

Unfunded mandates show state's lack of leadership

In politics, it's easy to pass the buck — or the blame — through the age-old practice of unfunded mandates.

It's the practice where one government orders an agency or a lesser governmental entity to take a specific action to fix a problem, but doesn't supply the money to make it happen. The mandate makes the agency or the community fix the problem out of their own budgets, which is often nearly impossible to accomplish without raising taxes, cutting services or both.

Even more, this practice usually rears its head at election time to give voters the idea that leadership is truly addressing problems rather than letting them slide. But the fact that those leaders have to issue a mandate in the first place shows the problem did slide. And sometimes, those same state leaders avoid transparency by using mandates as a scare tactic to get legislative or voter approval for unpopular or controversial legislation that they support.

That's the case currently with two state mandates in the past three weeks.

And to no surprise, the mandates surfaced as Gov. Kate Brown endorsed Measure 97, the highly controversial ballot measure that would create a 2.5 percent tax for some corporations on gross sales of more than \$25 million, rather than taxing those corporations on their on the profits as now is the case.

Supporters of the measure say it would raise an additional \$3 billion and help Oregon fix long-standing problems and avoid a looming \$1.4 billion deficit. Supporters also say the tax revenue would be spent only on schools, seniors and health care. Opponents point out the regressive nature of the tax and say corporations would simply pass the tax on to customers who can afford it least. The measure, they say, would curb private sector growth while boosting public sector hiring. They also point out that lawyers for the Legislature say tax dollars raised by Measure 97 could be spent however lawmakers please. In her endorsement, though, Brown said she would make sure the money goes to those areas.

The mandates

The first mandate came in early August when the state Treasury announced that the bill for schools, cities, state agencies and other public employers in Oregon will rise by \$885 million next biennium to fund the state's public employee pension system. The \$885 million is much higher than was forecast and represents a 44 percent increase from what public employees are currently paying into the pension plan to support it.

Next came an order from

the Oregon Board of Education after it adopted a new, fast-tracked rule at the behest of the governor that requires testing for lead and radon in schools, public disclosure of problems that are found and the elimination of each problem when discovered. School districts are required by the mandate to have a preliminary plan in place by October and a finished plan by January. While parents and educators all agree that fixing those problems needs to happen and happen quickly, the order came without a funding mechanism in place. The state School Boards Association predicts the mandate could cost districts hundreds of millions of dollars statewide. Fortunately, districts on the North Coast have been proactive and only a handful of problems have surfaced so far.

Public schools are also facing another challenge that was mandated by the Legislature in 2007. It requires they provide a minimum of 150 minutes of physical education instruction per week for kindergarten through fifth grade and 225 minutes for sixth through eighth grade. Schools must meet the standard by 2017, but less than 10 percent of 1,080 public schools with some or all grades K-8 are in compliance. School advocacy groups are asking lawmakers to either push back the 2017 deadline or to allow a phase-in. Funding for additional PE teachers is one of the reasons the advocacy groups have cited for the poor compliance rate.

Leadership and reforms

Real leadership is needed in addressing each of these problems.

PERS in its present form simply isn't sustainable, and there are a number of reform options available. The governor and legislators, however, have been reluctant to attack the problem head on. Lead in drinking water at schools is curable, and the fact that there was no statewide requirement for even testing until 2016 says the state Board of Education and those who oversee the board from the governor's office were asleep at the wheel. The problem of physical education for children in K-8 is even more curable with innovation and creativity at the local level and the proper leadership and focus at the state level.

Each of those problems have their own individual solutions, and state leaders, especially those at the top, should be just that. They should be visible to the public and transparent with their motives and actions instead of using unfunded mandates as their method of operation. And importantly, they should quit looking for the easy cure-all fixes for problems the state faces. They should know from experience that easy fixes aren't always the right fixes.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Why I will vote for Sheriff Palmer's re-election

To the Editor:

I will vote for Sheriff Glenn Palmer because I believe that he would not pull a driver over on a cold, snowy and dark December night because the driver was trying to avoid poorly lit and open trenches on a construction project.

I believe that Sheriff Palmer would be sure there was probable cause for the traffic stop; that he would understand the driver's inability to perform field sobriety testing because of physical, not alcohol, related problems with his balance and gait; that he would not call the driver "arrogant" simply because he tried to help him with the spelling of the names of his medications; that he would have offered the driver assistance under the road conditions to get to his driveway 300 yards away rather than arresting him.

And last, but not least, I believe that Sheriff Palmer would not have boasted in his church the following morning about "getting the Doc last night."

Obviously his opponent is excluded in my mind from any of the above by virtue of his past performance.

I believe that Sheriff Palmer is a much better equipped candidate to protect and represent the people of Grant County in the upcoming election.

Joseph Intile, MD
Mt. Vernon

Join us in making public lands healthier

To the Editor:

Eastern Oregon has received more than its fair share of negative press during the past year. This includes the Oregonian series "Burned," which recounts the 2015 Canyon Creek fire. Well intended, this series nevertheless misrepresents key aspects about how the fire was handled by minimizing the larger, region-wide pull on firefighting resources and ignoring the real, practical decision-making context in which sound judgment and solid effort in a complex and dynamic situation can go sideways in a heartbeat.

