

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Will we nurture and protect our children?

In this season when young people complete various phases of their education and launch themselves into the future, the Vernonia School District has an unprecedented opportunity to catapult into the 21st century.

A dedicated and diverse group of volunteers has been meeting with district administrators and the district's architect for several months to evaluate long range facilities for the school district. The group evaluated the previous plan, did an informal survey of the community, reviewed engineering reports, studied possible new locations, evaluated educational program needs and contemplated how much money the community would be willing and able to provide.

Conventional thinking, as in the previous plan, would be to build a new high school and repair existing buildings to bring them up to standard. Unfortunately, repair estimates for existing schools, plus the cost of constructing a new high school on a new site, is far beyond the district's means. Faced with an engineering evaluation showing that ALL of the district's major buildings are worn out, inaccessible, and just plain dangerous in the event of an earthquake, and that the major focus of the community was to address student safety issues, the committee began to explore new territory. Instead of proceeding in the traditional fashion, strategic thinking resulted in an entirely new concept.

Based on the premise that sharing resources provides the most efficient use, and considering the importance of the school campus to the small town feel of Vernonia, a design evolved that calls for constructing a facility with its major functions (library, cafeteria, administration, gyms) in a central hub, surrounded by smaller buildings for different grade level programs. This design allows for great savings in capital construction costs and in operating costs over time.

Like all truly innovative plans, this will require sacrifice. Not only will the community have to come up with the necessary funding but, in order to capitalize on the central location of the existing campus, buildings must be replaced. Historic and classically beautiful though it is, Washington Grade School is essentially a pile of bricks held together with sand, just waiting to fall on the children within.

It is no accident that this editorial is being presented before most of you have a chance to learn much about the recommendations of the long range facilities committee. That will be presented in depth in the July 5 issue of *The INDEPENDENT*; in the meantime, we want you to consider what is needed to provide a quality education in a safe atmosphere. Overcrowded classrooms can interfere with learning; unsafe buildings can interfere with life.



Salem Scene

By Rep. Elaine M. Hopson
Second District

June 8, 2001

In addition to the regular bills/laws being passed to hopefully improve our conditions, several major issues reached a peak this last week. Money was used that reduces the kicker refund, a defection occurred in the Republican Caucus, and redistricting maps were released.

In an effort to fund some of the needed programs, the House voted to pass SB 963 by a 31-27 vote on Thursday. SB 963 takes \$106 million in federal Medicaid money from this year's kicker refund in order to fund these programs. Currently, the State turns some Medicaid money into general fund money. By taking that federal money out of the general fund, the kicker still "kicks in" but not to the extent it would do if that money remained in the general fund. The kicker "kicks" when general fund revenues exceed estimates (made two years earlier) by two percent or more. By removing the Medicaid money, the revenues in excess of the two percent will decrease from \$355 million to \$249 million, thereby decreasing the individual kicker check. However, the money will be used to fund some needs of our most vulnerable populations.

As you no doubt read, a Republican House member left the Republican Caucus and is now an independent. Jan Lee decided that the confinement brought on by some of the conservative members of her Caucus was more than she could tolerate. Although her defection does not really change committees or power, it is a statement regarding the need for compromise, consideration, and cooperation with the halls of the Legislature. We don't get all that we want but we can always focus on what is good for the people in our communities and the State as a whole.

Every ten years, redistricting occurs to reflect the changing populations in the various communities and legislative districts. The Republicans and Democrats have each developed a plan to address increased populations in each District and those plans have been released. I think it would be fair to say that neither will remain as presented. The plan the Republicans want will most likely receive enough votes to exit the building - which is what being in the majority means. However, in this case, the Governor can turn the plan down and then it goes to the Secretary of State for his decision. There are a number of criteria for redistricting the areas such as using specific, prominent geographic distinctions; keeping communities of interest together; following various highway/freeway lines, and

other demarcations. This is just the first step, as a bill must pass out of the legislature in order to start the process mentioned above.

June 18, 2001

Rumors are rampant trying to guess when we will be out of here and close up the "shop" for another two years. Doing the business of the state, especially the budgeting, for a two-year period certainly complicates the process. Although I am not willing to argue for annual sessions, you can imagine the complications in trying to project income and expenditures two years in advance. Nevertheless, we work toward a speedy conclusion to this process with the best estimates and projections we can.

On Thursday, the first of the education budgets passed from the Education Subcommittee of Ways and Means. It fully funded the \$45 million dollars for enrollment growth requested by the Community College folks. Although it was pulled back into our committee on Friday, there is every reason to believe it will go forward.

On Saturday, we passed out the first of the K-12 budgets - the one dealing with all the Grants-in-Aid that come through the Oregon Department of Education. One complicating factor in all of the K-12 education budgets is the increased amount of money expected to come from the Federal budget. It continues to look like we will get more federal money but it is unclear how specifically it will have to be allocated. The importance of the education budgets moving is that it signals the preparations for the end of the session.

A bill to require insurance companies to pay for prescription contraceptives continues to be an issue. SB 608 had sufficient support to come out of the building. However, due to a very strong lobbying effort, it appears it may be dead this session. The fact that it was sent back to committee without a vote on the floor was the impetus to one member of the Republican's decision to leave her Caucus. The federal court in Washington ruled that pharmacies excluding contraceptives from employer health plans violates the federal Civil Rights Act thereby subjecting employers to legal challenges. The Legislature's own attorneys stated in writing that they were reasonably certain the courts will be ruling the same way on pending legal challenges currently in place in Oregon. In spite of that, an attempt to bring the legislation back to the floor for a vote was thwarted by the Republican majority. It seems a shame that we will ne-

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