

SCHOOLS

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the audience of about 80 included school administrators, board members, teachers and interested citizens from as far away as Ontario, Halfway, Mitchell and Lakeview.

Equitable funding for rural schools was the focus, but the bottom line – the students served by the schools – was not forgotten.

“We’re putting our heart and soul into our students,” said Superintendent Mark Witty of Grant School District No. 3 in his opening remarks. “We care about this area, and we represent kids that matter.”

Morgan Allen, a legislative specialist for Oregon School Boards Association, captured the frustrations and challenges for rural school districts, noting that no matter the size of the school, they still are required to fulfill all the state’s education mandates.

“Our small schools are expected to do what the large schools are expected to do,” he



The Eagle/Angel Carpenter
Rep. Cliff Bentz speaks to the Education Forum audience at Grant Union with Senator Ted Ferrioli to the left.

said, adding that rural schools are often the major employer in small communities.

Speaking about the state school fund, Chris Cronin, Grant School District No. 3

school board chair, described what her district went through to be on budget for the current biennium.

Drastic measures included the closure of Mt. Vernon Mid-

dle School, which merged into Grant Union; reductions equal to 19 full-time employees; and the closure of the district’s alternative school.

In a PowerPoint, Cronin showed that to meet targets to close achievement gaps for all students, including the state’s 40-40-20 goal, the state school budget would need to be \$7.85 billion.

The 40-40-20 is the state’s push to have 40 percent of all students go on to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher degree, 40 percent finish community college and the other 20 percent at least graduate from high school.

Cronin said \$7.55 billion would maintain current programs, while \$7.45 billion would result in 4.56 percent budget cuts at their district.

Baker School District Superintendent Walt Wegener displayed pictures to illustrate the increasing layers of bureaucracy he’s seen in his district – a presentation that drew laughs.

“It’s hard to focus on 40-40-20,” he said. “I don’t disagree – it’s a great idea – but for us, it’s 15-80-5.”

He said a requirement that a teacher would need a bachelor’s degree to instruct students in how to drive a tractor doesn’t make sense, while local control does.

“We need highly effective teachers more than highly qualified (teachers),” he said.

He added that students of his school district are receiving thousands of college credits.

“We educate our kids to live and be successful with us,” he said.

Other topics of discussion included Senate Bill 447 to support facilities improvement, Small School Correction, Education Service District funding request and Career Technical Education access.

Addressing the state mandate to implement full-day kindergarten, Chris Panike, La Grande School District business manager, said having that requirement without added funds ends up penalizing other school programs.

Grant ESD board member Dana Brooks said the education service districts need funding that is tied to the state school funding amount.

She noted ESD funding “has

been stagnant since 2003,” adding the Grant County ESD has had to cut services to schools, and those costs are passed on to the local school districts.

Legislators asked for feedback, with Bentz recommending that people be specific in their emails to him about how lower funding is affecting the students.

Ferrioli said argument for rural schools is an “equity issue and a fairness issue.”

He mentioned Long Creek School District, which has lost a significant population of students over the years and currently serves about 30 students.

“I’ll dig in and fight, because we’re not going to lose any school,” he said. “I will fill sandbags.”

Witty said the meeting was positive and an opportunity for those who serve rural students to be heard by their Salem representatives.

“I was very pleased with the commitment from our legislators who represent Eastern Oregon,” he said. “They were willing to take the time and commit to understanding critical issues that directly impact students in our region.”

SNAIL

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positive identification of the snail.

Elaine Eisenbraun, executive director of the Long Creek-based watershed council, said the snail is an invasive species that has not been recorded in the John Day River system. Native to Europe and Asia, the snail gets its name from its ear-shaped shell.

Eisenbraun said the “invasive” tag means the snail, while exotic to North America, is increasing in population density on the continent.

However, it is not considered a “noxious” species, as it is not outcompeting or having any known detrimental impact on native species in the lakes and rivers where it is found.

The nearest prior discoveries of the snail were in Lake Billy Chinook, in Central Oregon, and

Snail facts

European ear snails – Radix auricularia – are in the family of lymnaeid snails, which are scrapers and gatherers.

- They are native to Europe and Asia.
- Size: They grow to about 15 mm in height and 13 mm in width.
- The mantle has dark spots along its edge and 4 to 5 whorls in the shell.
- Habitat: They prefer fresh water lakes and slow-moving rivers, where they feed on detritus, algae, and sand.

Idaho’s Snake and Owyhee river drainages. In addition, significant populations have emerged in southwestern Oregon.

The Watershed Council will seek additional funding to search areas near the capture site to determine the level of prevalence of the population. Plans

also call for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Oregon Marine Board to look into ways the snail might have entered the basin.

“Rivers are such a dynamic element of our environment. It is important to keep an eye on the changes that take place naturally and as a result of human activity,” said Eisenbraun.

She credited the council monitoring staff for its “meticulous work” leading to the discovery of this change in the river system.

The council’s monitoring program, coordinated by Justin Rowell, is affiliated with the Intensively Monitored Watershed, a working group supported by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, NOAA Fisheries and other funders. That work draws participants from universities, agencies, and nonprofits who are collecting information about the health of the Middle Fork and its response to restoration activities.

JOB

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Commissioner Chris Labhart said he felt the scope of the position should be decided in the budget deliberations, but he also worried about the county’s exposure to liability without an HR person.

“We’re hanging so far out there, guys,” he said.

The unspoken backdrop for the discussion includes two pending federal lawsuits against the county, filings that allege county employees used derogatory, vulgar language to describe a job applicant in a hiring meeting. The county’s lawyers have not yet filed a response to the discrimination lawsuit filed by Terry Hanson, while a U.S. District Court judge has referred the whistle-blower complaint filed by James N.

Gravley to mediation.

While not mentioning the litigation specifically, Britton noted a couple of problems have come up recently, but he contended a full-time HR person wouldn’t be the solution.

“All the HR persons in the world aren’t going to prevent someone from saying something inappropriate in some setting,” Britton said.

The Court discussed, but backed off from, an alternate scenario proposed by the treasurer to craft a position at less than full time.

Smith suggested the county budget consider a future merging of the HR duties with the court secretary’s job. That would create one full-time position after the current secretary, Mary Ferrioli, retires, which is not expected until sometime in 2016-17.

If the Court opted for that plan, County Clerk Brenda Percy said she would take

back some of the HR duties until the new job goes into effect. If she filled in, it would not include union negotiations or grievances.

Percy had the HR duties until last October when she resigned that assignment, saying the personnel work was starting to interfere with her elected duties.

Justice of the Peace Kathy Stinnett questioned how many of the HR duties Percy could be expected to do on top of her elected full-time job, and she asked the Court if there would be a solution in between full time and the partial approach using the clerk to fill in.

The Court’s split vote leaves the future of the HR job up to the full budget panel, a choice Britton criticized as abdicating their responsibility.

Pending a solution, Myers is the default HR officer for the county.

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