

Before any tax increase, ODOT must restore trust

Those who proclaim government agencies should be run like businesses are, in some ways, wrong.

A case in point: If government services and infrastructure were awarded to low-population areas in proportion to the income they produce, large swaths of America wouldn't have paved roads, bridges or anything but one-room schools. Basic politic principles and simple fairness would never allow such overt neglect in the U.S.

When it comes to the Oregon Department of Transportation, however, a valid argument definitely can be made for a somewhat more businesslike approach to such fundamental procedures as setting priorities, seeking out differing opinions and measuring how well goals are being achieved.

With a budget of roughly \$2 billion a year and thousands of employees, ODOT is one of the state's largest organizations. It's no Nike or Intel, but it's big enough — and so crucial to the state's safety and success — that it must adopt at least some lessons from the private corporate world in order to achieve all it needs to do with the resources it has available. It wants even more. ODOT, along with Oregon's counties and cities, suggests they might need up to an extra \$5 billion a year to preserve roads and bridges, ease congestion and bolster public transportation.

A nearly \$1 million performance audit from New York-based McKinsey & Co. — which the EO Media Group/Pamplin Media Group Capital Bureau successfully pressed ODOT to release last month — found the department acts like a complacent family. Nobody in top management rocks the boat by questioning the agency's decisions. Though the audit is couched in the diplomatic code phrases of managerial consultants, the overall picture of top ODOT management is uncomfortably close to the old cliché of a clubby circle of friends standing around leaning on their shovels kibitzing.

Consultant interviews with senior management found “no example of individuals who considered themselves a ‘dissenting voice.’” Government agencies, boards and commissions often go to great effort to ensure such a lack of disagreement within their ranks. However, from a public perspective, too many unanimous decisions within an entity like ODOT are nearly always a sign of trouble. It means no one is really speaking up to question old assumptions or fight for significant changes in budgeting, personnel, project planning and other important matters.

In the case of Oregon's transportation system,

ODOT's management team is supposed to be accountable to the five-member governor-appointed Oregon Transportation Commission.

However, this effort at citizen oversight is not functioning as it should. On Jan. 10, Tammy Baney, the commission's chairwoman, sent Gov. Kate Brown a letter asking for quarterly meetings with Brown, along with an independent staff person to carry out commissioners' requests for information and research. Baney also wants an “active” role in ODOT Director Matt Garrett's performance review. Most Oregon citizens will be surprised that such basic elements of independent oversight are not already in place. Without routine contact with the governor or a role in reviewing the ODOT director, the commission becomes little but a symbolic shell.

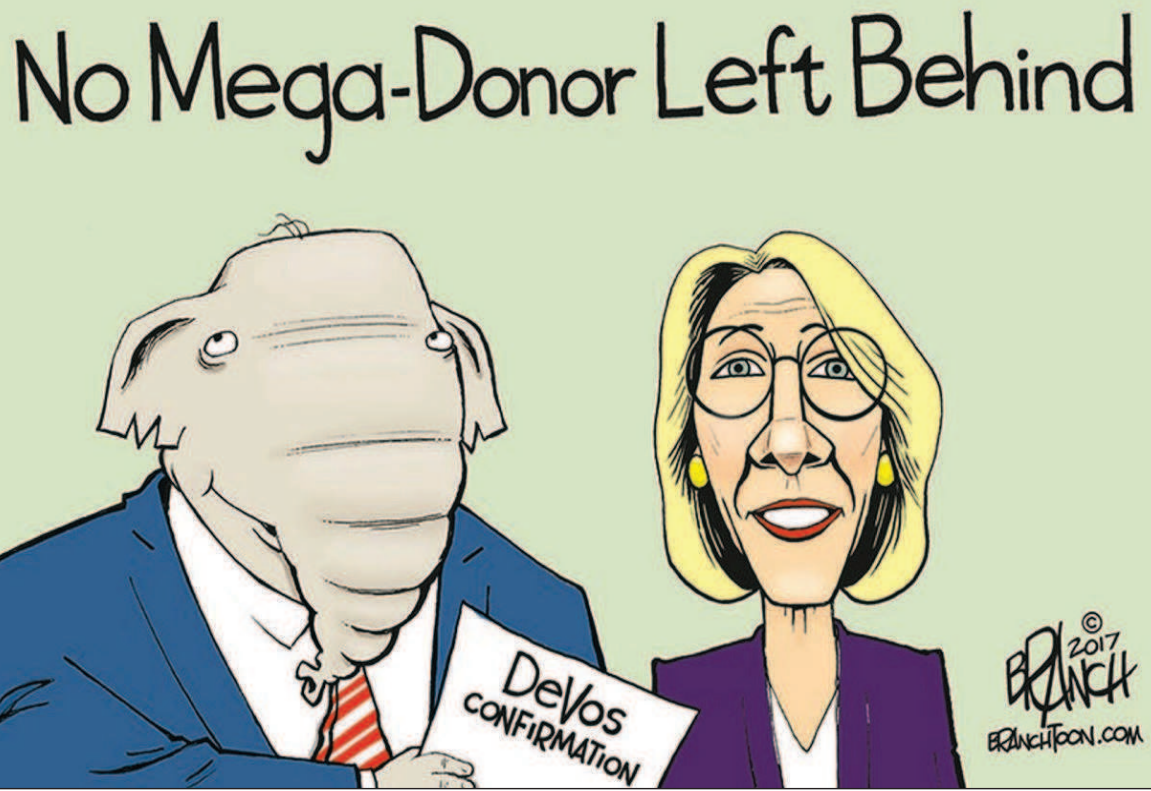
Former commission Chairwoman Catherine Mater said the request for an independent staffer indicates “a complete disintegration of trust” between ODOT and the commission tasked with overseeing it.

