

Swimming out of the education backwaters

The presidents of both Oregon and Oregon State aren't sure the residents of this state care about having excellent public universities.

"There's something wrong with a state willing to be 46th in funding, willing to be a backwater state," bemoaned University of Oregon president Michael Schill Sept. 17.

Can that really be so — this land of clear mountain streams — a backwater? Nationally, Oregon's reputation is of a green, progressive, well-run state partial to marijuana and brunch. But dig a little deeper beneath those clichés and you find a state that is locked in a struggle with Mississippi and Alabama at the bottom of many education rankings. It is no coincidence that those two other states are among the nation's poorest, too.

Schill, along with Oregon State University president Ed Ray and new Eastern Oregon University president Tom Insko, worry about the mechanisms that fund higher education in the state. They were pleased with the funding increase this biennium but worry about the decrease they said is sure to come next time the economy dips.

That lack of long-term planning and long-term priority has them working at a disadvantage. And students are suffering because of it.

Higher education seemingly did pretty well in the last legislative session, with its budget increased to nearly \$700 million for the biennium. So it is possible the colleges can be seen as ungrateful — or just always wanting more and more dollars.

But Ray said the funding bump offered a glimpse into a "window of opportunity" and none of them want to see that window close.

"The everyday conversation hasn't changed," said Ray.

"Everybody should be upset." "And embarrassed," added Schill.

All three men say they can get exhausted having arguments here — with legislators and citizens — that aren't had anywhere else. Schill said at previous stops, including most recently at the University

of Chicago, the importance of higher education was a given. People knew they were economic engines, necessary for this country to keep churning, and were real sources of pride no matter the record of the football team.

Not so here. Schill said there is "something wrong" with a state that doesn't understand that.

Let's be clear there is something wrong with our state universities. The graduation rate at two of our most popular schools is miserable. The number of Oregon students at both is in serious decline. At Oregon State alone, the number of in-state students has fallen from 85 percent to 73 percent, and Ray said he sees it falling further if the school continues to lose money to educate Oregonians when they can make money by importing students from out-of-state. Or even more money by importing from out-of-country.

And let's be even clearer: there's something wrong with K-12 education in Oregon as well. We're down there with Mississippi in graduation rate, in classroom hours, in numerous other statistical categories.

We've been told we need to rebuild our state education system from the ground up — starting with preschool through third grade. We can't let those kids get behind, and then everything after will be improved.

But this state and this country have been bouncing through competing education priorities and testing systems and bureaucrats so rapidly that it seems pretty unlikely that we can stay on one track for students to turn from toddlers into college graduates.

We should be embarrassed at the state of the Oregon education system. But funding isn't the only way to fix it. It's a help, for sure. But we need that total rebuild — a rebuild that must come from the ground up and — for the sake of this generation of college students — from the top down, too.

We can get into specifics later. The first step to recovery is admitting we have a problem.

WHERE TO WRITE

Salem

Gov. Kate Brown, D — 254 State Capitol, Salem 97310. Phone: 503-378-3111. Fax: 503-378-6827. Website: www.governor.state.or.us/governor.html.

Oregon Legislature — State Capitol, Salem, 97310. Phone: (503) 986-1180. Website: www.leg.state.or.us (includes Oregon Constitution and Oregon Revised Statutes).

State Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario (District: 60), Room H-475, State Capitol, 900 Court St. N.E., Salem OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1460. Email: rep.cliff-bentz@state.or.us. Website: www.leg.state.or.us/bentz/home.htm.

State Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R — (District 30) Room S-223, State Capitol, Salem 97310. Phone: 503-986-1950. Email: sen.tedferrioli@state.or.us. Email: TFER2@aol.com. Phone: 541-490-6528. Website: www.leg.state.or.us/ferrioli.

Oregon Legislative Information — (For updates on bills, services, capitol or messages for legislators) — 800-332-2313.

Grant County

Grant County Courthouse — 201 S. Humbolt St., Suite 280, Canyon City 97820. Phone: 541-575-0059. Fax: 541-575-2248.

Canyon City — P.O. Box 276, Canyon City 97820. Phone: 541-575-0509. Fax: 541-575-0515. Email: tocc1862@centurylink.net.

Dayville — P.O. Box 321, Dayville 97825. Phone: 541-987-2188. Fax: 541-987-2187. Email: dvville@ortelco.net

John Day — 450 E. Main St, John Day, 97845. Phone: 541-575-0028. Fax: 541-575-1721. Email: cityjd@centurytel.net.

Long Creek — P.O. Box 489, Long Creek 97856. Phone: 541-421-3601. Fax: 541-421-3075. Email: info@cityoflongcreek.com.

Monument — P.O. Box 426, Monument 97864. Phone and fax: 541-934-2025. Email: monument@oregontrail.net.

Mt. Vernon — P.O. Box 647, Mt. Vernon 97865. Phone: 541-932-4688. Fax: 541-932-4222. Email: cmtv@ortelco.net.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Issues need to be addressed

To the Editor:

I have heard from several sources the managers of the Canyon Mountain Complex fires watched the fire grow while farmers and loggers begged to use their equipment and manpower to get on the fire right away and put it out, but they were told they could not move their equipment and personnel in. They did not have permission. There were also 6 helicopters sitting at the airport not being used until the fire was way out of control.

It is being said we need to learn from our mistakes. We need to have a timeline that tells the time between when the fire was first spotted until each of the units was called for and when they got on target and who was making the decisions and who was making the calls. It seems to me an independent investigation is called for to review all of this material. I'm urging all the Public Forest Commissioners to get involved in writing letters and calling for this independent investigation.

