

Take message on taxes to heart

Oregon voters place a top priority on K-12 public schools but don't really trust the state to tax and spend wisely on education, new opinion polling indicates.

Our Capital Bureau reported earlier this week on a poll commissioned by the Oregon School Boards Association. All polls, especially those sponsored by entities with a vested interest in their findings, must be viewed with intelligent skepticism. But the new poll results ring true.

According to the poll, 60 percent of the public believes any new tax money should be earmarked for state education and should be combined with spending cuts elsewhere. Ironically, this mirrors what the business community itself has indicated it would support. Legislators need to take this to heart.

Oregonians are big believers in public schools. You don't need a poll to know this. Time spent in any Oregon community or neighborhood is a revealing lesson in how schools are fundamentally bound up in our lives and our sense of who we are as a people. We're united around the idea that schools impart essential knowledge and social skills, partnering with families in preparing children for lives every parent hopes will be financially rewarding, intellectually gratifying and emotionally fulfilling.

Anxiety

EDITORIAL

Voice of the Chieftain

As our nation and world become more complex and demanding, any sense that schools aren't fulfilling their vital mission is certain to provoke anxiety. While more money is rarely, if ever, a complete solution to any problem, Oregonians are strongly inclined to bolster school funding. Ninety-three percent of voters say it's important to fund K-12 education. Nearly two-thirds would support boosting taxes on corporations if the proceeds were certain to go to schools.

But the state just overwhelmingly rejected new corporate taxes in the form of Ballot Measure 97. This was despite the objective fact that companies contribute less to state coffers than voters commonly believe — less than 6 percent of general fund revenue, by the Oregon School Boards Association's reckoning, while citizens believe the number is around 36 percent.

In rejecting Measure 97, voters didn't trust that new revenue would be well spent and feared the taxes would be passed on to us in the form of higher prices. And as a matter of fact, Oregon firms already pay a lot of taxes — an effective rate of 7.6 percent, third highest in

the far West.

Budget gap

Faced this year with a \$1.6 billion gap between revenue and expenses, legislators are struggling to find enough money for all the state's priorities, including more for schools. A majority of the public may say they support targeted cuts coupled with some tax fix, but the devil is very much in the details.

The Tax Foundation on Monday released its latest analysis of fiscal burdens in the 50 states and Washington, D.C. It found Oregon ranks 10th in state and local tax burden as a percentage of state income. It has the sixth-highest individual income tax collections per person in the country, \$1,814 compared to the U.S. average of \$967. On the other hand, it is smack in the middle in terms of state and local property taxes — 25th, with average collections of \$1,350, less than the national average of \$1,462. It's worth adding that the Tax Foundation gives Oregon good marks for its current business tax climate, rating it 10th best in the country.

So it's fair to say Oregonians aren't undertaxed, an understanding reflected in the continuing strong rejection of a general sales tax, even if it went to education, according to the poll. But it's also fair to observe that a state's citizens get what they pay for. Some of lowest-tax states on the Tax Foundation's

2017 index — Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama — aren't models of civic success.

Difficult choices

So what should we do in Oregon? Clearly, some very difficult choices will need to be made. Most Oregonians want to protect and enhance public education, but will have to recognize that doing so will force undesirable cuts elsewhere. Elected leaders and state agencies have to embrace the same conclusion, that it is time to zealously root out wasteful spending, while circling the wagons around schools and a few other paramount priorities.

On the tax front, the new polling suggests considerable support for dedicating 2 percent of income tax kicker funds to K-12 education — particularly a rainy day fund to see schools past budget crises like the one they currently face. Beyond this, a business tax hike with strict links to education might just stand a chance.

Voters feel they have been burned too many times. State leaders must commit to governing in accordance with the wise words of that favorite primary school role model, Dr. Seuss' Horton: "I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one hundred percent." Promise only what you can reasonably achieve, tax only enough to achieve it, and then rigorously keep your promises.

To fight wildfires, Oregon must cap pollution

I've been fighting fires in the Pacific Northwest for sixteen years, many of them in Oregon. During that time, I've helped fight or manage some of the largest fires in the histories of three different states. From my vantage point as a wildland firefighter, and as someone who has served as a fire lookout for many years, I can see that the seasons are shifting. I can see that the climate is changing.

