

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Kicking the PERS can

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Of all the things parents want to pass on to their children, debt is probably not one. House Speaker Tina Kotek has suggested doing it anyway.

One of the ideas she has been thinking about as a partial solution to the state pension program's \$27 billion unfunded liability is kicking the can down the road. Delaying payments. Stretching out the liability farther into the future.

The idea in pensionspeak is to lengthen the amortization period for the Public Employees Retirement System. In plainer language, that means stretching out the number of years used to calculate the time to raise the money to pay PERS pension benefits.

Think of it like a car loan. Paying it off over 6 years rather than 4 years lowers the monthly payment. The Legislature could do a similar thing to PERS.

PERS amortization periods actually vary depending on the class of beneficiaries. Some are 16 years. Some are 20 years. Oregon could stretch those both out to 25 or further. Kotek pointed out state statute permits 40 years.

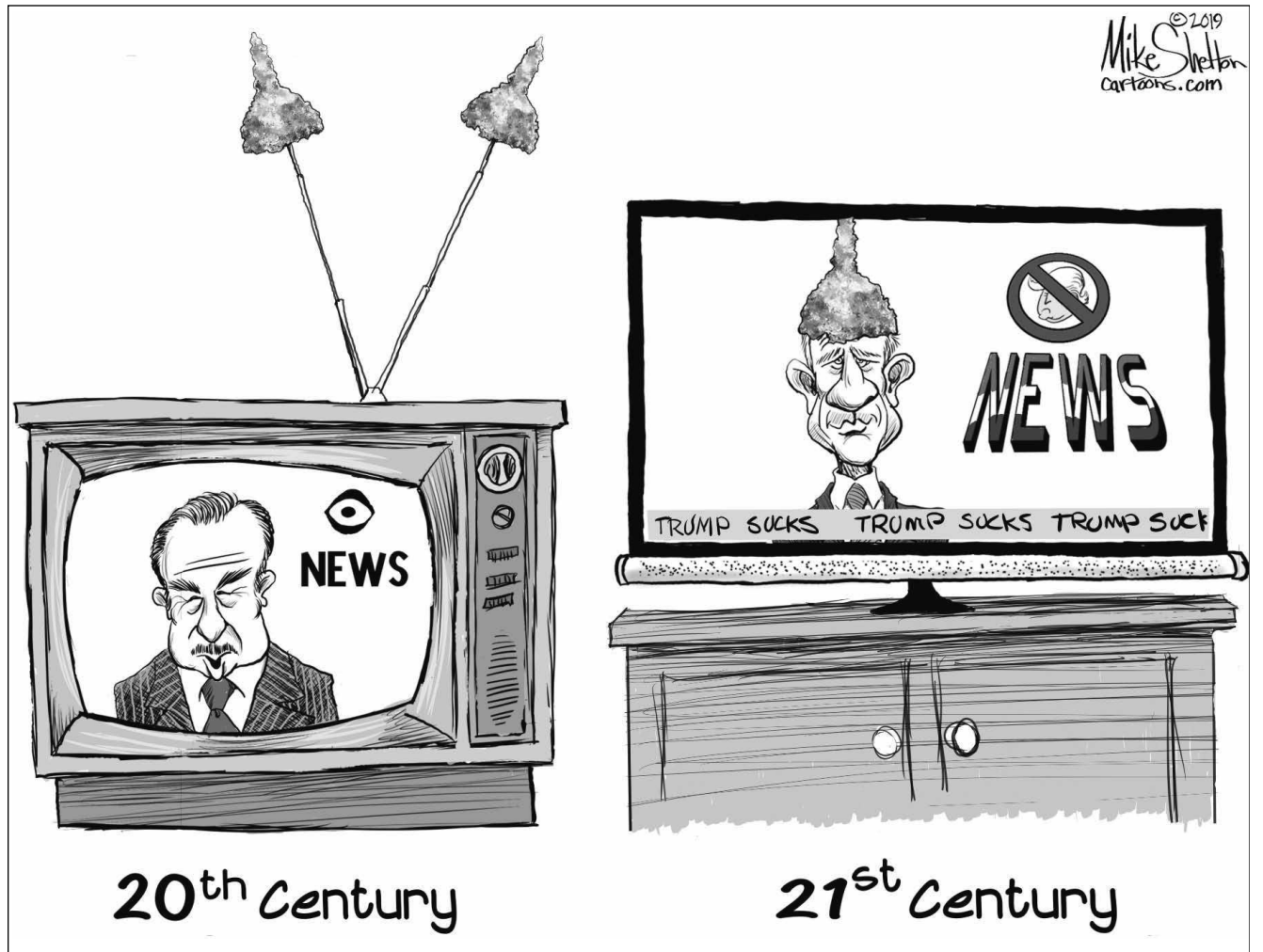
She said Oregon has one of the shortest amortization periods in the country at 15 years. That is not correct, as The Oregonian's Ted Sickinger pointed out.

