

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Tax-limit measure a good idea

Editorial from The (Bend Bulletin):

On July 5, an initiative petition that would make it more difficult for lawmakers to hike fees and taxes qualified for the November ballot. Three weeks later, in a seemingly unrelated move, the Oregon Liquor Control Commission showed voters why IP 31 is such a great idea.

IP 31 amplifies a taxpayer-protection requirement under which the Legislature already operates. Bills that would raise revenue must be approved by a supermajority consisting of three-fifths of each legislative chamber. This provision of the state Constitution sounds simple, but it really isn't. While there might be universal agreement among lawmakers that imposing a brand, new tax requires supermajority support, there's still plenty of room for disagreement — and money manipulation.

For instance, should a bill that would eliminate a tax deduction or credit be considered a bill "for raising revenue?" It would have the effect of a tax hike, and it certainly would raise revenue (that's the point), but there are those who insist that a simple majority should be enough to pass such legislation.

Meanwhile, there are plenty of other ways lawmakers extract money from taxpayers without running into a supermajority roadblock. Hiking fees is a good example.

IP 31 would, in brief, would require supermajority approval for any fee or tax increase, including changes to tax exemptions, credits, rates and so on. It would make the task of raising money more difficult for lawmakers, but that difficulty would favor bipartisan cooperation and the exercise of extreme care in deciding which taxes and fees to hike and which to leave alone. Surely that's not a bad thing.

On the contrary, the OLCC continues to provide a useful example of what happens when squeezing money from the public is too easy: Lots of squeezing happens, and it never ends.

Roughly a decade ago, in the midst of the Great Recession, the liquor commission agreed to charge an extra 50 cents for each bottle of liquor (25 cents for mini-bottles) for the 2009-11 biennium. The recession is long gone, but the surcharge lives on. It has been extended every two years even as the state's economy has boomed.

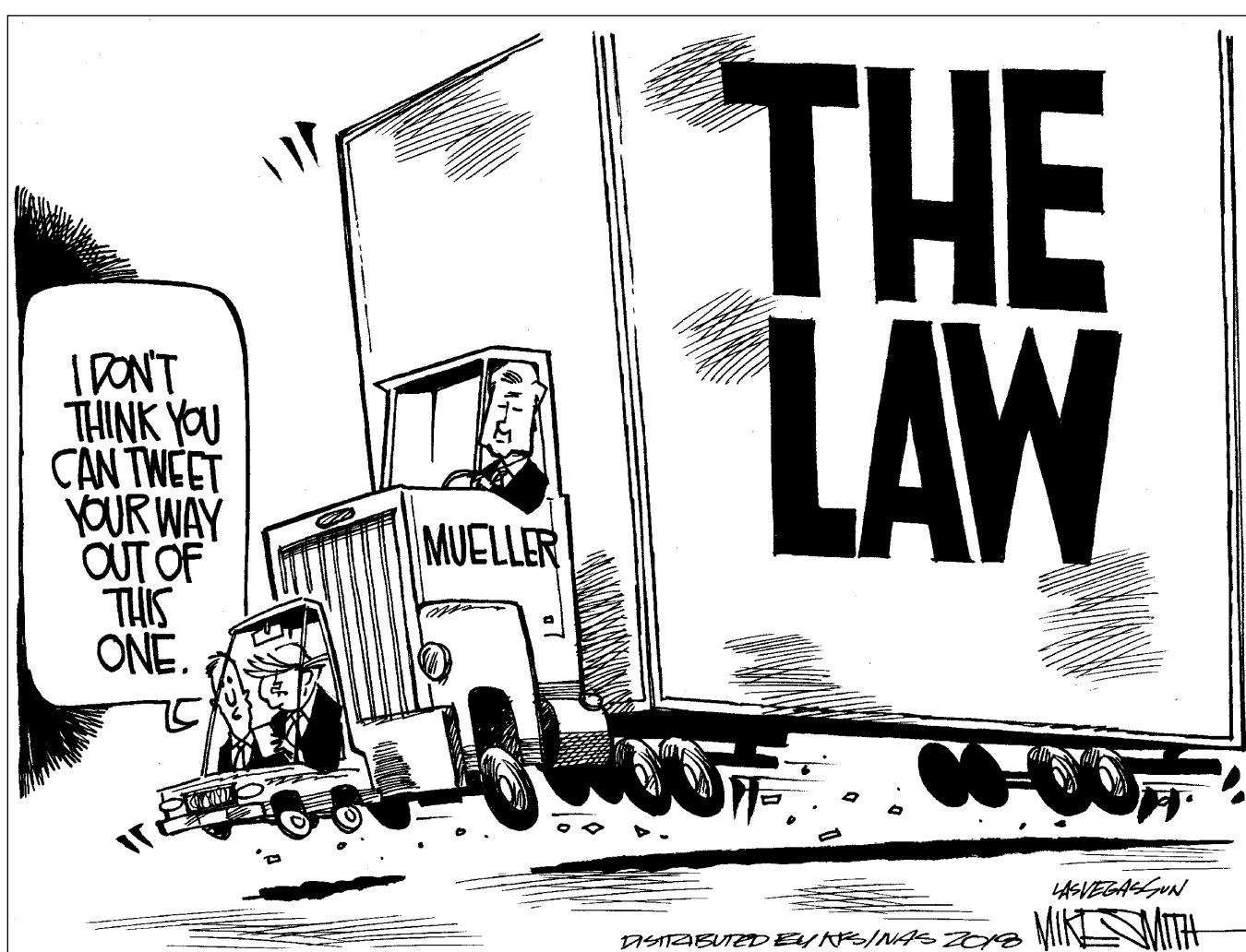
On July 26, the commission extended the surcharge for the 2019-21 biennium. The money the surcharge will raise during that period, about \$38 million, will go to the state general fund and be spent however lawmakers decide. The July 26 decision followed almost no discussion and included a "yes" vote from every, single commissioner present.

