

## Unions can help limit the damage

*Editorial*

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The wave of economic woes that first hammered the private sector in the form of foreclosures, layoffs and shuttered storefronts is now washing over the public sector.

And the result is extremely unpleasant — for the institutions and employees involved and the communities they serve.

Recent stories in the Clackamas Review and Oregon City News have detailed coming cutbacks at local school districts, cities and **Clackamas Community College**. Just like families, businesses and nonprofit organizations, these tax-supported agencies are directly dependent on the general economy. When income levels decline, the result is fewer tax dollars to support government services.

But while it's way too late to stop the slide in government revenues, there is still some possibility of limiting the damage. And that's what local schools and cities, and the employee unions for those agencies, must be willing to do in the next few months. The public needs government services now more than ever, and citizens will be watching how their public servants respond.

### Measuring the impact

At this point, local school districts and cities are still quantifying what this recession means for them in the fiscal year that begins July 1. But actions being contemplated by the area's public agencies provide insight into just how serious the situation will be:

- Oregon City School District is considering closing Park Place Elementary School, switching to a four-day school week and laying off employees to cover a budget shortfall that could reach \$9 million.
- Gladstone School District is facing a 20 percent reduction in state funding, and Superintendent Bob Stewart said the district faces bigger class sizes and layoffs.
- Clackamas Community College laid off 20 full-time employees last month.

When taken as a whole, these reductions represent hundreds of jobs and tens of millions of payroll dollars that could evaporate from the North Clackamas County economy. That's the equivalent of losing one of the region's largest employers.

But beyond the financial implications, there also are real effects for students and for all citizens. Fewer teachers and programs in schools will result in more crowded classrooms and lost opportunities for learning.

### Sacrifices needed to restore jobs

At least some of these negative effects can yet be avoided — but it will require collaboration and outright sacrifices from public employee unions, some of which we've already seen. Oregon City teachers moved swiftly to reach an agreement with district officials to shave five days off the school year, only one of which was an instructional day, resulting in a 2.6 percent pay cut. Faculty at Clackamas Community College accepted a 4.5 percent pay cut for next year. And throughout the region, school districts and their employee unions — teachers and classified staff — are in the process of renegotiating contracts.

Many of the jobs about to be lost — perhaps even hundreds of them region-wide — can be restored if unions simply agree to freeze their wages for the coming year, like CCC faculty did. Unfortunately, faculty at CCC made that sacrifice knowing that it would not keep any professors on board. But the resulting savings in larger school districts like North Clackamas and Oregon City could result in saving many jobs.

Multiply that effect throughout all local school districts, colleges and other government agencies, and the value of making such concessions could be immense. Jobs would be preserved. Students would be better served. The economy would benefit.

That said, we understand that unions can't take these concessions lightly. Educators in particular are tasked with one of the most vital jobs in our economy, and to drastically underpay them would drive talent from the field and ultimately leave the education system worse off.

We also feel that the struggling economy is just a small part of the larger problem in the state's education funding formula that must be fixed, and we DO NOT feel that unions should take permanent cuts. Whether we belong to unions or not, they have helped the American worker make great strides over the years.

But by now, most people in the private sector already have taken a hit in their compensation due to this recession. They have had their salaries frozen or reduced. They have taken forced furloughs. Too many have lost their jobs.

Public employees in the midst of contract deliberations with local schools and cities should consider freezing their wages. Ultimately, it will save jobs, strengthen the economy and help us out of this mess, so public agencies and employee unions won't be having the same deliberations at this time next year.