

Should Oregon legislators get a raise?

Oregon’s Legislature is proposing Senate Bill 959, which addresses legislative financial compensation. As it stands, Oregon lawmakers earn \$31,200 a year and a \$149 per diem payment for meals and lodging, roughly averaging around \$2,000 a month. SB 959 changes the way Oregon legislators are compensated by correlating it to the annual average salary of all Oregonians — increasing policy-maker’s pay by about 63 percent.

PRO: There’s a common mantra that politicians are paid too much and do too little. The point is well taken. But is this notion based on fact or frustration? More importantly, does it represent the best analytical framework?

At first glance, who among us is going to rally behind a roughly \$20,000 pay increase for our lawmakers? Probably more folks than you might think. Oregonians and their unique character should benefit from an equally unique representative legislature. The problem: Low-end legislative salaries preclude many qualified voices from representing a large constituency of Oregonians.

Consequently, the current system benefits independently wealthy or retired individuals — often out of touch with the people they represent. Where are the teachers, the social workers or the nurses? Do we not benefit from a demographically well-rounded legislative body?

It’s time to accept that the same demographic that’s been running this state for years could use some diversity. Perhaps they could even learn a thing or two from those in the middle-income bracket who work with common Oregonians daily. Furthermore, tying salaries to average incomes will affect lawmakers the same as the rest of us during economic downturns.

According to nonpartisan think tank FiveThirtyEight, a Missouri lawmaker, noting insufficient funding, described lobbyists as “unpaid staff.” Is that what we want in Oregon?

And while it’s easy to falsely presume the motivation behind a proposed wage increase as greed, research out of Stanford University, according to FiveThirtyEight, suggests that lawmakers asking for raises “are responding to the demands of an increasingly complicated job ... to be compensated adequately for the work they are already doing.”

The fact of the matter is this: Current legislative salaries make it nearly impossible to survive on that income alone, but it’s also difficult to maintain sustainable work while requiring so much of the year off. Again, this restricts

middle-class but competent wage earners from running for office while paving the way for the wealthier among us. Is that representative democracy?

CON: In a world of pure intentions and perfect outcomes, giving Oregon’s legislators a \$20,000 annual pay raise could make the state a more equally represented place.

But in reality, there’s little evidence that such a raise would achieve that goal. And it certainly would move the state government even further from its founding principle of being led by a citizen legislature.

Forget the additional \$1.8 million it would cost taxpayers to cover the raises. Think about the job we want our legislators to do, and why it should pay the equivalent of a full year’s salary for the average Oregonian.

