

A multipronged approach is right course on pension reform

When it comes to reforming Oregon's Public Employees Retirement System, state leaders need to avoid taking one step forward and two steps back.

As the Legislature recently spluttered on pension reform, Gov. Kate Brown appointed a seven-member, public-private task force to scrutinize ways to make the most of state assets to reduce the system's pension liability, which was \$22 billion at the most recent valuation.

Brown gave the task force a goal of reducing the liability by \$5 billion and suggested selling state assets, although not certain properties, such as prisons and state parks. Sales could include properties such as "buffer zones" around state prisons or youth correctional facilities. It's also possible the state could enter public-private partnerships or cut costs in other ways, such as by moving certain state offices to lower-cost areas.

Those are good steps and should be taken, but many would generate one-time-only savings, and none address the real root of the PERS problem — the system's structure and the benefits themselves. Public employee unions have vigorously fought any reduction of benefits, and the unions exert heavy political clout. Brown and other lawmakers acknowledged near the end of the legislative session that any structural or benefit reform would have to be tackled at the next full session in 2019, thereby kicking the can down the road once again. In this

past session, a bill that would have required a 1 percent salary contribution toward PERS died in committee.

A multipronged approach is the right course to take. Legislators, for their part, can only make changes to the system going forward. The task force, though, isn't addressing the benefits issue. Its mission is finding ways the state can pay down a chunk of what it expects to owe. It's also looking at whether dedicating specific revenue streams to help reduce the obligation makes sense.

In its first meeting last week, the task force agreed to focus its work — expected to culminate in a report due to the governor by Nov. 1 — on big-ticket items that can get to the \$5 billion figure.

However, the board overseeing PERS downgraded assumptions about how much return the system will get on its investments Friday, which is expected to increase the unfunded liability by about \$2 billion. This means state agencies and school districts will have to put even more money into the system in the coming years.

The governor and lawmakers need to be advocates for system changes to reduce the financial threat the liability poses to the state's future well-being. Until those issues are addressed, the liability will continue to grow, public employers will have to increase the amount they pay into PERS for employee benefits and the task force's work will provide only short-term help.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

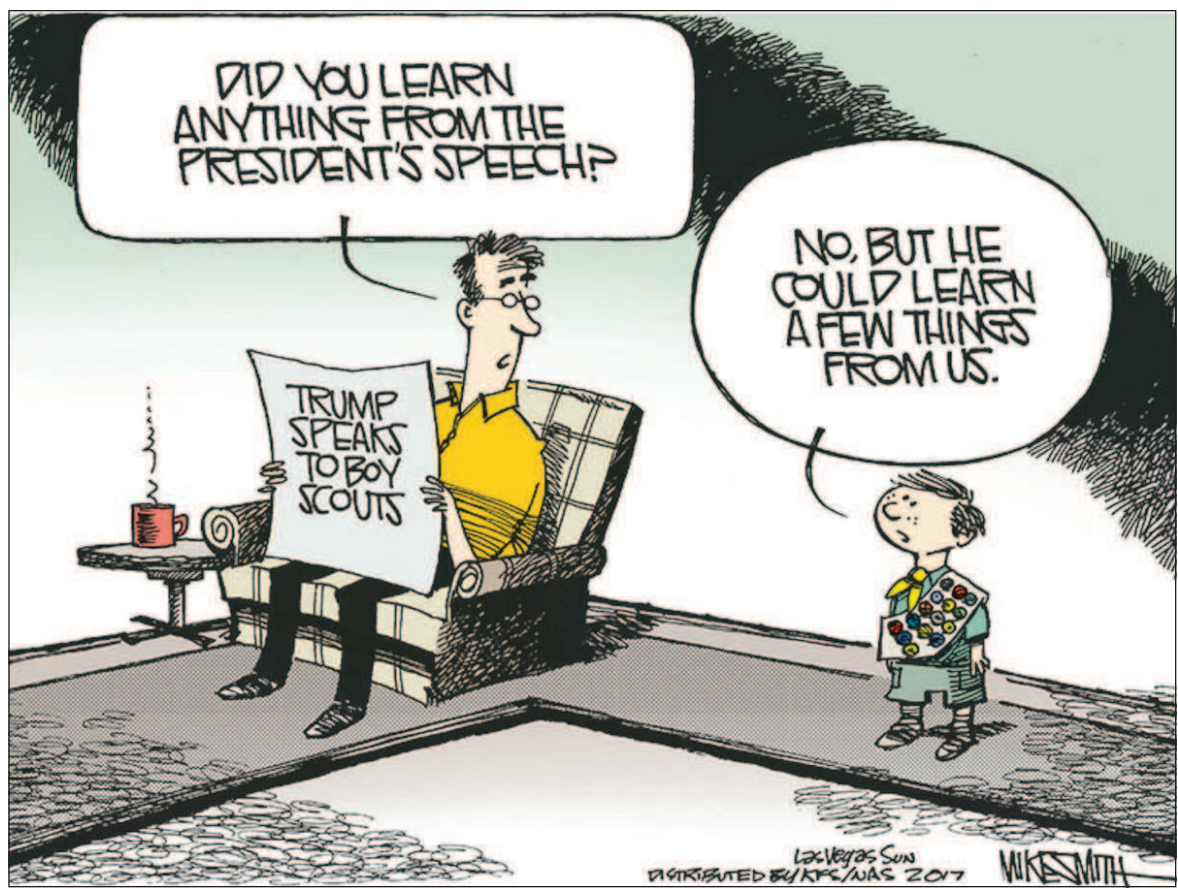
Family entertainment positive for community

