

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Wyden strategy removes BPA from Bush budget hit

President George Bush's 2006 budget includes changing the cost-based power rates of the Bonneville Power Administration to a market-based rate by increasing bills for Northwest consumers by 20 percent each year until the market rate is reached. Once the market level is reached, the taxpayer and ratepayer benefits will be eliminated, a switch that would only lead to privatization.

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, who had threatened to block confirmation of the president's nominee for Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy, because of the administration's plan to privatize the BPA and other Federal power marketing agencies, has now dropped his opposition because U.S. Senator Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has agreed to block the market rate proposal if it reappears in any form.

Wyden and the other Northwest Senators on the Budget and Energy Committees (Wyden serves on both committees) have worked together in opposition to the market-rate proposal, which would cost Northwest ratepayers billions of dollars. The Oregon Democrat, working with U.S. Senator Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) also wrote language specifically blocking the proposal that has been agreed to by the Senate Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) and will be included in the Senate's 2006 Budget resolution.

Though Wyden carried most of the effort on this issue, Senator Gordon Smith (R-Oregon), who also serves on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, was a strong supporter.

Smith and Wyden also demonstrated bipartisanship yesterday by opposing the move to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil drilling. The Senate voted to include the proposal in its budget, a maneuver that smoothes the way for Congress to approve drilling later this year.

The debate is not yet ended. The Senate must still pass a budget, which must be reconciled with the House budget; then Congress must pass a second budget-related measure that includes the drilling in a larger package of provisions.



Legislative Update

By Senator Betsy Johnson
Oregon District 16



The Other Education Issue

When Oregonians talk about education funding they are usually referring to funding for kindergarten through high school, the K-12 system. There is another system of education in Oregon that is also pleading for more general fund dollars: The Oregon University System. In one way or another Oregon taxpayers support six universities plus the Oregon Institute of Technology in Ashland and the Oregon Health and Science University which is also affiliated with the Oregon University System.

The business community and especially the high-tech community have been lobbying for increased funding for our universities to provide the trained professionals these firms seek. Students and their parents are asking for relief from the constant tuition and fee increases. Lower income students are asking for increases in scholarship grants. And the universities themselves are seeking additional funding to recruit and keep the most qualified faculty members. (According to recent data, the salaries paid to fully tenured professors in Oregon rank at or near the bottom when compared to the public higher education systems of the other ten western states.)

Some legislators are actually asking aloud the

question that has been raised quietly for years: "Can we afford our higher education system?"

Logic would lead most to conclude that Oregon cannot maintain three major universities within 100 miles of each other. But as just about everyone will agree, political decisions often are based on factors other than logic. Can you imagine what would happen if someone introduced a bill to close the University of Oregon? Or Oregon State? Or Portland State?

I can almost guarantee you that no such bill will be introduced this session or perhaps even in my lifetime. But the facts remain. The quality of our university faculty is declining. The cost of an education in our university system is increasing to the point where fewer Oregonians can attend an Oregon institution. Businesses seeking academic support, especially in the sciences and engineering, are becoming increasingly impatient.

Politically, we cannot close any of our campuses. Financially, we cannot support all of them adequately. The answer to this dilemma? Believe it or not, a bill has been introduced to create yet another campus in Bend!

Town Hall Meeting

Senator Betsy Johnson will hold a Town Hall meeting in the Council Chambers at Vernonia City Hall on April 1, from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m., to discuss what is currently underway in the legislature and to address constituents' concerns and questions.