When I first started my career as a firefighter, the West was at the tail end of what they were calling an eight-year drought cycle. There was an emerging trend in which fires were becoming larger, faster moving and more unpredictable. It's 2017 now, and — despite a wet year — drought conditions persist for longer, and affect our communities over more years, rather than less. It seems that the drought which was once an intermittent cycle, is now part of a new reality. In 2015, for the first time in its 110-year history, the U.S. Forest Service spent more than 50 percent of its annual budget on firefighting at the expense of other programs. Just 20 years ago, firefighting made up only 16 percent of the annual budget for the Forest Service.

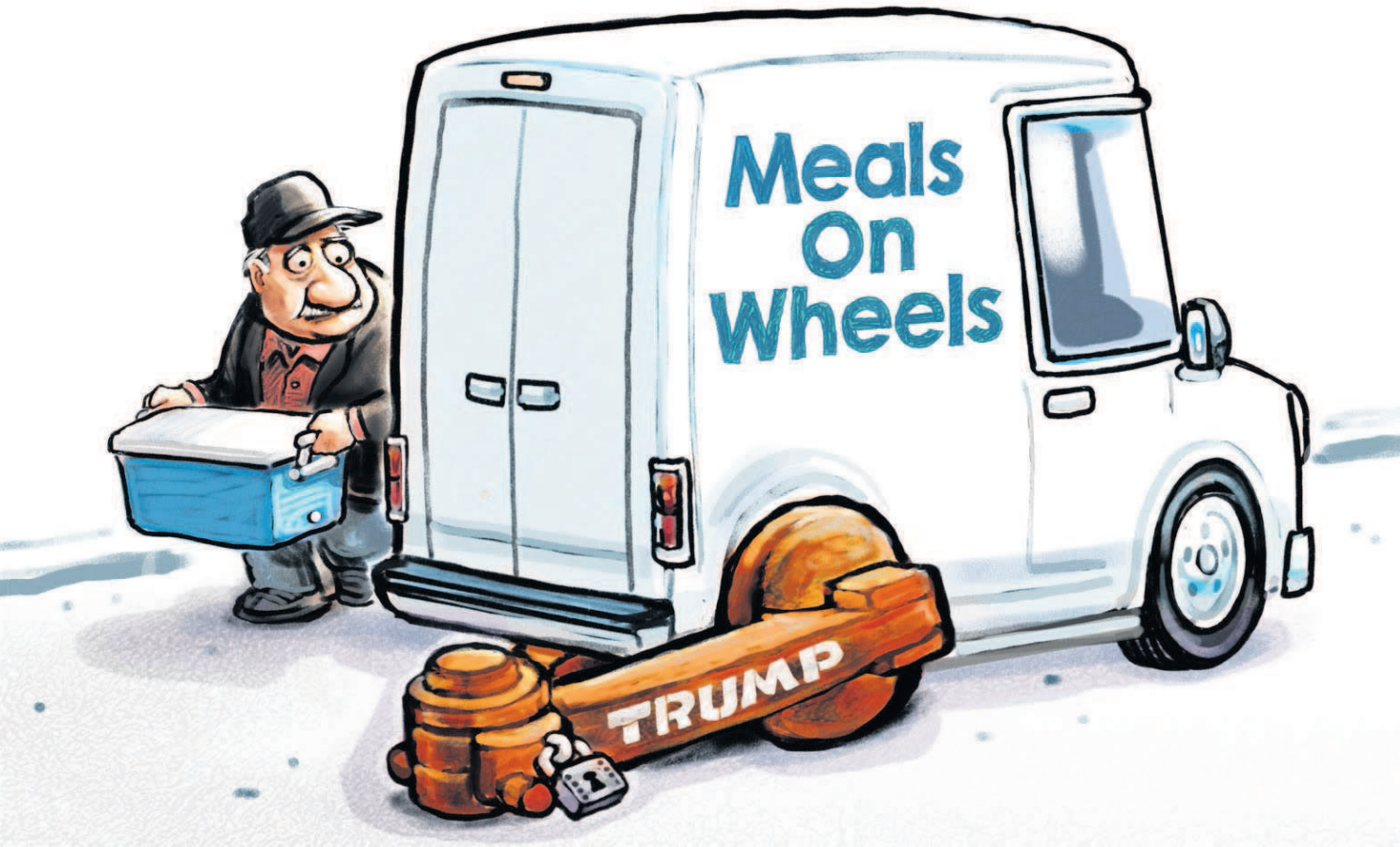
This is more than a drought that can be cured by one blessedly wet winter; years of warmer temperatures, lower snowpack, and drier conditions — due to climate change — all compound to create unhealthy air for our most vulnerable community members, and a major threat to the way of life for those who live near Oregon's beautiful open spaces. At a time when we need firefighters more than ever, some may decide the job is just too dangerous.