To the Editor:
Having been a businessman here in Grant County since 1974, I personally know how difficult, expensive and challenging it can be to start a new enterprise. I want to take this opportunity to recognize the Madden brothers for their vision and willingness to invest hundreds of hours of their time and thousands of dollars in upgrading the old Ju-

nior High School on Dayton Street and bringing it back to life. Their goal is to provide the community and the surrounding area with the opportunity to enjoy some good, clean family entertainment. I hope that everyone will invite a friend or a neighbor and come enjoy the music and see old friends. Let's show the Maddens a good old Grant County turn out and let them know that their efforts are appreciated.

Jerry Franklin
Prairie City

Letters policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for Blue Mountain Eagle readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters will be asked to be contained to 350 words. No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. No thank-you letters. Submissions to this page become property of the Eagle. The Eagle reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content. Letters must be original and signed by the writer. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. We must limit all contributors to one letter per person per month. Deadline is 5 p.m. Friday. Send letters to editor@bmeagle.com, or Blue Mountain Eagle, 195 N. Canyon Blvd., John Day, OR 97845; or fax to 541-575-1244.



GUEST COMMENT

Bipartisan water progress

By Rep. Greg Walden
To the Blue Mountain Eagle



Rep. Greg Walden

All of us in Oregon and across the country deserve access to safe, clean drinking water. That's why the Energy and Commerce Committee — where I serve as Chairman — just passed bipartisan legislation to modernize the nation's drinking water infrastructure.

Today, drinking water flows to our homes and businesses through more than one million miles of pipes operated by both publicly and privately owned water systems. Many of these pipes were laid in the early to mid-20th century with an expected lifespan of 75 to 100 years. In fact, some communities in Oregon still rely on wood stave water pipes that are reaching the end of their life. While in most places, drinking water quality remains high, we also have seen horrible problems from Flint, Michigan, to drinking fountains in Oregon schools.

Our legislation focuses on addressing drinking water systems' physical needs, aiding states and utilities with compliance and operation of the drinking water program, and encouraging the wisest use of money that is spent.

For the last 20 years, Congress has helped drinking water delivery systems meet the challenge of providing consumers with safe and affordable water through the Drink-

ing Water State Revolving Fund. From the end of 1997 through 2016, Oregon has received more than \$274 million in grants to help improve the safety and quality of tap water, comply with drinking water rules and reporting requirements and give a helping hand to the most economically distressed communities struggling to provide their residents safe drinking water. This fiscal year, Oregon is set to receive nearly \$12 million in funding to improve its water systems.

Many rural communities across Oregon struggle with failing infrastructure and a limited ability to afford these increasingly costly projects. They turn to the DWSRF for help. In Malheur County, rural communities such as Vale and Nyssa are completing new water treatment and storage facilities to bring safe drinking water to their residents. In Umatilla County, the city of Pendleton is upgrading more than 30 miles of water lines that are nearly a century old — Mayor John Turner said this project would be impossible without the program.

Our bill, the Drinking Water System Improvement Act, continues those important investments and authorizes \$8 billion over five years

for the DWSRF while also expanding the number of ways in which the fund can be used to improve delivery systems. In fact, we're authorizing an increase of \$350 million in funding for next year from which states such as Oregon could benefit.

Perhaps most important is how the bill looks to the future, using smart technology to monitor drinking water quality in real time. This allows us to better prevent, detect or rapidly respond to contaminants in our water systems. The ability to have up-to-the-minute information helps ensure water is safe and clean, system leaks and recent contamination are identified quickly and the accuracy and availability of compliance data is maintained. We also included a program to help our schools replace drinking fountains that might contain lead.

These are just some of the highlights of the bill. As this measure heads to the House for a vote, I will continue working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure it passes and we do our part to make sure the water Americans drink is safe.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (R-Hood River), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, represents Oregon's Second Congressional District, which includes 20 counties in central, southern and Eastern Oregon.

FARMER'S FATE

What's in your lunchbox?

By Brianna Walker
To the Blue Mountain Eagle



Brianna Walker

As the years have passed, the science of what food is healthy spans the spectrum. Red meat, white meat, fake meat, no meat and then back to red. Mark Twain once wrote, "Don't take advice from a health book. You could die from a misprint!"

