

# Legislators' postage-paid ballots bill should be returned to sender

Projected \$1.6 billion deficit should remind lawmakers not to spend what we don't have

There are few minds that can rival Sen. Richard Devlin's when it comes to his knowledge of the state's budget — encyclopedic and precise, practically down to the decimal point.

As the senate's chief budget writer, the Tualatin Democrat is not only well aware of the \$1.6 billion deficit facing the state, he and his counterpart in the Oregon House of Representatives sounded the alarms for the public by painting a dire picture of how those cuts could play out. And in a recent meeting with The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board, Devlin acknowledged that legislators must deliver on multiple fronts in a short amount of time to close the gap in a manner that limits fallout. In other words, do nearly the impossible.

So it's perplexing that he, of all people, would be a chief sponsor of a bill that calls for new spending to solve a dubious problem of questionable magnitude. But Devlin, along with Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, and Sen. James Manning Jr., D-Eugene, is pushing SB 683 to save Oregonians from the apparently monumental challenge of securing a stamp for their mail-in ballots.

The bill revives an effort from the 2016 session that Devlin backed with then Rep. Val Hoyle, D-Eugene. It would require the state to send postage-paid envelopes with ballots to Oregon voters for all elections held on or after Jan. 1, 2019. If enacted, the legislative fiscal office estimates the requirement would cost Oregon up to \$500,000 for the 2017-2019 biennium and as much as \$2.6 million in the biennium after depending on how many ballots are returned.

Why provide postage-paid ballots? Because millennials aren't into "the stamp culture," as Dembrow contends. Supporters say low-income people may find it difficult to afford a 49-cent stamp. And it's not easy for people with disabilities or those in communities with fewer collection boxes to drop off their ballot if they can't get a stamp.

All of these things may well be true. But that still brings up the question that any legislator should ask before pushing a new bill: Is this a problem of significance that the government ought to solve?

It's not. It is difficult to see how Oregon, which reported 80 percent voter

turnout for the November election, could make it any easier for people to vote. People have ample time to mail in their ballots or drop them off at collection boxes in their community.

It's ridiculous to devote any revenue to a problem that's really about civic enabling rather than expanding voter access. The state cannot and should not spend taxpayers' money trying to eliminate any possible inconvenience or save people from their own forgetfulness. People make choices and sometimes voting just isn't one of them.

But the severity of Oregon's impending deficit — despite projections of record revenue — should have killed this bill before it was even introduced. Instead, it's scheduled for a Wednesday work session by the Senate Rules Committee.

Devlin's commitment to expanding voter access is genuine and runs deep, a quality apparent in his unsuccessful run last year for secretary of state. He told the editorial board about his efforts as a volunteer decades ago braving ice and snow in a Ford Escort that had no tire chains to retrieve ballots from voters living near Mount Hood.

But it's as if the stark cuts facing child-welfare services and community colleges and K-12 school districts exist in some other parallel universe — not the one that he and the rest of Oregon must operate in. And Devlin is far from the only legislator dreaming up new programs, increased employee benefits or other ways to spend Oregonians' money. It goes to show that even the savviest legislators can ignore fiscal realities when it involves an issue for which they are passionate.

Devlin contends that in the grand scheme of things, covering postage for ballots amounts to a small sum of money. But that's the problem. He's forgetting the grandest scheme of things: This state is expecting deep cuts to basic public services despite record revenue. That should shock any legislator's conscience to, at the very least, jolt him or her out of this destructive cycle of spending what we don't have.

— *The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board*

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