The lower payments could, indeed, provide some temporary relief for Oregon's public employers — school districts, state and local governments. The rates that many of them have to pay into PERS have been ratcheting up. That's because, in part, of richer retirement benefit packages the state promised in the past.

For instance, the Hillsboro school district is paying about 28% of its payroll into PERS for the 2019-2021 biennium. That's projected to go up to over 33% for 2021-2023, meaning the district will have less money to work with. So one way to hold down those increases is to fiddle with the calculations to lower those payments.

But we all know what happens. Delaying paying off the debt means paying more in the end. Kotek knows that. She sees it, though, as one way to limit the increases in PERS rates as state employees with the richer packages move through retirement.

As The Oregonian's Ted Sickinger explained, though, there's no guarantee that lengthening the amortization period would help much. What if the stock market dipped and PERS investments faltered? Oregon might be even worse off. Oregon could just make things harder for the next generation. That's not a solution the Legislature should pursue.



Your views

Brown, Democrats stealing from Oregon taxpayers

In the article on Page 3A of the April 15 Baker City Herald headlined "Brown unveils plan to control PERS costs for schools," she has proven herself to be nothing better than a common thief. In order to try to "backfill the growing deficit," the governor has chosen to misappropriate (steal) funds from the taxpayers of Oregon.

In order to come up with approximately an extra billion taxpayer dollars, Gov. Brown has chosen to get the funds from the following sources:

- Transfer \$500 million from SAIF Corporation — that is the property of customers of SAIF Corporation as an Oregon governor found out in the 1980s.
- Keep the portion of any taxpayers' kicker check that exceeds \$100 — the average check is usually several hundred dollars per taxpayers. This

Letters to the editor

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act of thievery is estimated to bring in between \$400 million and \$500 million. Note — she (and her minions in the Legislature) have already stolen \$108 million from the projected 2020 refund check through a parliamentary maneuver.

- Transfer \$100 million of Lottery funds included in the state budget.
- Take \$83.3 million from additional taxes from the Trump tax reform

that are the repatriation of corporate profits.

All of this comes at a time when state revenues are at record levels. Apparently, there is NEVER enough money for the liberal Democrats to spend. This is what happens when you have supermajorities in both houses of the Oregon Legislature. All of these things can (and will) be accomplished without one Republican vote.

Oh, by the way, don't forget about the proposed carbon "cap and trade" bill... if passed it will increase taxes on gasoline by 15 cents per gallon AND devastate the rural Oregon economy. Their messaging on this bill makes it sound like it will only affect businesses, but when businesses go away, then where will you work?

Remember, "power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Joe Bailey
Baker City

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Book explores 2016 Malheur Refuge takeover

I read the word "sagebrush" on the book cover and I was powerless against the compulsion to pick it up for a more thorough look.

Sagebrush is among the words or terms I simply can't ignore when they're part of a book title.

Others are "Beatles," "Bigfoot," "Great War" and "Hiking Trails."

Each is a topic for which I have yet to exhaust my curiosity. And although sagebrush, so far as I can tell, has not spawned quite so extensive a bibliography as the above quartet, it is among my favorite shrubs, and rarely have I been disappointed with a book that has something to do with this ubiquitous denizen of the arid West.

I certainly was not disappointed in this case, although the book had much to do with politics and society and quite little with botany.