There seems to be a desire to blame Global Warming for what we are dealing with here, or that there isn't enough resources to throw at this, but there seems to me to be a management problem also that needs to be addressed.

One other comment I've heard is fire is big business, there for we need big fires for big business.

Fortunately there were no lives lost in this fire, but the tremendous loss of property has hit this community very hard and there is no way to replace the real things accumulated over a lifetime that was lost in such a short time. My prayers go with each person who has lost so much. Commissioner Nicky A. Spruave

Grant County Public Forest Commission position #2
Canyon City

Keep our kids, community safe

To the Editor:

I confess, I have not been one to make it to many city council meetings in Prairie City since I moved here, but having been made aware of the upcoming decision on recreational marijuana sales in our little town, this is no time to stay home. There will be a town hall meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Sept 23, at the Strawberry Grange in Prairie City to give our residents the opportunity to declare their stance on this important matter to the council members.

If you don't come, don't be

whining about a dramatic change in the face of our community should our council members decide to go for the shops. The Governor has given us a rare opportunity to not be overrun by the voters in Portland and other liberal areas in Oregon, and we should take it, and keep our kids and community safer.

Mary Brown
Prairie City

Quick action appreciated

To the Editor:

I received calls from Scott and Mary Ellen informing me there was a fire headed our way Aug. 30 outside of Mt. Vernon. Getting my water bucket, gunny sacks and shovel loaded I headed out as John pulled into the driveway and asked if my crawler was handy. I told him it wasn't and he said he would be back with his. Crossing the highway I found Sgt. Hutchison on the creek bottom and asked him to radio the pumper truck to come and follow my track to the ridge top where I was working on flames. I saw Bill and the Mt. Vernon Rural pumper coming up the hill and shortly after Todd and his crew with a pumper. John came on his crawler and immediately started a dozer line around the north and east edge of the fire and headed up the ridge. I could see Hugh with his spray tank on his side-by-side, Jeff with his bale chaps flailing the flames while being followed by his son and daughter-in-law with shovels. Steve, Leonard, Cody, and a number of other friends and neighbors were working the edge of the blaze. John Day Rural and State had pumper trucks on the fire and others were working the edges and hot spots.

Standing in the smoke and heat I could not help but wonder if the Berry Creek fire was met with this "stop it here and put it out now" level of aggressive determination I was observing, staffed mostly by volunteer workers? If so then how could it have ever gotten away? I know there may be no comparison between the incidence - fuel loads, topography, weather, man power, agencies, perhaps even philosophies, budgets and the list goes on - but as I watched this blaze get extinguished I could not help but wonder if the situation may have been entirely different.

Our rural fire suppression departments, both Mt. Vernon and John Day, are staffed by dedicated volunteers and they do what is needed to stop fires where they are and extinguish them now. I am not sure they realize how significant they are to our community.

Our fire was small and insignificant in comparison to Canyon Creek, but the Berry Creek was small and insignificant when the lightning first hit the snag. Hugh and Cindy Gray, Meredith and I truly appreciate the efforts of all involved in dealing with our fire. Thank you on behalf of our rural community.

Roger and Meredith Ediger
Mt. Vernon

Local contractors deserve recognition

To the Editor:

In reading about all of the people who helped on the Canyon Creek Complex, I have seen mention of the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and Rural Fire Departments. They did a good job, but one group is missing.

The local contractors. Grayback Forestry, Thunderbolt Fire Service, Strike Back, Trico, Crown Chaser, Iron Triangle, J&D Logging, Moore & Heuckman, DaKom Logging, L&L Excavating, Chad Engle Logging, JWS Wildfire, Neil Bauer, and the local timber fallers. These people live in this community and gave their all to help.

These people were put in harms way and performed at a high level, helping to try to save houses and property of friends and neighbors.

If I missed anyone, which I am sure I have, I am sorry. To all of you, a job well done, you can be proud of the work you have done.

Roy Cates and family
Mt. Vernon

Follow up thoughts

Dear Editor:

Sadly, the Grant County Regional Airport's (GCRA) annual Fly-In was canceled this year.

Credits are certainly due to Dr. Joe Intile's comments regarding this unnecessary decision in his Sept. 16, Blue Mountain Eagle Letter to the Editor.

Dr. Intile is a person with deep wisdom and experience: a military flight surgeon (Fellow American College of Physicians (FAMC) highest distinction for the profession), retired colonel, private pilot, jet pilot, former GCRA Commissioner and hangar owner, and well traveled individual with vast experience certainly brings credence to his insight and opinion regarding this incredibly disappointing situation.

Al Olson
Private Pilot and 6 years part-time Airport Manager
John Day

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PUBLISHER..... MARISSA WILLIAMS, MARISSA@BMEAGLE.COM
EDITOR..... EDITOR@BMEAGLE.COM
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT..... KRISTINA KREGER, KRISTINA@BMEAGLE.COM
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT..... CHERYL HOEFLE, CHERYL@BMEAGLE.COM
COMMUNITY NEWS..... ANGEL CARPENTER, ANGEL@BMEAGLE.COM
SPORTS..... ANGEL CARPENTER, ANGEL@BMEAGLE.COM
MARKETING REP..... KIM KELL, ADS@BMEAGLE.COM
OFFICE MANAGER..... LINDSAY BULLOCK, OFFICE@BMEAGLE.COM

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