

# Oregon taxpayers deserved better

The COVID-19 virus outbreak put unexpected pressure on an array of state and federal agencies, and in at least one case, the compression created leaks that sprouted into wide fissures.

Take the Oregon Employment Department's failure regarding the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program as an example.

The federal program — rolled out in March — was just one of a series of relief packages created to help plug the unprecedented gaps created by the COVID-19 virus epidemic. Essentially, the program was an expansion of employee insurance that covered self-employed individuals and contract workers.

Oregon, though, didn't even begin accepting Pandemic Unemployment Assistance applications until late April. The Oregon Employment Department did not have a phone number for those seeking the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance until this month, and while it added more phone lines, callers were still expected to wait more than an hour and a half for assistance.

That isn't the most troubling piece of the whole equation, though. That's because instead of processing the claims in a rapid manner — or even in a slow, but methodical fashion — the OED admitted recently it had a backlog of more than 70,000 unprocessed claims. That, in turn, means that thousands of Oregonians who qualified for help didn't get it.

The Oregon Employment Department also proclaimed it would roll out a new program, dubbed FOCUS PUA,

to better focus resources and staff to clear out the backlog of unprocessed claims. The state estimates it can administer 5,000 claims in the first week of the program and that its weekly processing numbers will grow by 2,500 per week thereafter, enabling the state to overcome the current backlog of PUA claims within six or seven weeks.

The state is also apparently cooperating with Google to build a web-based PUA application system. That system is expected to roll out in early July.

All of that, of course, is good news.

What remains troubling, however, is the failure of a critical state agency to handle this specific program in a professional manner. Some latitude can be given when the problem is framed against the abrupt disarray created by the COVID-19 virus and the governor's subsequent order to close the state to stop its spread. Tried and true methods, after all, were disrupted when the state's civil servants were ordered to work from home. That type of sudden disorder created new challenges for civil servants everywhere.

Yet, the state began to open in mid-May. While the wheels of bureaucracy were always slow, for the employment department to have dropped the ball — creating a massive backlog — on this specific problem is shocking.

Oregon taxpayers deserved a better accounting on this issue. They didn't get it. Lawmakers — including locally elected state senators and representatives — should be asking why.



## GUEST COMMENT Elbow grease goes a long way

Curbside appeal does not just apply to houses. It's the first impression customers have of your business, and especially during this tough economic time, anything a business owner can do to attract and keep customers is more important than ever.

The first step in making sure your business is inviting is to step outside and, using your critical eye, scan the entire area. Often a business owner or manager uses a side or back entrance and neglects to pay attention to the front of the store.

Do you have cracks in your sidewalk with grass growing up in between? If you don't want to use chemicals, give your local extension agent or nursery a call and find out what natural options there are. Is your sidewalk swept and regularly hosed off? Check to see if your entry is free of cobwebs and that your front door and knob are clean — maybe even consider repainting your door an eye-catching color.

Look at your signage. It is faded or worn, and can it be easily seen while driving or walking by?

Check to see if there are too many flyers in your window and whether they are outdated. Having a designated spot inside will give organizations a place to advertise their event or other information and will leave your windows clear so customers can see what you have to offer or enjoy your display.



Greg Smith

This may lessen the chances of them reading the flyer and walking on by. Speaking of seeing through your windows, can you? Or is it time to break out the window

cleaner?

Are objects in your window display covered with dust or faded by the sun? When was the last time you changed it? Shoppers are looking for what's new and different and are not going to be drawn in by the same old stuff.

Have you planted, weeded and watered your flowers? Is your flag faded and tattered or properly lit?

Make certain your days and hours of operation are clearly posted and that you adhere to them. It doesn't make customers very happy to find a note saying, "I'll be back in 10 minutes or closed for vacation."

As shoppers venture out, feeling safe is of utmost importance to them. Post your COVID-19 policy on your front door so customers know what to expect and what your efforts are to keep them safe. Many businesses are providing hand sanitizer near the front door and requesting customers use it when entering and exiting. Some are providing masks. Be certain you are following the mandatory safety guidelines for your type of business. Clean often,

paying special attention to door-knobs, the counter and pin pads on debit card machines — doing this in front of customers so they can see you are paying attention to cleanliness is not a bad idea.

Finally, you may want to consider joining a downtown association or banding together with other business owners in coming up with a plan inviting other shops in the area to participate in keeping their store fronts spiffed up. Everyone will benefit, and customers will have a reason to come in and spend their money.

In closing, please note: Eastern Oregon University Small Business Development Center will be hiring a limited-duration, part-time business adviser for Grant County. It will be for 20 hours per week at a little over \$30 per hour, and the position will last until March 31, 2021. If you are interested in applying, submit a resume, cover letter and three professional references. The successful candidate will have a minimum of five years business and/or lending experience. Please send application materials to the email address listed below.

