

Legislators should take message on taxes to heart

Oregon voters place a top priority on K-12 public schools but don't really trust the state to tax and spend wisely on education, new opinion polling indicates.

Our Capital Bureau reported earlier this month on a poll commissioned by the Oregon School Boards Association. All polls, especially those sponsored by entities with a vested interest in their findings, must be viewed with intelligent skepticism. But the new poll results ring true.

According to the poll, 60 percent of the public believes any new tax money should be earmarked for state education and should be combined with spending cuts elsewhere. Ironically, this mirrors what the business community itself has indicated it would support. Legislators need to take this to heart.

Oregonians are big believers in public schools. You don't need a poll to know this. Time spent in any Oregon community or neighborhood is a revealing lesson in how schools are fundamentally bound up in our lives and our sense of who we are as a people. We're united around the idea that schools impart essential knowledge and social skills, partnering with families in preparing children for lives every parent hopes will be financially rewarding, intellectually gratifying and emotionally fulfilling.

Anxiety: As our nation and world become more complex and demanding, any sense that schools aren't fulfilling their vital mission is certain to provoke anxiety. While more money is rarely, if ever, a complete solution to any problem, Oregonians are strongly inclined to bolster school funding. Ninety-three percent of voters say it's important to fund K-12 education. Nearly two-thirds would support boosting taxes on corporations if the proceeds were certain to go to schools.

But the state just overwhelmingly rejected new corporate taxes in the form of Ballot Measure 97. This was despite the objective fact that companies contribute less to state coffers than voters commonly believe — less than 6 percent of general fund revenue, by the Oregon School Boards Association's reckoning, while citizens believe the number is around 36 percent.

In rejecting Measure 97, voters didn't trust that new revenue would be well spent and feared the taxes would be passed on to us in the form of higher prices. And as a matter of fact, Oregon firms already pay a lot of taxes — an effective rate of 7.6 percent, third highest in the far West.

Budget gap: Faced this year with a \$1.6 billion gap between revenue and expenses, legislators are

struggling to find enough money for all the state's priorities, including more for schools. A majority of the public may say they support targeted cuts coupled with some tax fix, but the devil is very much in the details.

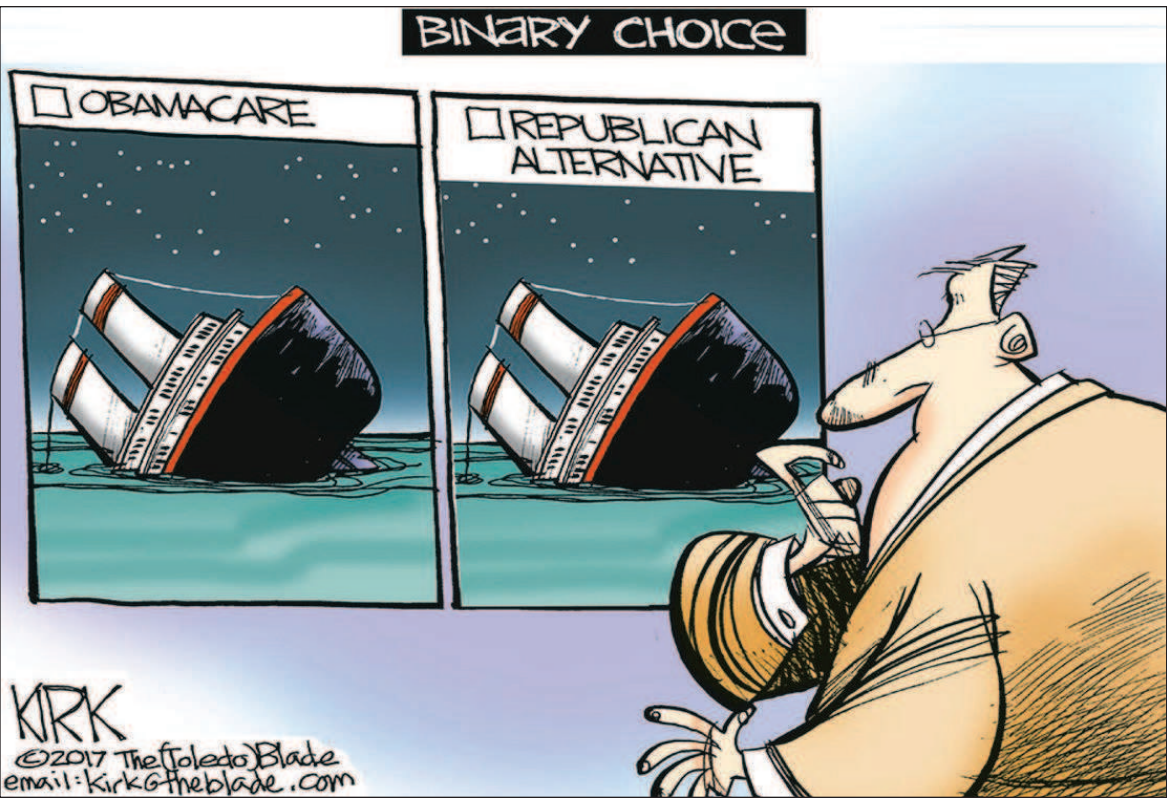
The Tax Foundation this month released its latest analysis of fiscal burdens in the 50 states and Washington, D.C. It found Oregon ranks 10th in state and local tax burden as a percentage of state income. It has the sixth-highest individual income tax collections per person in the country, \$1,814 compared to the U.S. average of \$967. On the other hand, it is smack in the middle in terms of state and local property taxes — 25th, with average collections of \$1,350, less than the national average of \$1,462. It's worth adding that the Tax Foundation gives Oregon good marks for its current business tax climate, rating it 10th best in the country.