ODOT's front-line workers clearly understand what is going on. They told the consultants: “We need to ensure accountability for performance and behavior problems. High-level managers can talk the talk, but poor performers and poor behavior is still tolerated. Good employees currently work hard through internal motivation and personal dedication to high quality service, not because the agency rewards them.” There is no doubt that Oregon needs substantial transportation upgrades and maintenance. In our part of the state, the weather has outfoxed the transportation system more often than not this winter. And while we may never be able to win the war against Mother Nature, we must invest more heavily in highways, bridges and other essential infrastructure. And better planning in the Portland area, the economic engine of Oregon, will help keep its steady expansion from bottlenecking future growth.

Ultimately, even if Congress grants President Donald Trump's wish for major national infrastructure spending, Oregon taxpayers will have to pay much of the tab for the things we need.

Deficiencies in ODOT's management system, along with the debacle of the failed Columbia Crossing project on Interstate 5, necessitate a convincing and thorough rebooting of this critical agency's managerial and oversight procedures.

It will be a fool's errand to ask Oregon voters for a major hike in transportation-related taxes until this basic work is done and trust is restored.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We need immigrants

To the Editor:

Did you know that Greg Walden grew up on a cherry orchard in The Dalles? Every fall, there are over 2,000 people employed to harvest the fruit off orchards in the Hood River Valley. After the harvest, fruit packing, canning and shipping employs in excess of 1,700 people each year. Who is going to pick, can and ship this fruit? Northwest farmers say they can't hire enough people to pick their fruit or work in packing houses. These are real concerns coming from people who voted for Walden. His Second Congressional District, the six largest in the country, asks him to support the people, the economy of Hood River and our immigrant workers, by supporting realistic immigration legislation, such as the nonpartisan Bridge Act in the House. In addition, opposing legislation that is being introduced to reduce legal immigration would create an adverse effect on the economy in the Northwest, crippling an industry that is a large majority of his district. We need immigrants.

Carolyn Welty
Hood River

Geology class 'fabulous'

To the Editor:

Hannah Grist taught a fabulous class on the unique geology of Grant County. It not only was an extremely informative class, but it also attracted one of the most diverse and representative groups of Grant County citizens.

There were in attendance: young children and senior citizens, students and teachers, conservatives and liberals, ranchers and Forest Service workers — all gathered together for learning and conversation. Ms. Grist's teaching style engaged her audience in a way that helped us see anew the marvels of nature that surround us. We need more of this sort of positive gathering in our community. (In fact, it is not too late to join in the next class of this four-part series. It will be held at 5:30 p.m. March 8 at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Canyon City.)

Susan C. Church
John Day

Let's not forget all we've accomplished together

To the Editor:

The last eight years, lest we forget...

