In Salem, it's not a long way to wit's end
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I swung by the Capitol Thursday to get up to speed on this state's crisis management.
Where, I asked, is the war room?
Where's the sense of urgency?
Where's the workshop on devising a new tax structure? Or, given the possibility tax reform may not be possible, where is the riverboat gambling research group or the committee probing the revenue benefits of legalized prostitution?
Where are the bipartisan groups taking knives to the rest of that legendary marbled fat in government?
Where's the game plan? Where's the leadership? Where's the impassioned sense of purpose?
My bad. It was the wrong week to ask.
There were no beach chairs, no tanning butter, and no salt on the rims of the glasses, but there was there no mistaking the mood in the Capitol last week: The building reeked of spring break.
After the Legislature balanced the 2001-2003 budget, emotional exhaustion steamrolled the place. Signs of life and initiative were few and far between, although Sen. Charles Starr, R-Hillsboro, the Senate Education Committee chairman, made news in the only way he can, writing acidly to a constituent, "I tell any parent who will listen to run -- not walk -- to remove their children from public schools . . . (N)othing could be worse for the future of America than consigning all our youths to the public education arena."
Before issuing a half-baked apology, Starr insisted, "We are failing our children unnecessarily. For 50 years, we have been dumbing down our nation." You think so, Chuck? If someone provides the forum, I personally know a dozen high school seniors who, dumbed down though they may be, would pick you apart in a political debate.
Unwilling to allow Starr to symbolize the Legislature's commitment to public schools, the Senate Revenue Committee held hearings Thursday on proposals to allow local communities to increase Measure 5's tax rate limits for education.
Gov. Ted Kulongoski didn't show up for the hearings -- his spokeswoman, Mary Ellen Glynn, said Friday the governor "is in favor of the general principle" -- but Randall Edwards, the state treasurer, did.
Because he is paying attention, because he understands budgets -- and because he regularly dines with Julia Brim-Edwards, a member of the Portland School Board -- you would expect Edwards to grasp the sense of urgency that escapes Kulongoski. He does.
"The school system is broken," Edwards said at the hearing. "The Measure 5 and Measure 50 mandates can't be continued." He later added, "We're out of time. This should have been discussed two years ago. Now we're at ground zero. We've hit rock bottom."
Edwards plumbed the state's fall on the day Fitch, a national credit-rating agency, downgraded Oregon's credit rating. Moody's and Standard & Poor's have yet to follow suit, but Edwards said the downgrade suggests something more serious than the possibility that Wall Street reads Doonesbury.
"We got a report card. We got a lower grade from one teacher, and the other two are waiting to see if we're going to be good students," Edwards said. Ruth Corson Maynard, a Fitch consultant, told The Bond Buyer the state is too dependent on revenue from personal income taxes and that the magnitude of its losses in this recession "are extraordinary."
"We have a revenue problem," Edwards said. "This isn't just the economy, this is how we're paying for things. The institutions that are dramatically impacted are the school districts putting their budgets together for next year. The Portland story is being played out around the state, and we're running out of time to help them.
"We have to put our heads together and come up with a tax system that delivers what the public wants. We narrowed our tax base under Measure 5. We've seen what happens when we hit a recession. We cannot meet our obligations."
The truth hurts, people. Because it's clearly too painful for President Bush, the governor or the Legislature to deal with, credit Randall Edwards for his willingness to face it down.
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