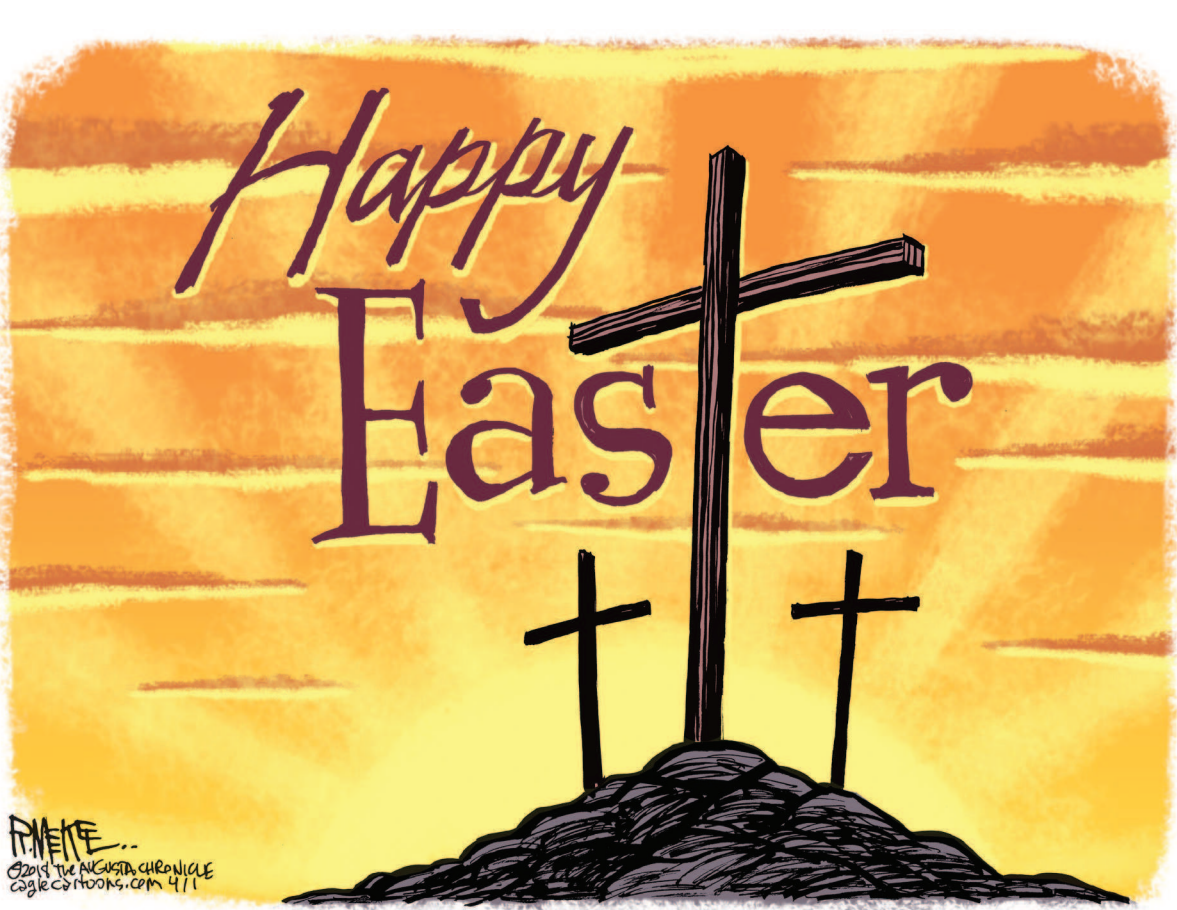
What we want are representatives who can bring their expertise in a variety of trades and their knowledge of their home constituencies to the statehouse for one sustained session every two years. They need to be knowledgeable in the workings of state government, but more focused on being a conduit and voice for their district than a full-time professional politician.

Also, the biennial “short session” year shouldn’t warrant a full year’s salary. It should follow its original purpose of adjusting the budget when necessary and addressing true emergencies between sessions. In the decade since it was implemented, it has gone far off course.

While raising the pay may draw more candidates, it’s unlikely to change the complexion of the legislature. Self-funded, white-collar candidates will still have the upper hand when it comes to campaigning, and would be even more incentivized to run for the higher salary.

Instead, state leaders should consider ways other than pay to attract a more diverse body. For instance, an educator might be willing to step out of the school if the job was directed toward developing and implementing policies they care about instead of juggling hundreds of bills and lobbyists and murky politics. Same goes for a contractor, a farmer or any other profession that is sorely under-represented in the statehouse.

Having a comfortable income shouldn’t be a requirement for representation. But instead of letting legislators give themselves a raise, we should find ways to make the job more welcoming, achievable and satisfying to the average Oregonian.



GUEST COMMENT

Breaking the silence — now it’s our turn

By Dwight Holton
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Something amazing happened last week in Oregon: In coffee shops, at the gym, driving carpools, meeting friends — just about everywhere people gather in Oregon — we have been talking about suicide and suicide prevention. Over 30 news organizations across the state teamed up to shine a light on the public health crisis of suicide. Dozens and dozens of news stories have appeared on our favorite TV stations, in newspapers big and small, on podcasts and on the radio — each article and broadcast telling stories of hope and of healing and of overcoming the risk and pain of suicide.

Never before have journalists linked arms like this to shine the light on suicide and suicide prevention.

It feels like that moment — Oregonians know it well — when the sun first peeks through the clouds after many months of gray and rain. It’s bright and it’s warm and it’s promising.

For far too long, suicide has remained in the shadows — something we just didn’t talk about. The reasons are complex. We want to respect the privacy of families enduring the pain of suicide, and we want to be careful not to prompt contagion — a very real risk.

But the silent treatment has not worked. Ignoring the reality and scope of the suicide crisis has helped erect a wall of stigma that discourages people from getting help. When even talking about suicide is taboo, many people struggling with depression feel that they just can’t show vulnerability — they feel that they should

just keep it to themselves. And all too often, left alone, these folks can’t find a way forward — a way to live.

I can’t tell you how many parents have told me they lost their child because of stigma — their son or daughter just didn’t think they could reach out for help because suicide is not something we are supposed to talk about.