I like science as much as the next guy. But historically, it hasn't been very consistent when it comes to diet recommendations. Every year the theories change. Wine saves you; wine kills you. Coconut oil is the new miracle drug; coconut oil is the worst saturated fat you can ingest.

- Drink a glass of red wine a day. Studies show it helps build better bones, prevents blood sugar problems, boosts your body's defenses, can increase your memory power and may increase life expectancy.
- Alcohol consumption can kill you. Studies show it raises overall death rates, causes cirrhosis of the liver, causes cancer, migraines and increases the risk of heart disease.
- Coconut oil has many health benefits. Studies show it is a natural prevention for Alzheimer's. It prevents high blood pressure and heart diseases. It cures UTIs and kidney infections and also shows promise in preventing cancer.
- Coconut oil can harm your health. Studies show it will raise

your bad cholesterol as much or more than animal fats. It will increase your chances of heart disease and will lower your overall health.

Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, promoted wine as part of a healthy diet as well as preventing diarrhea. Then Prohibition outlawed any beverage with an alcoholic content of over 1.28 percent, citing morals as well as health. In the '80s, the New York Times said wine was linked to migraines, as well as causing acid-reflux. In the '90s, 60 Minutes said that red wine drinkers had lower cholesterol than their counterparts. Later, it was said to stop macular degeneration and prevent prostate cancer. Then in the early 2000s, studies showed it may increase the likelihood of getting breast cancer.

Summer barbecues bring out the ever-worsening discussions on food. "We only eat organic."

"We don't eat any artificial colors or dyes."

"We stopped eating dairy after we watched a documentary."

"No gluten for us."

Barbecuing has now become an art — not just the actual cooking, but on how to keep peace between the carnivores and the vegans.

Inevitably, someone will start in on the latest studies showing a particular food that is now a super-food (or super-villain, depending on the year). My husband will laugh and say, "I don't know, my mom ate it (or didn't eat it), and she died from cancer — of course it could have been because she drank water too!"

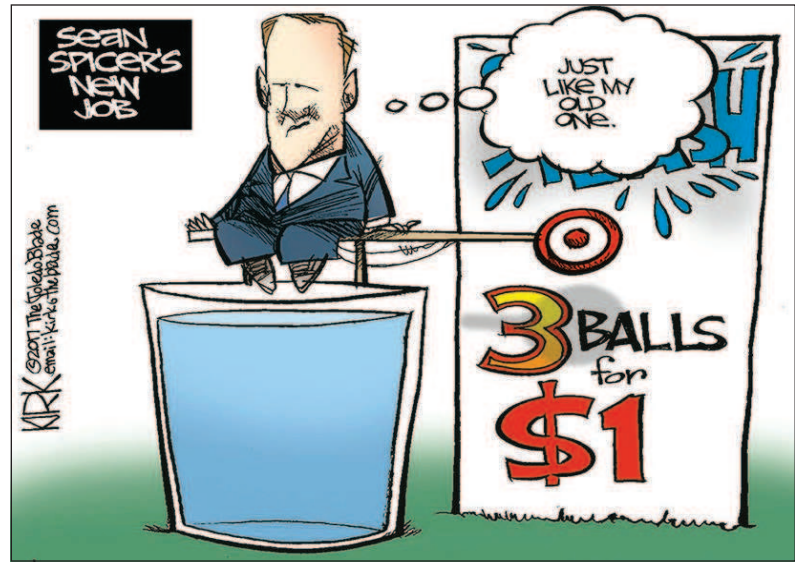
This usually provides enough levity to change the conversation.

It's funny, though, how animated people can get over food. Especially when science over the years can't even agree with itself. Is wine good for you or bad? Is coconut oil helpful or harmful? If you don't like the results of the studies this year, just wait. It's like the weather in Pacific Northwest; it'll change tomorrow.

Basically, I'd say this leaves us free to forget the "food science," as no one really seems to know or agree on what causes or prevents aging and cancer.

I would suggest eating and drinking what makes you happy. After all, studies show that happy people live longer — oh, wait, new studies say pessimists... Oh mercy! Studies on preservatives, carbs, calories, organics — it's just too much for me. I just hope I don't get the soggy Cheeto that my baby stuck back in the chip bag after sucking off the cheese!

Brianna Walker occasionally writes about the Farmer's Fate for the Blue Mountain Eagle.



Grant County's Weekly Newspaper

PUBLISHER..... MARISSA WILLIAMS, MARISSA@BMEAGLE.COM
EDITOR..... SEAN HART, EDITOR@BMEAGLE.COM
REPORTER..... RYLAN BOGGS, RYLAN@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

1 YEAR SUBSCRIPTION RATES
(including online access)
Grant County\$40
Everywhere else in U.S.....\$51
Outside Continental U.S.....\$60
Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER
send address changes to:
Blue Mountain Eagle
195 N. Canyon Blvd.
John Day, OR 97845-1187

USPS 226-340

www.facebook.com/MyEagleNews @MyEagleNews