

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Community effort reflected in standing

Vernonia placed 10th on the Safest Cities Survey of 100 cities and counties in the Portland Region, a standing that reflects a community that cares about the people who live here.

That level of safety is not easy to achieve; it requires far more than a good police department. It requires organizations and activities that keep people involved in the community—summer youth programs; community-wide clean-up and spruce-up events; bake sales and car washes; senior citizen programs and preschool programs; volunteer firefighters and volunteer EMTs.

Crime statistics can be difficult to pin down because the easiest way to demonstrate a low crime rate is by not reporting incidents, ie., if a crime isn't reported, it doesn't exist statistically. Another major variable is the huge changes that can occur with an increase of only a few crimes in an area such as Vernonia, with a small population.

Nevertheless, the community does make a difference and Vernonians have reason to be pleased. As the population increases, it will take more effort to maintain a low crime rate, but it can be done.

As long as community activities include people of all ages; as long as the local police continue to be peace officers instead of law enforcement officers; as long as the people of this community know and care about their neighbors, and as long as people here are aware of what is going on in the community, then we have the opportunity to retain a low crime rate. It's certainly worth the effort.

Council must use caution when setting precedents

The Vernonia City Council recently excused a large water bill for a homeowner who had a broken water pipe, deciding instead to charge her the average of her prior three month's usage. There was no negligence involved, only a worn-out pipe, which the homeowner had fixed as soon as she was made aware of the problem.

Though the city may lose some revenue with this kind of arrangement, it seems like a sensible way to handle a water bill that can exceed \$200 in a very brief period.

The precedent has been set, however, and the council will have to respond in similar fashion to all similar requests.

Now the council is considering a request to allow members of a local family to live in a travel trailer because their elderly family members need help. But there is nothing to prevent people from helping others while living in a legal residence.

The city ordinance that prohibits this was written to eliminate the problems created by people living on the street in facilities that have neither running water nor plumbing, and who pay neither taxes nor fees for an RV site.

This would be a terrible precedent. The council must approach it with considerable caution.



The Josi Report

By Rep. Tim Josi
Oregon Representative, District 2

Unions have played an important role in the history of industrialized nations. They organized to fight inhumane working conditions that existed in mills, factories and mines as the Industrial Revolution gathered momentum. Workers, then, were paid subsistence level wages with no benefits, while toiling in extremely unhealthy and dangerous environments. As working conditions and benefits have improved, union strength has declined in the private sector.

Public employee unions, however, are thriving because the employees they represent are under attack from those who want to cut government spending. Some believe public employees are paid better than private sector workers for "cushy" jobs with huge salaries and fabulous benefits.

This belief has given rise to legislation that seeks to curtail public employees' benefits and bargaining rights. A bill rejected last session appeared on the November ballot as Measure 8, requiring public employees to contribute six-percent of their salaries to their retirement fund. When this passed, some cities and school districts raised their employees' salaries to compensate for the loss; other government bodies, including the state, did not.

State employees have not had a pay increase for two years, placing their salaries 6.5 percent below private sector employees with comparable jobs. With the effects of Measure 8 added in, this creates real disparity between public and private sector compensation.

Some legislators want to create a two-tiered retirement system that provides decreased retirement compensation for new public employees. There is also an attempt to reduce the bargaining rights of public employees by restricting methods and subjects for bargaining.

The OPEU strike was probably justified, but will it end up hurting public employees further? Unions still serve an important function in our society, to distribute the wealth and to reward people's labor fairly. Right now, the balance may be gone; in Oregon 20 percent of the workers take home 49 percent of the wages!

Complaints about too much government regulation are common. Too many rules can

make life too restrictive but, on the other hand, an absence of rules may create another problem: If we are all doing what we see as best for ourselves, we may be doing harm to others. This is why government exists, to create and maintain laws that allow individuals to prosper within the confines of society's collective needs and interests.

The state legislature is charged with creating, maintaining and/or abolishing laws. Once the laws have been passed or modified and the Legislature has gone home, the state agencies that oversee compliance with those laws develop rules and regulations to carry out the will of the lawmakers.

Some people believe the agencies overstep the parameters of the laws, creating rules that are unnecessary or even contrary to the intent of the Legislature.

Because of that belief, in November voters will be asked to approve a constitutional amendment requiring all administrative rules written during interim periods to be ratified by the Legislative Assembly or they will be null and void. It also allows a review of regulations by a committee consisting of the Speaker of the House, the Senate President and other members they appoint. Any person may ask the committee to review any rule.

There are several problems with this process. Of approximately 5,000 rules written each year, only one-percent may be in conflict with legislative intent. This is an incredibly expensive way to get at that one-percent. It will cause confusion as to what is law and what is not and, at its worst, will allow a few people to manipulate the system to their own ends.

For instance, Fish & Wildlife manages hunting and fishing seasons by rule, but a citizen who is opposed to hunting could prevent an entire season by objecting to each rule that governs a particular season. Water Resources, DEQ, Health Department and Forestry regulations would all be at risk.

Controlling rule-making is a sensible idea if done properly; placing our state in perpetual limbo is not!

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