower garden with a minimum of four rose bushes, while coexisting with these deer who have adapted to living on flower petals. A gardening probation officer would check in once a month to make sure the garden was still coming along and, if not, it's off to the pokey.

The deer could have ankle bracelets to make sure they don't leave the yard. Or just have fences built and, I suppose, just send the bill to Mexico.

Jon Rombach is a local columnist for The Chieftain.

Make this one a Christmas of Hope

WALLOWA GAL

Katherine Stickroth

I have a faded color photo of a Christmas tree with gobs of wrapped presents underneath. Far more presents than my poor parents could afford.

Christmas had been approaching for my parents and their five children ages 3 and younger. An unexpected pair of twin girls had been born three months earlier. In the first week of December 1960, one of the babies died of SIDS. How did my parents provide that kind of a Christmas for us that year with such a tragedy on their shoulders?

They didn't.

It was our neighbors who came through. We lived in a cookie-cutter neighborhood outside of Washington D.C. — houses looked the same, working fathers wore the same dark suits, stay-at-home mothers wore Jackie O. look-alike sweaters. In the evenings parents would gather for cocktails at each other's homes while their children played dodge ball in the street, and at other times had crabapple wars — all the same.

What wasn't the same is that at my parents' darkest hour other families made sure my younger siblings and I had a Christmas. It wasn't that it would have mattered to us children. We were young enough to have gone through Christmas and not known whether Santa came or not.

Those neighbors simply did the right thing, and their kindness gave my parents hope that someone cared about them. Though I wasn't aware of this circumstance at the time, holding this photo impacts me today.

I listen to people I care about in despair about the election results, who see no hope with the new president-elect. And while I have my own opinions about these times at hand, I truly believe it's all going to work out.

It's out of my hands, really. So rather than going global with my musings, I bring it back home, back to Wallowa County. I had never seen how interdependence works until I moved here.

How independent people with polarizing political beliefs will together make sure an elderly neighbor has enough firewood to stay warm. Not government agencies, but people helping people. I see mysterious bags of groceries appearing on the steps of a home where the father has just lost his job. No SNAP card can do that.

Soon after I moved here, I was commenting to a new friend how generous Wallowa Countians are. She laughed, "We may talk about you behind your back, but by God, if you need something, we'll be the first ones to help you." I smiled all the way home, "If that isn't a picture of the human condition ..."

We can be so imperfect, but when it comes right down to it, I believe there is goodness in each of us. The worst alcoholic can have a moment of holding the door open for someone. A homeless woman will share one of her few crackers with a stray cat that tags along.

The most unlikely of people can do extraordinary things. Whether it's the story of kindness and generosity in a faded Christmas photo, or the story of an unlikely mother, in an unlikely stable, having an unlikely son who brings peace on earth and goodwill toward all — however it's told, I believe hope is still with us.

Merry Christmas, everyone.

Katherine Stickroth is a freelance writer and blogs at awallowagal.com.

Please find another fishing hole

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Dear fishermen and fisherwomen:

Please don't fish below the Troy School. It is distracting me from studying.

Thank you.

P.S. You are stealing my favorite fishing hole!

Emmett Flynn
Third grade, Troy School

Still time to request Christmas baskets

Time is drawing near when the Elks and their helpers will be delivering baskets and presents from the tree of giving. Delivery is scheduled for 8 p.m. Friday, Dec. 23.

If you would like to receive a basket, please fill out a basket form so we can ensure that you get one.

The Elks, in conjunction with the city of Enterprise, Wallowa County Juvenile Department and the Enterprise Flower Shop, launched the program earlier this year to give the Elks time to get all the necessary food items and make sure all children receive a gift.

Currently, the Tree of Giving gift tags are going out the door as fast as they come in. The Tree of Giving is located in the Enterprise Flower Shop, 102 S. River St.

The Christmas Basket/ Tree of Giving forms are available at the following Enterprise locations:

- Wallowa County Justice Center, 104 W. Greenwood St.
- Enterprise City Hall, 108 NE 1st St.
- Community Connections, 702 NW 1st St.
- Department of Human Services, 104 Litch St.

Forms are available in Joseph at Mt. Joseph Family Foods and at Wallowa Food City in Wallowa.

If you know of a family or individual who needs a basket, please contact Enterprise City Hall at 541-426-4196 or Randy Morgan at 541-263-0327. We will take down the information and make sure a basket is delivered. It is important to note that even though an earlier deadline was established, the Elks will still deliver a basket even if you turn in a form a little later. The Elks would like to have all forms in by Friday, Dec. 16, but the Elks will try to accommodate late entries.

If you simply wish to make a donation to the program, you may mail it to Enterprise Elks, BPOE 1829, P.O. Box K, Enterprise, OR, 97828.

Your help and contributions are always welcome and appreciated.

Randy Morgan
Enterprise

Letters

Letters to the Editor are subject to editing and should be limited to 275 words.

You can submit a letter to the Wallowa County Chieftain in person; by mail to P.O. Box 338, Enterprise, OR 97828; by email to editor@wallowa.com; or via the submission form at the newspaper's website, located at wallowa.com.

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