In Oregon, we have a goal to reduce Oregon's our state's climate pollution by at least 75 percent by the year 2050. We are not on track to meet that goal right now because, while it is the law, it is not being enforced: no one is being held accountable to meet it. Our legislature is currently considering clean energy jobs legislation that can get us on track. We need to address the root cause of what is drying out our forests and making work more dangerous for firefighters. We need to cut climate changing pollution with a cap on pollution and reinvestment in our communities and the clean energy that will keep us independent and resilient.

As someone who loves the forest, these changes — both the subtle and the striking — are heartbreaking to witness. Firefighters are putting their lives and health on the line to protect the resources we love and need for a sustainable future, and it's going to take all of us to stop climate change and keep our forests safe.

Kelly Coughlin is a wildland firefighter, fire lookout and Public Service Information Officer with U.S. Department of the Interior. She has fought many wildfires in Central and Eastern Oregon.

STAR TRIBUNE
S&K



Education, wealth and generosity

Last week, Wallowa Memorial hospital director Larry Davy told the Rotary Club that new doctors start their careers with \$300,000-\$400,000 of debt. I know that a doctorate in physical therapy can cost \$200,000, and am sure that nurses, med techs, dentists, and many others in health care start their working careers with enormous debt. As a consequence, small hospitals and health care systems, in order to compete for top personnel, must get creative. They help set up practices, either in-house or next-door — outfit clinics, labs and therapy spaces.

Hospitals and clinics also have to provide elaborate bookkeeping and accounting systems to handle the insurance companies, auditors and government regulations that are all part of modern medicine.

In 1971, Dr. Sharff was a \$4 office visit and we paid cash. He'd joke when someone would tap a shoulder while he was drinking coffee at the Homan Drug-store counter — "there goes four bucks" — and fill out a prescription, then tell me stories of getting paid in chickens and beef in his early days in Enterprise.

It's easy to idealize times and places in the past. My first ten years in a small Minnesota town with baseball, ice skating at recess, Uncle Al and fishing for wall-eye; Southern California, too, before the freeways, where you could see the snow on Palomar Mountain but didn't have to live in it.

Of course the Mexicans in my school, some of whose families had been in California while it was still part of Mexico,



MAIN STREET

Rich Wandschneider

were more likely to be placed in special education, and, as I recall, rarely got As in Spanish class because of their poor Castilian pronunciation. My friend Richie's parents would have had to go to Tijuana, Mexico to get married, because his Filipino father was prohibited from marrying a Caucasian in California — a law not repealed until 1948.

But here is the thing: Richie went to a good college and then to UCLA Medical School. California might have been slow dealing with some minority issues, but it was in front of the nation on education. Get a 3.3 in high school and the California University System was free — we paid \$50 a term in student fees. And, although the system might have been more difficult for Black, Latino or Asian students, Jackie Robinson's mother put him on a train from the South and packed him through California schools and on to UCLA (an impossibility in much of the nation in the 1930s and 1940s.)

Jackie went from college to breaking the color barrier in major league baseball, and California, right up to and through Silicon Valley, became an educational leader in the country.

But they weren't alone. My generation of docs here in Wallowa County — Euhus and Palmer and Siebe — could get

through medical school almost debt free, and if they promised two years of military or public health service, could have all med school debt forgiven.

Teachers, too, could teach away college debt with federal loans. It was a time when the country valued education and when we, the recipients of this largesse, were encouraged to find a calling. I do not remember one time being told how much money a teacher or doctor or engineer made. I remember being counseled to find something I loved, and to look at society's needs for doctors and teachers, pharmacists and engineers.

I was fortunate to live in a time when, according to author Charlie Peters, "generosity" was the order of the day. It began in The Great Depression, when neighbors helped neighbors and women — and I remember my mom doing this into the 1940s — handed out sandwiches to migrants passing through town looking for work. And President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal put people to work in places like Wallowa County building roads and bridges, when the government brought electricity to small towns and farms and when — gradually — misogyny laws, discrimination against Jews (they, along with women and Blacks, were on quotas at professional schools) declined and Civil Rights legislation was passed. When we elected a Catholic president!

According to Peters (full disclosure: I worked for Charlie at the Peace Corps

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USPS No. 665-100

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Wallowa County's Newspaper Since 1884
Enterprise, Oregon

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PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY BY:
EO Media Group

Periodical Postage Paid at Enterprise and additional mailing offices

Subscription rates (includes online access)	1 Year
Wallowa County	\$40.00
Out-of-County	\$57.00

Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

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