Dayville: re-opened restaurant, vacation rentals, gift and beer shop.
Mt. Vernon: first-time sidewalks and new streetlights, second cafe and rebuilt laundromat, expanded services at Frontier rentals and vehicle repairs, vacation rental and bicycle inn, rebuilt community center, large antique and wine shop.

John Day and Canyon City: second farm and feed store, expand-

ed services and rentals at Polaris, rebuilt and expanded JD Rents, Malheur Lumber mill saved and pellet factory built, 10-year stewardship contract with forest service with 100 new employees in the county, new Oregon Department of Forestry compound, Juniper Ridge mental health care facility, new dental clinic, brew pub and restaurant, new bistro presently under construction, two new coffee shops, pizza parlor, county fair barn rebuild, community garden, summer farmer's market, meditation and well-being center, Chinese medicine herbalist and masseuse, Kam Wah Chung museum re-opened with interpretive center, Grant County Museum rebuilt, new fire station, new state police offices, new Indian Center offices, new chamber of commerce offices, expansion of the People Mover with service to other counties, Koyote antique store on Main Street, Sue-Z-Q's thrift store, new cosmetology school, second veterinary clinic, Canyon City Community Hall rebuild, new pellet heating systems for high school, airport, Prairie City HS and hospital, new education services building, rebuilt home health services building.

Prairie City: Train depot museum rebuilt, new forest service offices, new vacation rentals, Prairie City hotel rebuilt and opened, city park rebuilt, Methodist Church turned into a community center.

Grant County: The Fossil Beds Paleontology center, two Highway 26 bridges rebuilt, bicycle lanes defined, increase in tourist business to all service businesses, Silvies Valley Resort built and opened, internet service to all, fiber optics cable system installed, increase in new home construction and general real estate sales, Bates State Park opened, library foundation created, new airport building and forest service training center, unemployment goes to 7.9 percent after many years in the 20 percent range and approximately 50 new, unfilled jobs now available around the county.

Let us count our blessings for all we've accomplished together in the beautiful valley.

Jim Bay
Mt. Vernon

'Throwing down the gauntlet'

To the Editor:

During the Feb. 1 county court meeting, Mark Webb stated the reason he sought nullification of the Grant County Public Forest Commission was the relationship with the sheriff and militia! Webb further asserted I was present with him and county counsel when nullification was discussed. Patently false.

Past commissioner Chris Labhart, Judge Scott Myers and Commissioner Boyd Britton allege they knew nothing of the nullification effort until the issue was heard

in circuit court. Who then authorized county counsel Ron Yockim to represent the county and receive payment of \$7,500?

I'm throwing down the gauntlet in challenging Mark Webb to provide the location, date, time and those present when nullification was discussed. Webb said I was present, and I'm adamant I never knew of such a confab and certainly was not in attendance.

Harry Reid may have been able to lie on the Senate floor with impunity and other politicians when prevarication is exposed claim they “misspoke.” However, this is Grant County, and that does not cut it with folks. Mark Twain wrote of “simple liars, damned liars and experts.” So it is.

Dave Traylor
John Day

Coordinate cooperation

To the Editor:

Local laws, regulations and commissions should not easily be dismissed or dispensed. These commissions and regulations are representative of the “local governments” within which the lands are located, and according to “The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976,” must be coordinated with, as stated under Sec. 202 (c) (9) Land Use Planning.

This, as stated, is dealing with our public lands in our state and county. We are not to be subordinate but as coordinate is defined by Webster: “equal in rank, quality, or significance,” not subordinate.

The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are to care for the land and serve the people.

Be aware and read it for yourself.

From U.S. Code: “Land use planning. Sec. 202. [43 U.S.C. 1712] (a) The Secretary shall, with public involvement and consistent with the terms and conditions of this Act, develop maintain, and, when appropriate, revise land use plans which provide by tracts or areas for the use of the public lands. Land use plans shall be developed for the public lands regardless of whether such lands previously have been classified, withdrawn, set aside, or otherwise designated for one or more uses. ... (c) (9) to the extent consistent with the laws governing the administration of the public lands, coordinate the land use inventory, planning, and management activities of or for such lands with the land use planning and management programs of other Federal departments and agencies and of the States and local governments within which the lands are located, including, but not limited to, the statewide outdoor recreation plans developed under the Act of September 3, 1964.”

Michael R. Christensen
John Day

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