

## Addressing our problems: Will we get upstream?

I listened recently to three dozen community leaders describe our valley's most pressing needs and their ideas for meeting them. What stood out was full agreement that our big challenges are interrelated. Homelessness/intolerable housing, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, underemployment, barriers to healthcare and education, aren't bullets on a random list. They're a web, with progress on any of them depending on how well we address the others.

A second agreement was that we won't solve these problems by battling their symptoms. They're predictable outcomes of social and economic conditions that we understand better all the time. We have to "go upstream," in a favorite current phrase, to confront the root causes.

These two agreements are cornerstones of the Student Success Act that became law passed this year. It will deliver far more children to school ready to learn by investing in early childhood and mental health programs, and in the capacity of families to meet their kids' basic needs. Though this approach makes perfect sense to most people, passing it into law was a titanic battle because of the additional \$1 billion/year it will cost us.

Here we come to the crux of the matter: paying the bill. It's great to hear local leaders with diverse political viewpoints agreeing that we have to get upstream of community challenges. But what that means is investing in people left behind by the 21<sup>st</sup> century's massive economic shifts. That plainly won't come cheap.

It could be that we broadly share some beliefs that would help move us from polite, abstract agreement about getting upstream to practical support for the funding that will take. I'll offer three:

**1) Our challenges are steeper, and the tab to meet them bigger, because so many cans have been kicked down the road for so long.** We've generally known the probable impacts of climate change at least since Exxon predicted them in confidential memos 30+ years ago. We've known for decades that our economic playing field was tilting in ways that would dump countless Americans out of the middle class and into dependence. All along the way, there were opportunities for upstream action that would have cost less than what we face today. We didn't take them. Political consultants told candidates not to ask anything serious of us if they wanted to get elected, so very few did.

**2) Government has to manage tax dollars better than it has.** This isn't simple. Government cleans up messes and protects people that no one else will, prepares for calamities that may never happen, manages a complex network of public and private providers of a thousand services, measures and monitors every step along the way in the name of accountability, and wobbles in the breezes of political change. As the most jumbled matrix of responsibilities and reactions ever devised, it will never spend every dollar wisely. That doesn't let us off the hook from continuously pushing for more cost-effective government. Why should taxpayers buy into upstream solutions if they don't see their money managed with transparency and accountability? But... anyone who says ending "waste, fraud and abuse" is the whole answer, or demands nearly perfect fiscal management before they'll consider new taxes, is saying *no* to the solutions Oregon needs.

**3) We have families and businesses who've reached or passed the limit of what they can pay in taxes without damage to their quality of life or future security.** We can get serious about upstream investments without asking more from them. National studies rank Oregon at or near 50th among states when it comes to taxing the global corporations that often enjoyed record profits through the recession from which so many people and small businesses never recovered (visit [www.ocpp.org](http://www.ocpp.org)). We've been frontrunners in the national race to the bottom. Changing that is the first step towards funding upstream policies.

(A side note for further discussion: Oregonians feeling overtaxed might want to focus on the larger check they send to the federal government, with programs of questionable worth that cost more in a month than Oregon's entire budget for a year. What if, say, 1/3 of what we send to Washington was re-directed to Oregon's upstream solutions?)

The Rogue Valley is already known statewide for local leadership's collaborative creativity, sometimes across difficult political boundaries. Maybe we could take a very big next step: building enough agreement to design funding for the investments needed to transform effective upstream solutions from theory to reality.

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