

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

County priorities do injustice to citizens

Columbia Pacific Food Bank, which is the umbrella organization for Vernonia Cares and other local emergency food pantries in Columbia County is in desperate need. The county's unemployment rate is now over 12 percent; local emergency food outlets have seen the need for food assistance increase by 45 percent; 16.6 percent of our county's population needs emergency food.

Three years ago, Columbia County's budget included \$2,000 for the food bank; the last two years, the amount was \$1800. This year, with a dramatic increase in need combined with a 65 percent decrease in USDA commodities, the food bank requested \$2500. The answer: \$300.

There are five senior citizens centers in the county. Three of them...Vernonia, Clatskanie and Rainier...have a lot of low-income seniors who need the services offered through the County Council of Seniors and the Agency on Aging. In addition to providing low-cost meals three days a week, funds from these sources can arrange for home delivered meals to seniors and disabled who are unable to get to the centers. Other funds go to Colco Transportation, which is particularly needed in Vernonia. A senior advocate in each center helps seniors with housing /renter/energy assistance, helps them get to appropriate offices for food stamps and Medicaid assistance; can help with appropriate in-home assistance.

Three years ago, the county helped Colco with \$40,000, then \$36,000. This year, their help is \$5,000...while they keep saying they are concerned about transportation for seniors and disabled. The County Council of Seniors is also down to \$5,000, from \$55,500 three years ago and \$49,500 two years ago. Incidentally, those bus drivers, cooks and senior advocates are mostly paid minimum wage and have no benefits.

The Board of Commissioners has claimed the high road by taking no cost of living raise this year. That isn't quite as impressive as they might wish since they gave themselves a 7.6 percent increase last year. Taxpayers now reward this caring trio with nearly \$63,000 each, plus benefits.

But they are still buying "Facilitated Goal Setting" for \$4,000. How many hours of minimum wage assistance could that \$4,000 buy for senior citizens?

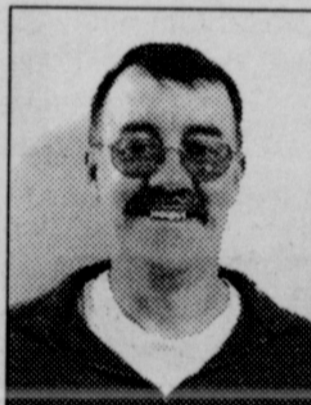
Costs are up for the county as they are for everything and everyone else. PERS and health insurance are huge increases they cannot control.

This county budget raises more questions than it answers, even to those accustomed to reading government budgets. There appears to be little effort to actually reduce costs in any way except by eliminating support for outside agencies such as County Council of Seniors, Colco Transportation and Columbia Pacific Food Bank. These are all agencies that actually help people when they need help, a recognition that has almost totally disappeared from consideration under the auspices of Columbia County Commissioners Rita Bernhard, Tony Hyde and Joe Corsiglia. They haven't stopped spending, they've just stopped helping.



Ike Says

By Dale E. Webb, member
Nehalem Valley Chapter, Izaak Walton League



With the legislature in session, there are some interesting twists in the plots regarding the outdoors and the people who use it. I mentioned, in a previous article, a proposal to try an experimental program in regard to navigable streams. The measure was going to set up five test streams that are currently not deemed navigable, but most likely are. The idea was to ease the conflict between the landowners along the streams and the public that uses the streams. The bill had a subcommittee hearing and appeared to die, with many objections on both sides of the issue. But, like in many legislative sessions, some bills seem to develop a life of their own.

With the help of Senator Ted Ferrioli (R-John Day), the bill has now been twisted into a private landowners' land grab. Senate Bill 293 would, basically, give up the state's interest in ownership of the streambed in return for public usage of the waterway. The key is that the public would not have an automatic right of usage; they would be required to pay access fees as yet to be determined. The fee amounts could potentially price the public off the rivers, which is what a lot of river users believe is the plan. There is also a provision in the bill to allow private clubs to claim sections of rivers and exclude the public; this is pure commercialization of a public resource. It is amazing in a state like Oregon, a state that cre-

ated the beach bill to allow public use of our beaches, that such rancor has erupted over public ownership of streambeds. Federal law is clearly on the side of public usage of all navigable streams, yet our legislators could very well give away our rights. It is time to ascertain if they truly represent us...before they turn around and give away our beaches also.

I also recently wrote about a fee increase proposal by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The ODF&W budget has fallen behind again and needs a boost of about \$9,000,000. Of course they are asking for \$10,000,000, but what the extra million is for was not explained. Well, it seems that Governor Kulongski also has a proposal for ODF&W's budget; it is for an increase of \$15,000,000, five million of which would go to the state General Fund.

What? Yes, the money would go to the state General Fund, to replace the \$5 million dollars that ODF&W currently receives from the General Fund to operate fish hatcheries. When I first heard of this issue, I saw red, but in reconsideration, I think it is fair to ask the question, "should we be subsidizing public fishing while schools and other public agencies go wanting?" Many sportsmen will consider the Governor's proposal a direct attack against their pastime; I must give him credit for proposing an honest question in a dire time. Sportspeople in Oregon subsidize a lot of programs that benefit the general public, so the answer to this question is not an easy one, but I would propose that, if sportspeople need to step up and pay their full way, it should be remembered when the times are good again.

On another topic, in 1884, J.L. Bernard set

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