So it's fair to say Oregonians aren't undertaxed, an understanding reflected in the continuing strong rejection of a general sales tax, even if it went to education, according to the poll. But it's also fair to observe that a state's citizens get what they pay for. Some of lowest-tax states on the Tax Foundation's 2017 index — Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama — aren't models of civic success.

Difficult choices: So what should we do in Oregon? Clearly, some very difficult choices will need to be made. Most Oregonians want to protect and enhance public education, but will have to recognize that doing so will force undesirable cuts elsewhere. Elected leaders and state agencies have to embrace the same conclusion, that it is time to zealously root out wasteful spending, while circling the wagons around schools and a few other paramount priorities.

On the tax front, the new polling suggests considerable support for dedicating 2 percent of income tax kicker funds to K-12 education — particularly a rainy day fund to see schools past budget crises like the one they currently face. Beyond this, a business tax hike with strict links to education might just stand a chance.

Voters feel they have been burned too many times. State leaders must commit to governing in accordance with the wise words of that favorite primary school role model, Dr. Seuss' Horton: "I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one hundred percent." Promise only what you can reasonably achieve, tax only enough to achieve it and then rigorously keep your promises.



FROM THE PULPIT Join the ‘Spring Roundup’

By Bob Douglas
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:19-22 that the church is to be a “building ... a home in which God lives.” Each of us are fit together to make up this building. Each of us has our own place as we are placed together as we stand on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.

There are times when we don't give the appearance of that unified “home of God's spirit” because we are each working on the task that God has given each of us to accomplish. We got focused on “doing our own thing,” and it blinds us to the greater vision that God has in mind. But there are

times when all the differences in the way we serve him fade away. The mist that clouds the unity of God's building is lifted, and we can see the wonder of how God's spirit has put us together.

The worshiping congregations in the greater John Day area are celebrating this important time as we approach Palm Sunday (April 9), Holy Week and Easter (April 16). We are working together. We are building together. We are worshipping Jesus Christ together.

It is called the “Spring Roundup.” It is a series of evenings, 6:30 p.m. April 6-8, at the Grant County Fairgrounds. There will also be a family experience that will take each group for an hour-

long walk through the last week of Jesus' life. You can begin that “Road to the Resurrection” any time from 1-4 p.m. Saturday, April 8. Bring your family and join in the fun of being on the road with Jesus as we move toward Easter!

