

Rural highways and drivers deserve green light in Salem

Rural Oregon rarely makes it into the Salem spotlight, but two bills currently being debated on the floor have us front and center.

The first would increase speed limits on select rural highways, including the stretch of Interstate 84 from Ontario to The Dalles. The second bill would allow for self service gas in counties with less than 40,000 people — most of Eastern Oregon.

We're in favor of both. Increasing the speed limit to 70 mph from The Dalles to Ontario, as House Bill 3402 would do, makes good sense. It's good for the Eastern Oregon economy, good for our drivers and good for travelers coming from neighboring states with higher speed limits.

It doesn't mean that everyone has to speed up by 5 mph — but those of us who feel more comfortable driving in the mid 70s can do so without fear of being ticketed.

But everyone knows as speed goes up, gas mileage goes down.

And if you are traveling in Grant County and other rural areas, but forget to fill up, it can be a long way to the next station.

State Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, is a co-sponsor of a bill to lift the ban on

self-service in certain areas, at certain times. He says it makes sense for the remote reaches of the state, where stations are widely scattered and few, if any, can afford to have workers on site round the clock.

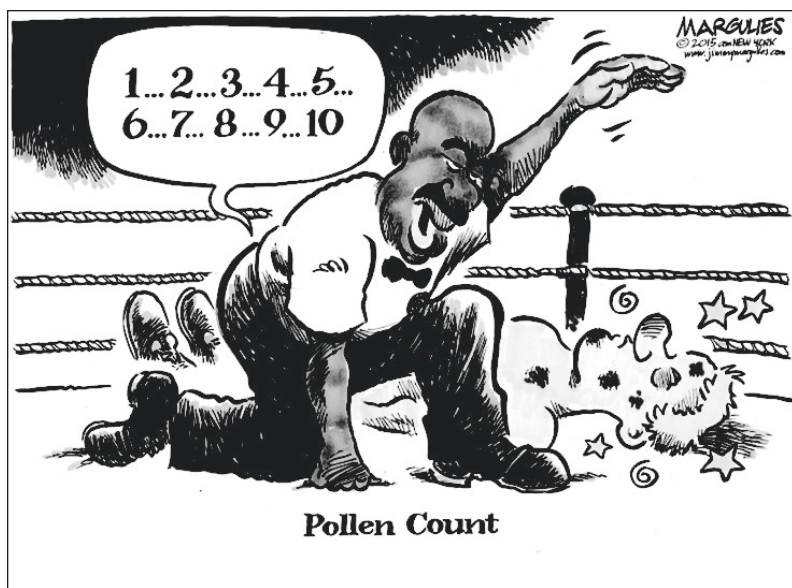
"If you're a tourist going into the outback of our state without a full tank of gas," he told oregonlive.com, "you'd better be prepared to sleep in your car, because it's going to be tough to find a gas station that's open after a certain hour."

So it makes sense in some of our most rural places for self-service to be legal when no employees are present.

You heard that right, under this proposal, such stations will still be full service from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. But after hours, when you can't wait around until the station opens in the morning, you can pump your own so you can get on your way.

This is a reasonable step for the rural areas, and also nudges the state toward the path already taken by almost all the other states. (New Jersey, the only other state with a self-service ban, is weighing a change as well.)

And that might come in handy one of these nights when you're driving a lonely stretch of Highway 26 or 395, your gauge dipping dangerously close to empty.



Pollen Count



The PERS earthquake: A damage assessment

By Adam Davis
For Oregon Capital Insider

Banner headlines, above the fold: Supreme Court Overturns PERS Changes.

Since the announcement a couple of weeks ago, the chattering class in Oregon has been focused on assessing the damage from the political earthquake. What do the billions of unfunded PERS costs mean for the state moving forward?

Many wonder if the earthquake has shaken the taxpayers enough that they are now willing to tax themselves to prevent cuts to important public services including schools and public safety.

DHM Research did some earthquake damage assessment of our own to determine where Oregon voters are on PERS and the question of higher taxes to prevent cuts to services.

Despite all the hoopla surrounding the Supreme Court's decision, not all voters have heard about it. About a third of Oregon's voters told us last weekend that they had not heard or read anything related to PERS within the last two weeks. When asked to identify the most important issue they want their state government officials to do something about, only 3 percent mentioned PERS.

Voters registered significant concerns about the state's ability to pay for an adequate level of public services such as education and public safety. Good news if you think that the climate may be changing for tax reform. The magnitude of concern, however, remains moderate: Less than one half of Oregon's voters are "very" concerned (45 percent Democrats; 37 percent Republicans; 22 percent Independents). Yes, despite the PERS decision.

Furthermore, voters listed high taxes among the top issues that they want their officials to address. School funding remains a top concern, but is mentioned by less than a majority and split between those who feel the schools



Adam Davis

already have enough money (and just need to spend it more wisely) and those who feel schools need more money.

Two more data points from this past weekend suggest it may take some earthquake aftershocks and a prolonged economic recovery before the political landscape shifts enough in Oregon to safely support building a request of the voters to increase their taxes.

The state remains very divided on the need for more state revenue, even after the PERS decision.

In the 2013 Oregon Values and Beliefs Survey, 43 percent agree that our current tax system with just income tax and property tax is too unstable to pay for public services. A similar 42 percent disagreed.