You can bet that the surcharge, adopted for a temporary period during a budget crisis, will never go away.

There's a reason the effective rate of taxation for Oregon's booze is so much higher than the rates for beer and wine. The state of Oregon controls the sale of all liquor and decides how much to charge. Raising the effective tax requires nothing more than the agreement of a handful of appointed commissioners. In other words, it's very, very easy.

Raising taxes on beer and wine, on the other hand, requires action by elected legislators, who are particularly sensitive to input from constituents and industry groups. Putting the squeeze on people is, thus, relatively hard.

Even so, there are still plenty of opportunities, including those involving fees and tax exemptions, for legislators to behave like liquor commissioners and take the easy way out. Voters in November should change that. Raising taxes and fees shouldn't be impossibly difficult, of course. But given how hard money is for most of us to earn, it should be a little more difficult for legislators to take.



Replace libraries? Not so fast

On July 21, Forbes published a piece by economist Panos Mourdoukoutas arguing that Amazon.com stores should replace public libraries. The backlash was rapid and unforgiving; library lovers from around the world responded with angry tweets, and Forbes removed the piece two days later. Yet the article highlights a concerning fact: Too many Americans misunderstand the role of the public library.

The library is not a warehouse of books like Amazon, a tech developer like Apple or a cafe like Starbucks. It is a public institution of learning predicated on the principle that all Americans should be able to access information, education and culture free of cost. In practice, the unique mission of the public library leads to a distinct set of services, ranging from book-lending to computer- and English-language classes. The growing diversity of library activities is not a means of compensating for the rise of the internet or a decline in the number of library users. Libraries have been reinventing their programs for over a century to advance the same old mission: information for all.

It's true that some people can gain the educational and cultural resources they seek at for-profit venues. However, as library advocates point out, the quality and diversity of library events and educational resources are rarely surpassed. Licensed librarians are available to curate books and online resources around any question a patron might ask. There are story-time events, job assistance resources for homeless

ADAM ECHELMAN

people and citizenship classes for recent immigrants.

But to compare the library to a bookstore or cafe is to miss the point. The existence of for-profit alternatives to some library services does not undermine the need for libraries, just like the existence of private attorneys does not diminish the importance of our public defenders.

For over a century, American libraries have mastered the craft of ensuring that everyone has access to the highest quality services in a free and open manner. Today, nearly every library provides free computer access and runs digital literacy classes. These services are not meant to compensate for waning interest in books or to compete with Amazon. Rather, public libraries provide free training and technology because the internet is a tool to access information even though that tool is distributed unequally in the U.S., where only 65 percent of Americans have broadband access at home, including 57 percent and 47 percent of blacks and Latinos respectively.

This summer, my organization, Libraries Without Borders, is working with the Providence Community Library in Rhode Island to bring legal information, Wi-Fi access, and library resources into flea markets, laundromats and housing developments. We know that too many families want to meet with a lawyer, study for their

GEDs, or learn English but don't know where to begin. Some lack the time to pursue these interests while others are simply unaware of existing services. The library is the first step to achieving these goals, but library services extend far beyond a building or the books inside it.

These outreach activities are emblematic of the decades of mission-driven work by public libraries across the United States. There are few systems as representative of this fact as the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. In 1886, Enoch Pratt was opened with the intent to provide information to all regardless of race; in October that year, Harry S. Cummings was the first African-American to get a Pratt library card. In 1943, the library sponsored a horse-drawn bookmobile designed to travel throughout the city. During World War II, the Brooklyn Branch of Enoch Pratt served as an information bureau for Civil Defense, while operating a day care center for working mothers and hosting Red Cross meetings. And all these initiatives? Done before the advent of the internet.

The value of a library is defined by its steadfast commitment to making information free and open to all. In that respect, there is no company or public institution that could ever replace the library.

Adam Echelman is the director of programs for Libraries Without Borders. His email is adam.echelman@librarieswithoutborders.org.

Your views

Small town values, and the love of a rooster

I was born and raised in Baker City. I grew up on an acre of land in town and was surrounded by animals. Horses, ducks, chickens, roosters and even a milk cow. My father graduated from Baker High School as I did, my husband and our children. I love this small town and everything that comes with it, the small town values and its sense of

belonging are priceless.

I am writing today to tell a story about a rooster, not just any rooster of course but a rooster that my granddaughter loves. We first got Frizzle when he was so small we did not know he was a rooster. She fell in love with him right away. She lives in Boise and loves to come over and spend time with Frizzle and her grandparents, as we all did growing up. I was really saddened to

read that the City Council is considering a ban on roosters. We are so blessed to be able to live in such a community that allows us to fall in love with little chicks that turn out to be roosters. Frizzle has been a part of our family for five years now. I wonder, City Council, do you support the same small town values that I do?

Pixie McKnight
Baker City

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.

- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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