

Opinion

BAKER CITY
Herald
Serving Baker County since 1870

Write a letter
news@bakercityherald.com

GUEST EDITORIAL

Don't hide teacher misconduct

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Oregon lawmakers are considering a pair of bills that would tighten the way in which sexual misconduct allegations against teachers and other school district personnel are handled. They are important changes to the law.

Among other things, Senate Bill 156, introduced on behalf of Portland Public Schools, would require the state Teacher Standards and Practices Commission to complete an investigation into the allegations within 90 days. For now, investigations can last eight months.

Senate Bill 155, introduced on behalf of the Senate Interim Committee on Education, would bar school districts from agreeing to contract provisions to keep accusations of sexual misconduct secret. It also would bar districts from agreeing to end investigations into employee misconduct if those employees agreed to quit their jobs. Like SB 156, it includes a variety of other provisions.

The measures, both of them, are overdue. As the Oregonian reported in 2017, it's all too easy for school districts effectively to ignore reports of sexual misconduct that sometimes go back for years. These bills are designed to end that practice.

But, as Anthony Rosilez, TSPC's executive director, told The Oregonian, the agency will need about \$540,000 to comply with the new rules and deadlines. Budget cuts have cost the agency one investigator, who would have to be replaced, and it would need to hire two more.

If it will take more money to complete investigations in a timely fashion, then more money must be found. This is one new expense lawmakers cannot ignore.

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com



GUEST EDITORIAL

Pension reform must come first

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Surely the biggest task Oregon lawmakers tackle every two years is coming up with a budget. This year the task is complicated by a couple of things. Legislators always want more money — even if revenue is already increasing. Too, the state is faced with a huge and growing unfunded liability in its Public Employees Retirement System fund, a nearly \$27 billion projected shortfall that costs money at virtually every level of government in Oregon.

Many lawmakers are eager to find new revenues. They're less eager to solve the PERS problem. Unfortunately, by ignoring it they're harming schoolchildren, foster kids, roads, public safety and anyone else who relies on government agencies

because so much of any revenue will go, not to education, safety and the like, but to paying off pension bills already coming due.

PERS reform is the necessary first step that must be completed before any new taxes are imposed.

Without it, at least a quarter of all new money raised for schools would go to pay down PERS. The Department of Human Services, which oversees the child welfare system, could be without the money it needs to overcome the serious problems that system has. Sending Oregon foster children out of state or holding them in former jails isn't an option many Oregonians are likely happy with. Other agencies badly in need of change also would be left high and dry.

In 2015 the Oregon Supreme Court rejected part of the most recent serious attempt to reform the pension system. It tossed out some but not all of a reform created by the 2013 Legislature, saying changing promises made to public workers on money they've already earned is unconstitutional.

What the court didn't say is there's no path to reform going forward. Yet Democratic lawmakers, who have controlled both houses of the Legislature since 2013, have not taken the issue seriously. That must change if Oregonians are ever to see improvements to government agencies that badly need them. Reforming PERS, in other words, is the critical first step toward making the sorts of improvements Oregon, its schools, cities and counties need.

Your views

There's no excuse for kidnapping children

Why are we receiving so little information regarding the children taken at our southern border and held in detention centers? These children were taken by the thousands with

no due process, inadequate if any identification guarantees, and little or no oversight of facilities and staff. Are there enough caretakers to comfort a sick child? A child having a nightmare? Do they even speak the child's language? Are siblings kept together?

There are people who try to excuse our behavior by saying that their parents entered our country illegally. What crime is worse than kidnapping?

Marilyn Hereau
Baker City

Circular argument: The safety of roundabouts

I recently read a report dealing with how drivers negotiate roundabouts, and the findings defy belief.

But of course roundabouts themselves are examples of utter insanity.

And capable of inducing it in a person whose mental faculties are otherwise in perfect working order.

When I'm driving and I approach a roundabout — and my family is unfortunate enough to be along for the ride — my kids weep in the silent way that people do when they're paralyzed, almost literally, by fear.

My wife stoically assumes the crash position.

Oxygen masks fall from the ceiling.

It's possible that I've confused that last part with a scene from "Airplane," but suffice it to say that my every tussle with a roundabout — and there is a definite martial flavor to these episodes — creates an aura of panic and crisis most usually associated with an impending explosion at a large industrial facility that processes toxic substances.

There are frantic flicks of the gearshift lever, whiplash-inducing jabs at the brake and gas pedals, rapid and apparently random spins of the steering wheel, all with a background cacophony of tires noisily shedding rubber.