Unfortunately, the thrust of the Oregonian article suggests that flawed suppression tactics were responsible for the disaster, which implies that fixing flawed suppression tactics will avoid another disaster. Not so. What requires fixing is forest conditions across the Blue Mountains.

It has taken decades of past management practices, informed by a variety of social interests and values, to create the hazardous conditions that preceded the Canyon Creek fire. And it will take decades more to restore the Malheur National Forest to a resilient condition that better withstands wildfire and other natural disturbances. In many places, this means thoughtful timber harvest or fuels reduction treatments followed by prescribed fire.

Indeed, a Fuels Treatment Ef-

fectiveness Assessment prepared by the Forest Service after the Canyon Creek fire indicates that where these treatments occurred pre-fire, the wildfire functioned in a more natural way by dropping to the ground, consuming small fuels and sparing large trees. However, where these treatments did not occur in tandem and weather conditions became so hot, dry and windy that literally nothing could have stopped the fire, the results of the Canyon Creek fire were indeed tragic.

These facts tell us the pace and scale of science-based, large landscape forest work across the Blue Mountains must increase considerably. The Malheur National Forest, Blue Mountains Forest Partners and other community members are undertaking this effort. We invite you to join us in making our public lands healthier and communities stronger.

Mark Webb
Executive Director, Blue Mountains Forest Partners

Is Palmer's professional judgment reckless and incompetent?

To the Editor:

A Grant County deputy appointed by Sheriff Glenn Palmer was found guilty of no less than three felonies by a Grant County jury of his peers — not some Portland jury. Roy Richard Peterson was convicted of first-degree theft, first-degree aggravated theft and possession of a stolen vehicle involving government money and government equipment of the Monument Rural Fire District. According to an Aug. 26 Blue Mountain Eagle article, the prosecutor described Peterson as using the fire district as "his personal piggy bank."

According to the same article, Palmer told the Oregon Department of Forestry that Peterson obtained the equipment "legally and lawfully through ODF." A Grant County jury of Peterson's peers reached the completely opposite decision and convicted him of three felonies. Does this reveal that Palmer is incompetent regarding his professional judgment?

According to the same article, Palmer also said that there was no probable cause that a crime had been committed by Peterson. A Grant County jury of Peterson's peers reached the completely opposite decision and convicted him of three felonies. Does this disclose that Palmer's professional judgment is reckless?

Why is Palmer's professional judgment about Peterson the complete opposite of a Grant County jury of his peers? According to an Aug. 20 Oregonian article, "Palmer's cellphone records dating back to November show he talked to Peterson more than anyone." Is Peterson a friend of Palmer?

Is Sheriff Palmer's professional judgment reckless and incompetent?

Brian McDonough
Bennington, New Hampshire

Kerr's letter incoherent and offensive

To the Editor:

The only thing clear in Judy Kerr's Aug. 24 letter to the editor is that she does not appreciate the Oregonian's best investigative journalist examining the activities of the sheriff of Grant County. The rest of her letter is incoherent, contains vague innuendo and is offensive to those of us that think it is time for a change in the sheriff's office.

As examples of incoherence and innuendo, she indicates "one must follow the money," but includes no indication about what money she references, where it might lead or who it might connect. She indicates that the Oregonian "... uses the tools of tyrants to pervert the plain meaning of words," but doesn't include the words she has a problem with. She indicates her concern that the Public Forest Commission would be disbanded — but it is unclear how that relates to the Oregonian's recent articles or the election of a new sheriff. She brings up the "illegal destruction" of political signs — but makes it very clear that she is only concerned about Sheriff Palmer's signs (I seriously doubt the Oregonian or its reporter are out there destroying signs).

But the biggest issue I have is her only slightly veiled reference to those of us with a different opinion — those that don't support the current sheriff as "those with intellectual disabilities" and "those who only understand from their limited level of perception."

That is downright insulting to a large proportion (possibly the majority) of the citizens of Grant County.

The media is often referenced as the fourth branch of power in the United States. So, why should it be a surprise when a reporter seeks information from a public servant in the process of doing their job?

I disagree with Ms. Kerr — I think Les Zaitz and the Oregonian are doing a service to the county, state and anyone who respects facts, truth and openness. I appreciate Les' dedication to his profession, his professionalism and his courage. And, as an aside, I also think Todd McKinley would be a better choice for sheriff in November.

Jim Hammett
John Day

New walkway made fairgrounds much more enjoyable

To the Editor:

The construction of the walkway at the Grant County Fairgrounds was well done, and I truly appreciate everyone involved with its construction.

As a handicapped person, I ride on a motorized wheelchair. As I rode on the walkway, I thought how difficult it was last year to ride through the rocks.

This walkway made the fairgrounds much more enjoyable.

Joan Metlock
John Day



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