The complete name of the book that caught my eye, published in 2018 and in the new nonfiction section at the Baker County Library, is "Sagebrush Collaboration: How Harney County Defeated the Takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge."

The author is Peter Walker, a professor at my alma mater, the University of Oregon.

This is a topic, and a book, that I would have checked out even absent the lure of sagebrush.

The subject is one of the more memorable episodes in modern



JAYSON JACOBY

Eastern Oregon history — the 2016 takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns by a group of people with a misguided notion of how public land came to be public.

It struck me, as I perused the synopsis on the book's back cover, that although I've read dozens of news stories, editorials and columns about the Malheur case — and written not a few myself — I had not come across a book devoted to the topic.

I have no doubt that Walker's fine effort will not be the last, as the subject has multiple aspects that ought to provide rich fodder for historians.

The illegal occupation of the Refuge during January and early February of 2016 was not, strictly speaking, a local story from my perspective. The Refuge, a haven for migratory birds that's managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is about 180 miles south of Baker City. Baker and Harney counties don't quite share a border, as Grant County's eastern thumb is jammed in between the two.

But in our region, where miles

have a rather different connotation than in the more modest dimensions of metro areas, 180 miles is near enough to deserve front-page headlines if the subject is especially compelling.

This one definitely qualified.

The issues raised, and most particularly the relationship between rural communities whose economies depend heavily on their use of nearby public land, and the federal agencies that manage that land, were intrinsically interesting to the Herald's readers.

The episode was at times dramatic, as when crowds gathered in Burns to discuss and debate the situation. Unfortunately it was also tragic, when police shot and killed one of the Refuge occupiers, LaVoy Finicum, when he failed to stop at a roadblock on Highway 395 north of Burns and then, while walking through the snow outside his pickup truck, he reached toward the pocket on his jacket that held a pistol.

The Refuge takeover remained relevant even after the last occupier left in early February of 2016.

The event was a factor, albeit I don't believe a deciding one, in the campaign that spring for a Baker County Commissioner position. Candidate Kody Justus, who narrowly lost to Bruce Nichols, had visited the Refuge during the occupation and met with some of

its leaders. Justus said he made the trip mainly to satisfy his curiosity rather than as an explicit endorsement of the occupiers' tactics.

Notwithstanding Finicum's unnecessary death — had he merely complied with police I have no doubt he would have lived, as did the passengers in his truck — I always thought there was a farcical flavor to the Refuge takeover.

This was due mainly to the fantastical notion expressed by the leaders, most notably the brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy, that the federal government had no legitimate claim to the Refuge land — nor indeed, to other public property that makes up more than 70 percent of Harney County — and that it rightfully belonged to the county. The Bundys claimed that transferring the land would reinvigorate the county's moribund economy by increasing grazing, logging and mining.

Walker devotes much of his book to explaining why this idea is so hare-brained, both legally and economically.

Just a few days after I finished "Sagebrush Collaboration," The Oregonian reported that a state judge in Nevada, where the Bundys' father, Cliven, lives, had dismissed the elder Bundy's lawsuit seeking to declare all public land in that state as belonging to the state.

Judge Jim Crockett described

Cliven Bundy's claim as "simply delusional."

I don't recall Walker using that adjective, but it certainly captures the essence of the case that he lays out in compelling and convincing detail against the foundation of the Refuge occupiers' claims.

But the overriding thesis in Walker's book, which the title makes explicit, is also the part of this story that most fascinates me. Which is why the occupiers failed to gain anything like a groundswell of support in a county that, much like Baker County, might seem, superficially, to be susceptible to their message.

I'll leave it to readers to explore this in detail by reading "Sagebrush Collaboration."

But I greatly enjoyed the journey through Walker's chapters. And I came away feeling ever more certain that a healthy majority of Eastern Oregonians, though they might find plentiful fault with how the federal government manages our sprawling lands of sage and pine, are far too savvy to fall for the empty promises of charlatans who seem to believe that carrying copies of the U.S. Constitution in their shirt pockets makes them legal scholars, and that wearing Stetsons makes them the allies of cowboys.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.