And that's just me.

Among other drivers, those already stuck in the traffic version of a maelstrom are willing to do almost anything, including going airborne, to disengage.

Those approaching the round-



JAYSON JACOBY

about swerve into any convenient shelter, whether sidewalk or front yard, to avoid becoming embroiled in what seems to be my deliberate attack against an inanimate object.

And one with an interesting, if indecipherable, piece of public art perched in the middle.

Given my personal history with roundabouts it is no surprise that an email with that very word in its title would catch my attention among the daily bushels of digital chaff.

The subject was a poll conducted by PEMCO, an insurance company.

As is customary with fallible polls — how many of our elected officials, comfortably ensconced in their taxpayer-supplied office, supposedly lost, based on exit polling? — the PEMCO query about roundabouts yielded findings which suggest an alternate universe where a different sort of physics reigns.

To wit, most drivers who responded (76 percent) claim they negotiate roundabouts with competence, yet almost as many respondents (64 percent) insist that they frequently see other drivers muck things up.

Obviously a lot of people are lying to PEMCO.

(Not that a lack of candor is uncommon among people when conversing with their insurance provider. "Do I smoke? Of course not,"

insists the putative policyholder whose nicotine-stained fingers suggest nothing so much as advanced jaundice.)

All I know is that I'm not responsible for the abysmal roundabout performance that 64 percent of PEMCO's pollsters claim to have witnessed.

No more than half of it, anyway. Sometimes weeks, and even months, will pass when I don't get within 50 miles of a roundabout.

Which is very nearly a miracle for the traveling public.

Of course between those two statistics — 76 percent of drivers who tout their own skill, and 64 percent who find other motorists' acumen lacking — it's all but certain that the latter is far closer to reality.

Among activities that most adults engage in regularly, I would wager that driving is the one for which we're most likely to exaggerate our ability.

Indeed, multiple studies — ones with rather more validity, I suspect, than an insurance company's poll — have consistently shown that a majority of drivers will rate their performance as better than average.

Author Tom Vanderbilt examines this idea in considerable detail in his fascinating, and at times unsettling, 2008 book: "Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (And What It Says About Us)."

As Vanderbilt notes, it's statistically implausible that most drivers are better than average.

Psychologists deem this tendency the "optimistic bias," but Vander-

bilt's reference to Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon — "where all the children are above average" — better captures the essence of the absurdity of the idea.

Vanderbilt notes that psychologists have found this effect is more acute when applied to activities for which it's difficult to rate a person's proficiency.

This isn't the case for, say, brain surgery or basketball, where a person's scarcity of talent is apt to reveal itself clearly — and, in the former example, disastrously.

Driving is different. Even a poor driver is likely to complete most journeys without mishap, after all. It's to be expected, then, that many people would assume that the main reason, if not the only reason, that they manage to avoid disaster behind the wheel is their own skill.

I know better.

I know, for instance, that when I enter a roundabout it's the driving equivalent of walking a tightrope.

I'm not ashamed to admit that roundabouts confuse and frighten me, and that whatever aptitude I have for operating an automobile is severely atrophied during those tense moments as I go round the circle, knuckles not just turning white but actually sinking into the steering wheel's rim, like chocolate chips disappearing into pancake batter on the griddle.

Just because I've yet to come to a bad end in a roundabout doesn't mean I have conquered either my fear or my confusion.

Vanderbilt, as you might expect given the subject of his book, has

quite a lot to say about roundabouts.

He writes that roundabouts are statistically much safer than traditional four-way intersections — the latter being the site for about half of all crashes in the U.S.

Roundabouts are safer largely because their design reduces the number of what traffic engineers call "points of conflict" — an engineer's euphemism for the place where pieces of metal collide noisily and messily — from 56 to 16.

I'm prepared to accept Vanderbilt's figures as genuine, since I know as little about traffic engineering as I do about, say, brain surgery.

But I immediately felt better when I read this sentence in Vanderbilt's book, in which he explains the paradox between what statistics reveal — that roundabouts are much safer than traditional intersections — and what most drivers, such as me, feel.

"The system that many of us would feel is more dangerous is actually safer, while the system we think is safer is actually more dangerous," he writes.

Never mind that roundabouts truly are safer.

I defy any traffic engineer to gaze upon the terrified faces of my children when they're in the middle of one of those infernal circles, prisoners of fate and of their father's failings, and tell me that safe is what those innocent passengers are feeling.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.