This past weekend, we asked voters to consider the state's quality of life and low ranking compared to other states in many areas. When asked if now with the PERS decision there was a need to raise taxes, 43 percent agreed and 47 percent disagreed. You want a party divide? While 72 percent of Democrats agreed that it is time to raise taxes, only 16 percent of Republicans and 34 percent of Independents felt so. That's not good calculus for tax advocates.

Wonder if people view the situation differently when framed in terms of "my local schools?" That should tug at the heart strings, right?

Given four statements, only 24 percent felt the statement that comes closest to how they feel is "my local public schools just don't have enough money, and now with the recent Supreme Court ruling overturning PERS reform, the problem is worse. I'm prepared to pay more in taxes for my local schools."

Slightly more, 28 percent, felt even with the PERS reforms being overturned, "I'm not prepared to pay more in taxes for my local schools until edu-

cation reforms have been put in place to ensure that any additional money will increase student academic growth."

The most common viewpoint, chosen by 31 percent, was that "I'm not prepared to pay more in taxes for my local schools. Even with the PERS reforms being overturned, I feel the schools have enough money; they just need to spend it more wisely."

A smaller number, 10 percent, said "I just can't afford it. Even though I feel my local schools don't have enough money, I can't pay more in taxes for my local schools."

At this point, it doesn't look like the Supreme Court's PERS earthquake has shaken things enough to mobilize Oregonians in support of increased taxes to maintain funding for public services. How many aftershocks would it take, and for how long would they need to happen, to change things? Hard to tell.

Also, consider that we're only talking about the need for additional revenue to prevent cuts in services. How about the money needed to address new expenses such as our deteriorating water, sewer, and transportation systems?

We do know that any future earthquakes would have to be of seismic magnitude to penetrate the voters' consciousness, significantly affect their attitudes about government and politics, and alter the political landscape. It will likely take more than one. Perhaps it may take a real earthquake. Not likely to happen? OK then, let's just go after the wealthy and big business. What a novel idea.

No wonder only about a third of Oregon voters feel that over the next 10 years we'll find common ground and work together to make progress addressing the critical issues we face as a state.

Adam Davis, who has been conducting opinion research in Oregon for more than 35 years, is a founding principal in DHM Research, an independent, non-partisan firm. Visit www.dhmresearch.com.

COMMENTARY

Trade pact is good for rural Oregon

By Bruce Dausavage
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Recently there has been much debate about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the free trade agreement that the United States is negotiating with 11 other Pacific Rim nations, and Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), which gives the President authorization to negotiate the TPP and bring it to Congress for an up or down vote.

One thing is for sure: TPA and TPP are good for rural Oregon.

Businesses grow and hire people when they sell more of their product. One of the biggest opportunities to sell more Oregon made products is to export them to Pacific Rim countries. Today there are 525 million middle class consumers in Asia. By 2030, there are expected to be 2.7 billion. That's more than six times what the U.S. market will be at that point. And these consumers are demanding exactly what rural Oregon produces: great food, quality building materials, and renewable fuel to heat their homes.

Most of the TPP countries simply do not have the excellent forest and agricultural resources that we possess in Oregon. That's why the list of what we produce in rural Oregon looks a lot like the list of Oregon's top exports, including wheat, fruits and vegetables, processed foods, dairy, beef, and wood products.

Forty-five percent of the \$18.6 bil-

lion in goods that Oregon exported in 2013 went to TPP countries, and much of it was food and forest products. Small and medium sized business make up 80 percent of those that export.

Exports also helped keep my industry, forest products, afloat during the recession. U.S. housing starts — the traditional driver of Oregon's forest products industry — came to a screeching halt after the housing and financial crisis that began in 2007. At the same time, housing starts in China and other Asian countries were growing rapidly.

While much attention was paid to the controversial topic of exporting raw logs, the little known fact is that exports of manufactured wood products to Asia grew rapidly during this period. It is hard to imagine, but the recession would have been much worse for rural Oregon without access to these markets.

During the recession my company began producing high quality wood pellets from forest biomass. These pellets are used to heat homes, hospital boilers and schools all over the world. They replace fossil fuels, improve air quality, and help restore our forests by providing a use for small diameter trees that are contributing to devastating forest fires in our overstocked federal forests.

Growing more markets for these products not only helps us keep dozens of people employed at our mill in John

Day, but it accelerates the much needed thinning and restoration of our eastside federal forests.

The TPP and TPA are needed to grow Oregon's export economy because they will open additional markets for Oregon products where little or no trade is currently occurring, lift trade barriers like tariffs and red tape on particular products even in markets where some trade is already taking place, and make it easier for more companies to get into the business of exporting in the first place. More markets, more products, more companies.

Perhaps even more important is that unless the U.S. leads the global trade conversation, China will. That scenario looks much worse for Oregon. The United States' leadership on the TPP is leading to a trade agreement with the strictest and most enforceable labor and environmental standards of any trade agreement in history, helping Oregon and U.S. businesses which already have to comply with these standards here at home.

Many members of Oregon's congressional delegation have been leaders on this issue including Sen. Wyden and Rep. Walden. They deserve our support. Whatever concerns that people have about TPA and TPP, there should be little doubt that they are good for rural Oregon.

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