And while we have remained silent, the suicide crisis has grown. About 825 Oregonians died by suicide in 2017, up 35 percent since the year 2000. Suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among young Oregonians. Nationally, more than 42,000 people died by suicide last year — more than the number of Americans killed in action in the Vietnam War.

This week, Oregon journalists decided to break the silence — to shine a light on this public health crisis with responsible reporting on suicide. I am hopeful this will launch a community conversation and help erase the stigma that keeps people from getting help. We need to embrace the reality that it’s OK to feel sad or depressed — and it’s OK to get help.

This week has also been about breaking the silence on suicide prevention. Help, hope and healing are happening in communities all over Oregon — and we are finally hearing those stories. For every one person who dies by suicide in this country, there are 280 people who think seriously about suicide who do not kill themselves. Those are 280 remarkable stories of hope. Research shows that telling these untold stories of suicide prevention can save more lives. At Lines for Life, we know that when people do get help,

it works. Here at our crisis line at Lines for Life, we help each caller make a plan to stay safe — and we deescalate over 95 percent of our calls without needing to involve emergency services. Research of National Suicide Prevention Lifeline crisis centers like ours shows that most callers feel significantly less emotional distress and suicidal after their call.

Oregon journalists have launched this conversation. Now it’s time for us in the community to do our part. We need to take care of ourselves and our loved ones, we need our policymakers to do more to support suicide prevention efforts and we need to learn more about what actions we can all take to prevent suicide. Here are some specific steps you can take:

- Reach out: If you or a loved one is struggling, connect with the lifeline. You can find a welcoming voice at any time of day or night at 1-800-273-8255.
- Make change: Call your legislator now. Demand support for suicide prevention bills currently being considered in Salem.
- Learn more: Check out the steps for how to help others who could be suicidal at Bethelto.com, how to help yourself at suicidepreventionlifeline.org and linesforlife.org and how to get involved with more suicide prevention community events at afsp.org.

Together we can break the silence and shine the light on suicide and suicide prevention to save lives, save our families and save our communities.

Dwight Holton is chief executive of Lines for Life and previously served as U.S. Attorney for Oregon. He lives in Portland.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Is John Day being a good neighbor?

To the Editor:

I applaud the letter written and published in the Blue Mountain Eagle on April 3 by Pete Hettinga of Dayville. Pete’s letter stated facts backed by common sense that should not be dismissed by the citizens of Grant County.

I am fairly concerned that many citizens of Grant County do not understand that the decisions of the John Day City Council concerning the wants of their city manager will spill over to the rest of the county to pay for through taxation. The businesses of John Day are sustainable because of the Grant County residents. We support them for our main grocery needs, medical, auto parts, furniture, flooring, ATVs, livestock feed, tires, etc. Neighbors have always relied on neighbors, and we, the neighboring communities of Grant County, are good neighbors to John Day. The wants of John Day are not being penciled

out to be financially sustainable, so who will pay for the sustainability once the wants are pushed through? That would be us, the neighboring communities of John Day through the rise of our county taxes. Would that make the city of John Day good neighbors to their neighbors?

As I see it, the Grant County citizens all have a stake in the changes that are being proposed in John Day. Do they really need a new pool? Or a new high-speed internet? Or a change in the John Day River channel? Or a greenhouse? Remember, if the city of John Day cannot find a way to pay upfront for these proposed wants and guarantee their sustainability, we will pay for them through higher taxes. How many residents will be pushed out of Grant County if that happens? Does John Day want to lose the business the area neighbors bring to them? Like Pete stated, today’s shopping can be delivered most of the time for a less expensive cost.

Rusty Clark
Monument

Editor’s note: The property tax rates for Grant County, each city within the county and all other taxing districts are permanent and cannot be raised. Additional taxing districts, as well as temporary bonds and local option taxes, can add to property tax bills but must first be approved by the voters who would pay them. For other types of taxes, Oregon law requires voter approval before tax-related ordinances take effect.

Reynolds was intelligent and generous

To the Editor:

Last week’s Eagle did an excellent job describing Judge Dennis Reynolds’ keen sense of civic responsibility and commitment to Grant County — his passion for its communities, children and families. I’ll miss his intelligence, generous nature and ready smile.

Mark Webb
Mt. Vernon



Blue Mountain

EAGLE

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