Greg Smith is the director of the Eastern Oregon University Small Business Development Center, which provides free, confidential business advising. For more information, call 541-962-1532 or email eousbdc@gmail.com.

## GUEST COMMENT Communities must work together

By Quint Studer

Freedom, independence, self-sufficiency: These are great and glorious concepts. We celebrate them this time of year, whether we process it that way or not, because they're so deeply ingrained in our image of America. We see ourselves as a nation of rugged individualists: seizing the bull by the horns, charting our own course, walking alone into the forest with an ax slung over our shoulder.

Yes, it's a romantic notion. But it's not an accurate one. America is a nation of small, tight-knit communities and always has been. The more we cooperate, share, defer to others and work together, the more successful we are. Today, as citizens, businesses and civic leaders seek to come back from a public health and economic crisis, that spirit of community is more important than ever. It holds the key to our survival.

I've spent much of my career traveling from one American community to another. Some are bustling larger cities. Others are quiet small towns. What they all have in common is the burning desire to revitalize themselves: to become more vibrant, prosperous, livable and loveable than they are right now. And as I've worked with these diverse groups of Americans, I've seen a theme emerge: Those communities that work together, win together.

When citizens and leaders come together, put their self-interest on the back burner and work as a team, things get done. When they don't, nothing gets done.

The more you think about the myth of the self-reliant early American, the less likely it seems. Our ancestors must have huddled together in small groups and worked to protect each other from a harsh and unforgiving environment. They must have joined forces, shared what they had and leaned on each other when times were tough.

And on the larger stage, our nation's founders had to work together in a similar fashion to bring America

into being. They were working toward independence as a new nation, but they had to rely on interdependence to get there. And as leaders of communities of all shapes and sizes and demographics and political persuasions, we can all learn a lot from them.

Here are four big "history lessons" we should all heed as we seek to reopen, recover, rebuild and continue making our way on journey toward vibrancy:

*Set aside your self-interest and create something that works for everyone.* Lots of different professions, industries and interests were present at the birth of America. Cabinet makers weren't fixated only on the wood industry, nor silver smiths on the silver trade. Everyone was fired up to contribute to something bigger than themselves. They bought into the overarching mission, and weren't bogged down by endless debate over the short-term costs of their plan.

In other words, don't be overly concerned with your own wellbeing. Setting aside your own short-term best interests may accomplish far more for everyone in the long run. Because a rising tide lifts all boats, this includes you.

*Don't let ideological differences stop you from achieving something tangible.* Despite bitter disputes and differences of opinion, a group of people with little in common other than their shared determination that change was needed were able to get mobilized and get something done. While there was much to be decided about the way things would function in the new nation, they all recognized that there wouldn't even be a new nation if they didn't set aside their disagreements and move the ball down the court.

It's important to know what matters. Don't let petty disputes about how things should be done sabotage the greater task at hand.

*Don't be constantly trying to steal the spotlight from each other.* It's OK to let someone else be "the one in charge." No one complained that John Hancock's signature was bigger than theirs, or that so-and-so got to sign the

Declaration before they did. (OK, it's possible, but we can see by the document that resides in the National Archives that it got done anyway!) The founders kept their focus on the ambitious mission of standing up to one of the most powerful authorities in the world: the king of England.

When we try to make it about ourselves, we can get off track and let our self-absorption derail the project or initiative. Keep the greater goal in mind and stay focused on that.

*Don't wait on the government to "fix it."* Instead, join together and take bold action at the local level. The changes desired by American colonists weren't coming from Great Britain. And so, in the summer of 1776 delegates from each of the Thirteen Colonies took it upon themselves to challenge British authorities and make change happen — their way.

Citizen-powered change is the most powerful change. If it's to be, it's up to you and me, not government agencies. (Local governments tend not to have the budget to drive fundamental change, and due to election cycles, officials come and go. Many won't be around to see long term projects through.)

Yes, early communities needed each other, and that drove a lot of their interactions. We went through a period of time where we started to believe we didn't need each other, and that clearly isn't true. We now realize that working together is the only way we can make our cities and towns thrive.

No one is saying America's founders were perfect. They were far from it, as we are. But one thing they got right was the knowledge that they needed to work together for a common cause. Teamwork is a powerful force. We couldn't have built a nation without it, and we can't build a better community without it either.

Quint Studer is the author of "Building a Vibrant Community: How Citizen-Powered Change Is Reshaping America" and founder of Pensacola's Studer Community Institute. For more information, visit vibrantcommunityblueprint.com and studer.org.



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