

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
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Opinion

The First Amendment
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

"I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend." —Thomas Jefferson (1800)

LETTERS

THE MORE WE UNDERSTAND, THE MORE WE CAN DO

In an interview on "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio (NPR) March 14, Bill Gates, Chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (B&MGF) stated that the first step any individual can take in combating climate challenges is to learn more about them.

He asserted that knowing more will, at some point, saturate the notion that what's happening around the world is a political issue, and bring home the fact that the changes we are witnessing are actually a threat to humankind and the planet Earth.

He expressed a belief that people who don't believe these challenges are real simply do not know enough about them.

The more we know and understand, the more we can do.

Mr. Gates suggested that we all start learning more — and keep learning more — never feeling like we have learned enough, until many more of us can sense the enormity of the situation and start coalescing to determine courses of action that will have real impact in our respective communities.

I suggest that we approach the issue from a financial or economic perspective, rather than an en-

vironmental one.

Thinking about finances carries less emotional charge. The environmental conversation leaves believers and deniers angry, and both unable to speak productively to one another.

Yet determining who has what to gain from various courses of action or inaction might be a conversation starter.

It really is a chess game with the future hanging in the balance. We must practice critical thinking and strategize a few moves ahead in several scenarios.

—Ivy Meadow
Florence

Ambulance district is at a financial crossroads

(Editor's Note: Viewpoint submissions on this and other topics are always welcome as part of our goal to encourage community discussion and exchange of perspectives.)

Western Lane Ambulance District (WLAD) is at a critical financial and operational crossroads and we — Larry Farnsworth, elected Board of Director Member, with RJ Pilcher and Joel Marks, appointed Budget Committee Members — wish to alert taxpayers, business owners and community members about the financial challenges facing this district.

Let us state up front that the WLAD staff of paramedics and emergency medical technicians are all excellent at what they do. There is a long history of excellent service to our district, which encompasses the care of individuals within approximately 1,000 square miles. We certainly do need Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) services in our community. These highly qualified personnel also provide the essential transport of patients from our local hospital to the critical care facilities in the valley.

That being said, we speak today as knowledgeable, private individuals and our comments do not necessarily reflect the view or opinion of the WLAD Board or management. This is not a partisan political issue; we each share various political views and affiliations; Larry Farnsworth has been an active union member within the AFL-CIO for 34 years.

It is our belief that the district's taxpayers are not getting a fair deal and that the ambulance district, including the Board of Directors and the paid management staff, are unable or unwilling to correct the egregious patterns of ongoing financial mismanagement.

The WLAD management has determined — and the Chief has made financial presentations — illustrating how the district is going to go out of business on its current trajectory as operational costs increases eventually outpace revenues. The only way to continue funding the district is either through strong contract concessions from the union or significant future tax increases from the public.

The principle economic challenge for the district is what we see as excessive overcompensation and the high costs associated with the benefits package for union-represented staff members. Adding to overspending are scheduling models that rely on guaranteed overtime staffing.

The district has an enormous \$3.4 million Unfunded Actuarial Liability with the PERS retirement program owed by taxpayers to the State of Oregon.

WLAD was organized in 1976 to provide EMS services to our western Lane County area. Hospitals typically do not employ or manage ambulance services. So, the hospital in our commu-

GUEST VIEWPOINT

By: Larry Farnsworth, WLAD Board Member; RJ Pilcher and Joel Marks Budget Committee members

nity organized a Health Taxing District and WLAD became a taxpayer-supported service to provide essential BLS and ALS services to those who are sick or injured, conveying them to the nearest location for medical care. WLAD is a "Special District," like many others in the state.

Special districts are a form of local government. They are created by their constituents to meet specific needs for their communities where similar services are not available. Most perform a single function such as water, fire protection, wastewater or cemetery.

The ambulance district receives revenues, in part, by billing patients for their medical transport. These services provide revenues that come from employer and private health insurance coverages, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Because starting a new ambulance service in our community required additional funds, two property taxes were proposed and approved by voters: 1) a permanent tax levy, and 2) a renewable five-year operating tax levy. WLAD differs from a private ambulance business model or a corporation-owned business because it receives both patient care insurance revenues and tax dollars. Unfortunately — and in stark contrast with other privately run ambulance services — this is still not enough funding to keep our district in business despite more than \$1.5 million in taxpayer funding each year.

We believe financial mismanagement paying excessively high wages, benefits, and overtime compensation, with a growing PERS retirement obligation, are to blame.

Most ambulance services throughout Oregon are privately owned businesses that do not receive any government tax funds or subsidies. These ambulance services, such as neighboring Metro West Ambulance, a nationally accredited and locally owned company, has been a household name in the Pacific Northwest since the early 1950s. Metro West

provides high quality, community based, pre-hospital healthcare through working closely with hospital groups, long-term care providers and allied healthcare organizations. Their subsidiary, Pacific West Ambulance, has been serving nearby Lincoln County for the past 34 years. Another example is Bay Cities Ambulance, which provides emergency ambulance response to communities in Coos Bay, North Bend, Charleston, Hauser, North Bay, Millington, Green Acres, Sumner, Bandon, Roseburg and the Oregon Sand Dunes.

In fact, these companies actually have a higher level of professional certification from the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services than our own WLAD.

The remarkable difference between WLAD and these privately run ambulance companies is that they are able to provide excellent basic and advanced life support without any taxpayer subsidy — and do so while covering costs for their own ambulances, equipment and capital expenditures.

They do so by running their businesses the same way any successful small business, or anyone managing their family budget would: By making sure expenses don't exceed revenue. Our hope is that by sharing our perspective on the current economic situation at our ambulance district, taxpayers can reflect on what they feel is a reasonable amount to pay for these services.

A competitive living wage with health benefits and a retirement plan are expected. But what happens when "government" constantly raises salaries, benefits and perks that are far above what is offered by other qualified private businesses providing the same services?

In a government district, unions dictate through collective bargaining how much taxpayers must pay, through property taxes and levies, to continue operations.

It is our belief that taxpayers should be the ones who decide how much they will fund any service, whether it be fire, police or ambulance. Ultimately, taxpayers will decide if they would prefer a cost-competitive private business to provide these services, or if they are willing to pay more and carry the additional financial obligations that a government district requires for the same services.

We hope you will read the financial comparisons presented in the informational ad "What are you willing to pay?" on the next page.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor as part of a community discussion of issues on the local, state and national level.

Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters need to include full name, address and phone number; only name and city will be printed. Letters should be limited to about 300 words. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received.

Letters that are anonymous, libelous, argumentative, sarcastic or contain accusations that are unsourced or documented will not be published.

Letters containing poetry or from outside the Siuslaw News readership area will only be published at the discretion of the editor.

POLITICAL/ELECTION LETTERS:

Election-related letters must address pertinent or timely issues of interest to our readers at-large.

Letters must 1) Not be a part of letter-writing campaigns on behalf of (or by) candidates; 2) Ensure any information about a candidate is accurate, fair and not from second-hand knowledge or hearsay; and 3) Explain the reasons to support candidates based on personal experience and perspective rather than partisanship and campaign-style rhetoric.

Candidates themselves may not use the letters to the editor column to outline their views and platforms or to ask for votes; this constitutes paid political advertising.

As with all letters and advertising content, the newspaper, at the sole discretion of the publisher, general manager and editor, reserves the right to reject any letter that doesn't follow the above criteria.

Email letters to:
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