

Government and the total cost of citizenship

Created on Friday, 01 July 2016 12:38 | Written by [Mike Salsgiver](#) | 

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In the words of Ted Nugent, “if there was a Hall of Fame of Common Sense, a huge statue of Grover Norquist would be at the front door.” As the founder and president of Americans for Tax Reform (ATR), Grover Norquist is best known for his work to limit the size and cost of government and oppose higher taxes at the federal, state, and local levels.

Why is this reference to a 1970s arena rock legend (Nugent) and a staunch conservative (Norquist) relevant to Oregonians? Based on the outcome of the May Primary Election, many Oregon voters seem fed up with the cost of government and have begun expressing their frustration by opposing tax hikes at the ballot, most notably in the form of school bonds.

Across the state, there were twenty-two school districts seeking bonds—the largest number in eight years—and voters approved thirteen of them. Within the Portland area, the school bond landscape included:

- \$125 million Mount Hood Community College (MHCC) bond to build a new Workforce and Applied Technology Center and replace the eighty year old Maywood campus building. Results: Failed 55.3 to 44.7 percent.
- \$85 million Centennial bond for a new middle school and additions to other buildings. Results: failed 54.2 to 45.7 percent.
- \$11.9 million Corbett bond for a new middle school. Results: failed 53.8 to 46.1 percent.

The failure of these and other bonds has left many wondering why voters will not tax themselves in order to make investments in their children’s education and safety at these schools. That question alone

is a difficult one for many—on the one hand voters want to take care of their community's schools, but on the other hand, it has become incredibly expensive.

For example, some residents living within the Centennial district had four separate financial requests on their Primary ballots: the Centennial school bond, the MHCC Bond, the Portland gas tax, and a five year levy for the Oregon Historical Society. Voters in Sandy were looking at the same MHCC bond, a Sandy gas tax, and two Clackamas County money measures.

The sheer number of money measures alone is enough to give a voter a headache and begs the questions: where is all of the current tax and bond money going, and how is the average voter supposed to afford it?

By many measures, the economy is improving and, with that, jobs and wages are slowly beginning to return. However, East Multnomah County has failed to recover in the same way that other parts of the state have. A recent discouraging economic report demonstrated that as Portland wages increased thirteen percent from 2010 to 2014, Gresham's wages dropped fifteen percent.

While wages for parents in that area have dropped, the outlook for their children is also a growing challenge. For many of Oregon's students, high school has become a dead end. At 47th out of 50 states in high school graduation rates, Oregon's students leave high school generally unprepared for college or to join the workforce without the hands-on skills needed to be successful.

Additionally, in an effort to cut costs, the state has systematically disassembled vocational education programs—a sore spot for our industry as well as many other industry sectors. Where wood, metal, and auto shops were in almost every high school, today they are rare. Over the years and during the economic recession, over 600 (50 percent) of Oregon's secondary CTE programs were eliminated, reducing school districts' connections to their local and regional workforce and educational leaders. In an area with a strong manufacturing base like Gresham, a decrease in vocational programs that directly cater to their industry is a critical loss.

The picture we are beginning to see now is one of a family of decent waged workers, making do with what little money they have after taxes are taken out of their paychecks, sending their children to average public schools with unacceptably low graduation rates that are not addressing what it takes to educate a child in the 21st century. This same family is then promised better schools and better roads if only they vote YES on yet another measure to increase their yearly taxes.

What we are seeing is a collision between what people want to do and want they can afford to do. These people have a right to be upset and question where all of the previous money promised for better schools and better roads has gone.

If left unaddressed, multiple fiscal measures on every ballot will continue to plague Oregon's workforce, economy, and, frankly, continue to tap out every citizen. But what is the solution? Some districts have successfully passed school bonds- thirteen passed in the May Primary alone. So what will increase the chances of passing school funding measures?

First, the successful districts communicate constantly with their patrons. Transparency about how money is currently spent and what new funds will be spent on is needed.

Additionally, better coordination between the cities, counties, and educational districts would help alleviate the voters' feeling overwhelmed by too many money measures. It is critical for school districts, cities, counties, port districts, and other taxing districts to be talking with one another. Money measures can no longer be thrown out to the voters without coordination and a better understanding of what voters are facing economically.

In all, the total cost of citizenship is proving more and more expensive. Oregonians in large numbers have shown they want to build a great community. But even the most supportive voters are beginning to buckle under the weight of never-ending requests for more and more money. The use of a ballot measure should be deliberate, thoughtful, and fully consider the real effect proposed policies will have on the whole rather than the few, not hastily thrown together with the hope that it passes.

If anything, we can only hope that the May 2016 Primary is a reminder to government at all levels what their job is—to protect the public safety, educate our children, and manage public resources wisely. If they keep those priorities in front of them, voters will support them. And Oregon will have a much brighter future.

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