

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Another expensive failure in Salem

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Once again the Oregon Department of Human Services is in the news, and once again it's for the wrong reason. An article in The Oregonian documents yet another failure by the folks who run DHS, this time a failure to spend money according to the rules and the problems that failure has caused.

The \$40 million mistake came about when, as welfare rolls here declined, too much federal money was directed toward administration of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, rather than the program's impoverished clients. The federal government's request to have its money returned doesn't seem out of line.

The Oregonian piece is hardly the first story that has highlighted problems at one of the state's largest — 8,600 employees — agencies. Its handling of children has drawn particular attention, both in a secretary of state's audit of the agency and elsewhere. Most recently, there's the discovery that some children in the state's foster care system have actually been shipped out of Oregon to institutions where at least one 9-year-old was drugged in an effort to manage her behavior.

Still, just because this is only the latest in a series of problems at the agency doesn't mean the current mess, which will cost the state \$40 million to fix, should be taken lightly, as Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, seemed to do recently.

"I don't think it's a big deal," Nosse said. "... We're dealing with an agency that has thousands of employees. It has billions of dollars to manage. This is not all that surprising. This is part of the process; mistakes were made."

How can \$40 million not be a big deal?

Just over a month ago Gov. Kate Brown ordered major changes at DHS, creating an oversight board for the foster care program, among other things. So far, so good. But as the latest story makes clear, the DHS problems are not limited to foster care, not by a long shot.

It may well be that the sheer size of DHS is at the root of some of its problems. It employs more people than live in cities like Hood River, Burns and Junction City, and its programs include everything from food stamps to foster care to services for those with intellectual disabilities and the elderly.

The Legislature must decide if the agency needs additional controls to correctly manage its money or if the existing leadership is just not up to the task.



Your views

Tax revenue from pot sales not worth the trouble

This concerns the recent City Council meeting where Councilor Lynette Perry proposed that the Council reconsider the city's ban on retail marijuana sales within the city limits as a source of income. Who is going to buy the marijuana? It will be our children, the few teens going through the know-it-all years, the adults who carry heavy emotional burdens — even pain. I'm hoping the last two categories wouldn't mind going out of their way to get this avenue of relief.

Before moving to Baker City I loved in Fair Oaks, California, two houses down from the Catholic Church and school. A drunk driver hit a student in the crosswalk. He didn't kill her — just some broken bones — but about a year later another drunk driver hit the same little girl and killed her. Her mother cried out, "they killed her twice!" and MADD was born.

I wasn't there when the mother cried out, but I could hear it again and again every time I turned left onto Sunset.

Have mercy on mothers! MADD could also become Mothers Against Drugged Drivers or Drug Dealers.

The income isn't worth it.

Suzanne Kahle
Baker City

America's Constitution and laws define our country

I just received a letter from the "National Committee To Defend America." Many of you should have received this same letter. Let me make it clear — they're on America's side. But want to know whose side we as Americans are? These questions should not ever need to be asked.

Should Muslim law ever replace the U.S. Constitution as America's courtroom. Seems there are some liberal justices in the Supreme Court who think so. Pro-ACLU Justices Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Sonia Sotomayor say they don't understand what's wrong in using foreign law, including Muslim law,

which tells me they know nothing about what they are talking about. There's already been 50 court cases in 23 states where Muslim law was used to render a verdict. In New Jersey a Muslim man was acquitted of raping his wife. Muslim law gives him that right. These are all legal in Muslim law as well — honor killings, Jihad bombings, the beheading of Christians.

I believe it's time many of us wake up to the fact we have enemies in our government. We all must decide if the values and laws this country is based on, the freedom it stands for, or do you give it all up to a liberal government and foreign laws that hate you and me, that think we should be subject to laws besides this country's. From citizen to subject.

Excuse me, but I have always been under the belief that when you come to this country, you are required to obey its laws, not the laws of where you come from. I believe to become a citizen you take an oath to uphold this country and honor it and its flag, not a black one. God has honored this country because its people honored Him. There's some who want to take God out of most beliefs, without knowing the price we all would pay. I pray that you and I won't let it happen.

Richard Fox
Baker City

B2H power line is obsolete before it's even built

Mitch Colburn, an Idaho Power spokesman for the controversial Boardman-to-Hemingway transmission line, insists that demand for electricity will increase and a shortfall will exist by 2025, but my research shows that the market is not growing. Idaho Power's billed sales for the last 10 years have been essentially flat, if not declining.

