



Staff photo by Kathy Aney, File/East Oregonian
Mark Mulvihill (right) fields questions after a 2015 presentation at the Oregon Leadership Summit at the Oregon Convention Center. Mulvihill, the superintendent of the InterMountain Education Service District, has proposed allowing public employees to draw a pension while working to help pay down PERS liability.

‘Fixing PERS is Job. 1 — and it’s doable’

A new legislative report underscores that PERS could be headed for more trouble.

The report from the Legislative Fiscal Office reaffirms that the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System remains highly dependent on investment income for its financial stability. That is not a surprise. However, it should concern Oregon officials, especially in light of the current global economic swings.

Our federal leaders are not helping, with their trade disputes and partial government shutdown. Their lack of fiscal leadership and political cooperation adds to worries that the U.S. will fall into a recession. Where the nation goes economically, so goes Oregon.

The legislative report is based on a study last year from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which compared state pension plans for fiscal 2016. PERS had one of the worst ratios of operating cash flow.

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Editorial

On the other hand, PERS is one of the better-funded public pension plans. Cumulatively, state pension plans amassed a \$1.4 trillion deficit, because they generally are paying more in benefits than they receive in pension contributions. Poor investment returns also are factors, although PERS has done relatively well.

So ... PERS is not in danger of imminent insolvency, it is in better condition than many state funds but it is more subject to market volatility.

It should be of little comfort that PERS is not as bad off as other public pension funds. PERS' unfunded actuarial liability forces schools and local governments to cut current jobs and services to pay for pensions. The burden can fall disproportionately on rural Oregon, as is detailed in the winter edition of *The Other Oregon*, a quarterly magazine from EO Media Group.

Rural Oregon also has proposed solutions. Mark Mulvihill, superintendent of the InterMountain Education Service District in Pendleton, has proposed changing state law to allow longtime public employees to collect both their pension and their salary for several years before retirement. Schools and government agencies would benefit from retaining good workers who were considering retiring, employees would have more money in the short term, and they and their employer would contribute 6 percent of their salary toward paying down the employer's PERS liability.

The PERS burden is staggering, and it's growing exponentially. For Clatskanie and Ontario — cities on opposite sides of the state — the burden is roughly the equivalent of six times the city's annual payroll, according to 2017 figures from PERS.

That is why the Oregon Business Plan said in a report last month: "Fixing PERS is Job 1, and it's doable."

Among the plan's recommendations: Oregon should again require that public employees contribute 6 percent of their pay to their pension, similar to what most states do. Oregon could move to a defined-contribution system, like a 401(k), for future employees. The state also could give current employees a choice of staying with PERS or switching to a 401(k).

All are solid ideas. All are reasonable. Only one thing is missing so far — leadership from Gov. Kate Brown and the Legislature.



The danger of resolutions and winter getaways

The only thing I like about Christmas is the days have been getting longer for three or four days. The sappy Christmas stories are off the TV and horrid Christmas music is no longer cluttering up the radio. Time to think about New Year's resolutions and getting away for a few days to Arizona or some other place you don't need long Johns.

The problem with heading out for a couple of weeks is even if you don't have stock to feed, you need someone to check on your place. Some friends of ours had really never had a honeymoon or really any other type of vacation and after they had been married for 17 years they finally decided to take a few days off and get away from the ranch and kids. Jim and Sharyn asked me and my friend Jim to check on the three boys, ages 16 to nine years old. They had been gone about a week when Jim and I remembered and made a trip to the ranch to see how things were going.

You know how some stories start out bad and get worse, this is one of them. About a mile from the ranch we ran into the two oldest boys fixing a fence. It was obvious there had been some kind of a wreck. It turned out Brent, the 14 year old, had taken his mother's car to visit the neighbors and not being an experienced driver had slid off the road and wiped out 40 yards of fence. The car still



OPEN RANGE

Barrie Qualle

ran but wasn't what you would call road worthy. We sympathized and started to help unload fence posts. Jim commented it was a good thing they had the pickup for transportation. Blaine the oldest explained that wasn't exactly true in that it was only good for off road ranch work for the present. We looked at the pickup and asked why that was. Well a few days earlier the three boys had loaded up horses and headed down to Cowden's to rope. Unfortunately, on the return trip Blaine had neglected to release the emergency brake when they left and had burned out the brakes on the pickup. Felt lucky it hadn't ignited and burned up. There was still front brakes but the rig wasn't really road worthy.