God is moving in our community. God is moving in the hearts of many people. God is drawing many people to “come closer” and “follow me.” This is the time when all the churches in our area are speaking with one voice and with one message. We are the “home for God's spirit.”

Bog Douglas is the pastor of the John Day Church of the Nazarene.

GUEST COMMENT Fighting for the ‘American Dream’ budget Oregonians deserve

By Sen. Jeff Merkley
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Growing up, my family was like a lot of Oregon families: My dad was a millwright, and my mom stayed at home. At that time, a single working income could buy a three-bedroom ranch house, an annual camping trip and a dinner out a couple times a year.

We had enough to have faith in the American Dream.

Life's a lot tougher today for working families, and rural and small town communities are feeling it most.

Life's going to get even tougher if the Trump administration's recent budget proposals get through.

At a time we need creative ideas to build economic opportunity in rural America, the new budget proposes an unprecedented 26 percent cut to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which includes the Rural Development Agency and the U.S. Forest Service, in addition to essential agricultural programs.

This is an assault on rural communities' most basic needs. From slashing investment in small business growth and job creation, to threatening access to clean drinking water, to reducing funding to prevent and fight wildfires, the cut hurts farmers, ranchers, children and timber communities.

The Trump budget guts Payments In Lieu of Taxes — funding for counties that have large tracts of federal lands that don't generate

property taxes — by \$100 million this year alone, stripping from Oregon counties critical funding for public safety, social services, transportation and housing.

It decimates the community development block grants, cutting the \$3 billion program that has been critical to revitalizing rural Oregon's infrastructure and community services, housing and economic development.

The budget would eliminate the entire \$175 million Essential Air Service program that is vital to keep small, remote airports operating. It would dramatically defund programs to get doctors and other health care providers to rural communities. It would end grants for rural transportation projects, cut off rural entrepreneurs from loans and push huge costs onto rural water system ratepayers.

The Trump budget even seeks a devastating \$1.3 billion cut to the budget of the U.S. Coast Guard, which just last weekend rescued three Oregonians.

Millionaires and billionaires in big cities are doing great; they don't need the government to invest in their success. Rural communities are facing unprecedented challenges, and we need to crank up investment in essential programs and infrastructure — that is, the opposite of Trump's budget proposals.

This month I partnered with bipartisan colleagues in Congress to introduce the Timber Innovation

Act, which would support Oregon's innovative uses of wood for construction and manufacturing. I've helped preserve and reopen small airports and save small-town post offices, both of which are essential in today's interconnected economy. I've pushed to bring bipartisan sense to our wildland firefighting. I've used my position as the ranking member of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee to fight for research that helps our farmers fight off pests and improve their yields.

There is so much to do to move our smaller communities forward. But instead, this administration's budget is an enormous step backward.

The American Dream is one of equal opportunity for the child of a middle-class millwright and the child of a wealthy CEO. But this administration's budget takes us even further from this most fundamental ideal, eviscerating the programs that create that opportunity and level the playing field in our rural communities, where they are needed most.

We need to move closer to the American Dream. I will work with the true champions for rural America in both parties to fight for the programs that give Oregonians the opportunity to share in the economy they help create, and ensure future generations have the chance to thrive.

Jeff Merkley is a United States senator for Oregon.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kindness from strangers brings me to tears

To the Editor:
On March 21, my husband and I had gone to the Snaffle Bit restaurant for dinner. It was our anniver-

sary, which in itself is special to us. But this year it turned into something extra special and meaningful. As it turned out, there was a young couple sitting at a table next to us, and we found out they had bought our dinner for us. We have no idea who this couple is, but we want to let you know it brought me to tears

that complete strangers could be so thoughtful and caring. Our wishes for the both of you to have as many wonderful years as we have had. We appreciate your loving kindness, and may God bless you both.

Rich and Jan Lowry
Mt. Vernon



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