Changes in electric utilities are occurring so rapidly that most industry analysts propose "strategic positioning" as the best investment to make. B2H is a highly centralized, \$1.2 billion mega-

project that guarantees an \$80 million dollar profit to Idaho Power and their partners' shareholders, but does not serve the ratepayers or the public. The five Eastern Oregon counties that would be crossed by the line will see irreparable environmental and cultural damages and increasing grid defections, leaving poorest of communities to pay the bills. Idaho Powers' 12-year-old B2H plans are based on an old-school approach that has consistently ignored dramatic changes in power sources, delivery and storage.

For about a century, affordable electrification has been based on economies of scale, with large generating plants producing hundreds or thousands of megawatts of power, sent to distant users through a vast transmission and distribution grid. Today, utility industry developments are replacing that simple model.

At the top of the list is the availability of low-cost natural gas and solar power. Generators based on these resources can be built much closer to customers. We are now in the early stages of an expansion of distributed generation, which is already lessening the need for costly and wasteful long-distance transmission.

The insecurity of a centralized transmission system is not in our best interest. If one large transmission line goes down, perhaps due to terrorism or forest fire, entire cities are blacked out and vulnerable. With distributed generation, most areas would still have power. Ongoing price declines and technological advances in energy generation and distribution show the proposed B2H transmission line will be obsolete from the onset. Considering decreasing consumer demands and the rapid and dramatic changes in the industry, Idaho Power's self-serving efforts to support need for the B2H are neither credible nor realistic.

JoAnn Marlette
Baker City
Member of the Stop B2H Coalition
StopB2H.org

GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The Albany Democrat-Herald:

We suppose we should be grateful that the Oregon Legislature has even acknowledged the slow-motion crisis that is the Public Employees Retirement System. The problem is that the action the Legislature is primed to take this session — in the form of Senate Bill 1049 — is basically the same strategy it's used for decades: kicking the can down the road.

Even state Sen. Sara Gelsler of Corvallis, who is gaining a reputation this session for unusually blunt talk, recognized the problem: She was one of five Democrats who voted against the bill, which passed on a 16-12 vote. (The midvalley's other senator, Republican Fred Girod of Stayton, was one of three Republicans who voted for it; he called it "the hardest vote of our lives.")

To be fair, there is a hard part of Senate Bill 1049, and it's going to be hard for members of the House of Representatives when they take up the measure: The bill

proposes redirecting a portion of the retirement contributions employees currently make to a supplemental 401(k)-like savings plan. Under the provisions of the bill, some of those contributions — 2.5% of pay for employees hired before Aug. 28, 2003, and 0.75% for employees hired after — would go into an account that would support pension benefits.

By reducing the amount of money going into the supplementary retirement accounts, the plan would reduce employees' overall retirement benefits by 1% to 2% of pay, according to The Oregonian's Ted Sickinger, whose reporting on PERS continues to be essential.

That might not seem like a lot, but as Sickinger noted, many public employees say they're underpaid today, and there's some merit to that argument. And public employee unions are bitterly opposed to these provisions in Senate Bill 1049, so voting for it did require some political courage on the part of senators.

But here's the problem with the bill: It doesn't put much of a dent in the \$27 billion unfunded liability currently stalking the state's pension system. And, in fact, some 75% of its cost savings (estimated at about \$1.2 billion to \$1.8 billion in the 2021-23 budget cycle) come from extending the minimum payment schedule on the deficit by eight to 10 years.

Gelsler didn't mince words: "We are pushing this cost off to future Legislatures, to other Oregonians hoping that at some point in the future we will come back and find something that is politically feasible," she said during debate on the measure. "That doesn't make sense to me because that is how we got to this place right now."

The bill passes the House. If it is signed by Gov. Kate Brown, taxpayers won't pay off the PERS deficit until the 2041-43 budget cycle, as opposed to paying it off by 2035.

But that relies on a pair of questionable assumptions. First, it assumes that the

system continues to generate its average rates of return on investments, but that's an area in which the system has struggled in the past. (To be fair, it often has been saddled with unrealistic rates of returns in an attempt to make the books look a little better.)

The second assumption is even more questionable: A prolonged economic downturn could play havoc with these plans. And one thing is for sure: Our extended economic expansion will not endure forever. In fact, some economists (including some who work for the state) say it could come as early as next year. We can't say when the downturn will occur. But you can be sure it will come.

Part of the reasoning behind Senate Bill 1049 is to help ensure that the revenue headed to Oregon's K-12 school districts thanks to a new tax on businesses won't be swallowed up by increasing PERS premiums. The bill will help prevent that. But legislators are fooling themselves if they think this is the last word on PERS reform.