I shook my head and commented that the boys had sure had some bad luck. Nine year old Kyle piped up and said yeah his mom and dad were sure going to be mad. Jim said yeah, both vehicles not functioning would do that. Kyle went on that there was more and was worried that he would also be in trouble for his contribution. Jim asked, "What could you wreck?"

"Well, this last weekend we had a junior rodeo in Livermore and since their pickup wasn't capable of hauling their horses we borrowed Joe Viera's pickup to haul the horses to the rodeo," he said.

When it was time to come home they discovered Kyle had accidentally locked the keys to Joe's pickup in the rig. Not knowing how to handle that, the boys had jumped their horses in with some other kids that didn't live too far away and rode home with them. When Jim and Sharyn got home from their vacation they had two incapacitated vehicles and a neighbor's pickup 100 miles from home with the keys locked inside. They never asked us to watch the kids again.

Time for New Year's resolutions. I am much better at making resolutions for other people, however unappreciated. Often I have a better perspective of how someone else could improve their lives. You would be surprised at how many people become upset when you try to help them. As for me, I try to set attainable goals and this year I have resolved to not drink whiskey in St. Louis or smoke cigars in Kansas City. With a strong will-power like mine I am sure to keep these resolutions.

Barrie Qualle is an all-around working ranch hand, author and ranch rodeo enthusiast. He lives in Wallowa County.

Time for Oregon to say 'Welcome home'

About 50 years ago, more than 500,000 United States military personnel were deployed to Vietnam. The New Year of 1969 brought many of the same experiences of 1968. 1968 was the year of the greatest number of casualties during the Vietnam War. Almost 3 million warriors served in Vietnam. Thousands were from Oregon. All totaled, there were over 58,000 American troops who died in Vietnam; 710 of them were Oregonians.

These were the sons and daughters of the Greatest Generation. The Vietnam generation of warriors went to war and served their country well. Yet, when they returned from serving their nation, they did not get a thank you, let alone a "welcome home."

The era of the Vietnam War was a tumultuous time. There was strife and discord. The Vietnam Era Veterans were treated poorly; spit upon, verbally rebuked and on many occasions physically attacked, for wearing a military uniform and serving their country. During the ensuing decades, the Vietnam Era veterans, and their service to our country, were essentially ignored.

In our Oregon State Capitol building, you can find a memorial to the veterans of the Civil War. In our state capital city of Salem, on state properties, there are memorials honoring the Veterans of the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II,

GUEST COLUMN

Steve Bates

Korean War and the Afghan-Iraqi wars.

Many Oregon communities have a local monument, memorial or park to honor their veterans and war dead. Some communities have honored their local Vietnam War heroes with separate Vietnam War memorials.

Yet, in our state capital city, there is not a statewide monument or memorial honoring our Vietnam War Veterans. The states of California and Washington erected memorials on their capitol grounds to honor their Vietnam Veterans and collectively say "welcome home." It is time for the state of Oregon to do the same.

Over the past two years, a group of Oregon residents have been working to that end. The Vietnam War Memorial Fund was founded as a nonprofit charitable organization, established with the sole purpose of funding and building a Vietnam War Memorial on the Oregon State Capitol Grounds.

As a result of the efforts of this group, on Dec. 12, the Oregon House Interim Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness voted to sponsor House Bill 2195 which will be introduced in the 2019 Legislative

Assembly.

House Bill 2195 establishes a Vietnam War Memorial on the Oregon State Capitol Grounds and provides the necessary permissions for the expeditious completion thereof. In addition, it iterates that the memorial will be funded by donations from the private sector.

House Bill 2195 begins the process to enable the state of Oregon to collectively say welcome home to our Vietnam Veterans.

This bill must be passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate to be signed into law by the governor. You can help by telling your Representative and Senator to support HB2195: The Vietnam War Memorial bill.

It is appropriate that a Vietnam War Memorial be placed on the grounds of the Oregon State Capitol. This will demonstrate our state's commitment and gratitude to our Vietnam Era Veterans.

Let us honor and memorialize our Vietnam War Era Veterans for generations to come.

It is time for the state of Oregon to say "Welcome home."

— Steve Bates is a Life Member of the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America. He serves as Chair of the Committee on Memorials and Remembrance and President of the Vietnam War Memorial Fund.

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