

# The UO has the right idea: more private support

The Legislature is rightly pursuing its own university restructuring plan, but it needs to recognize the priorities and the urgency of the UO proposal

**S**ay what you want about the University of Oregon's bid for independence and its unlikely request for \$800 million in state bonds. Call the plan out of bounds, an end run or selfish, but recognize this:

It directly takes on the financial crisis strangling the state's universities, dashing the dreams of students and throttling the state's economy. And it's the only plan that concedes the obvious: After 20 years of decline and disinvestment, there's no infusion of public money coming to the university system.

The UO plan is an essential acknowledgment that if Oregon is to have any chance of achieving its ambitious higher education goals, it must get more — much more — private support for its public system.

We know the UO proposal isn't likely to pass in this Legislature. It's ill-timed, when the Legislature wants to focus on the necessary proposal from its higher education task force to end universities' status as state agencies and give them vital autonomy.

The UO plan asks for too much, \$800 million in future bonding authority from a state that, for the moment, has none to spare. It requires a statewide constitutional vote, a process that would be at best challenging. And it's too narrowly focused, a life preserver for the UO, a cold splash of uncertainty for the state's other universities.

But we would urge everyone — lawmakers, students, state board members, other university leaders — to recognize the vital message of the UO proposal. It looks with clear eyes at a university system that will get less base state funding in 2011 than it did in 1991, one that has had to raise tuition 241 percent over the past 20 years.

Today in Oregon, 25- to 34-year-olds are less likely than their parents to have college degrees. That is a grim marker of an education and economic crisis, a state sliding backward, not moving forward.

Of course, ultimately, Oregon must bring that same stability to all of its seven public universities. But the first vital step is to recog-

nize the system's problems, and the need for urgency in facing them. The task force's proposal, backed by the State Board of Higher Education and the chancellor, is a vital step in that direction, but only a first step.

After it passes, the state board says it will spend a year, maybe longer, studying local governance. We hope for a high priority, and a faster path.

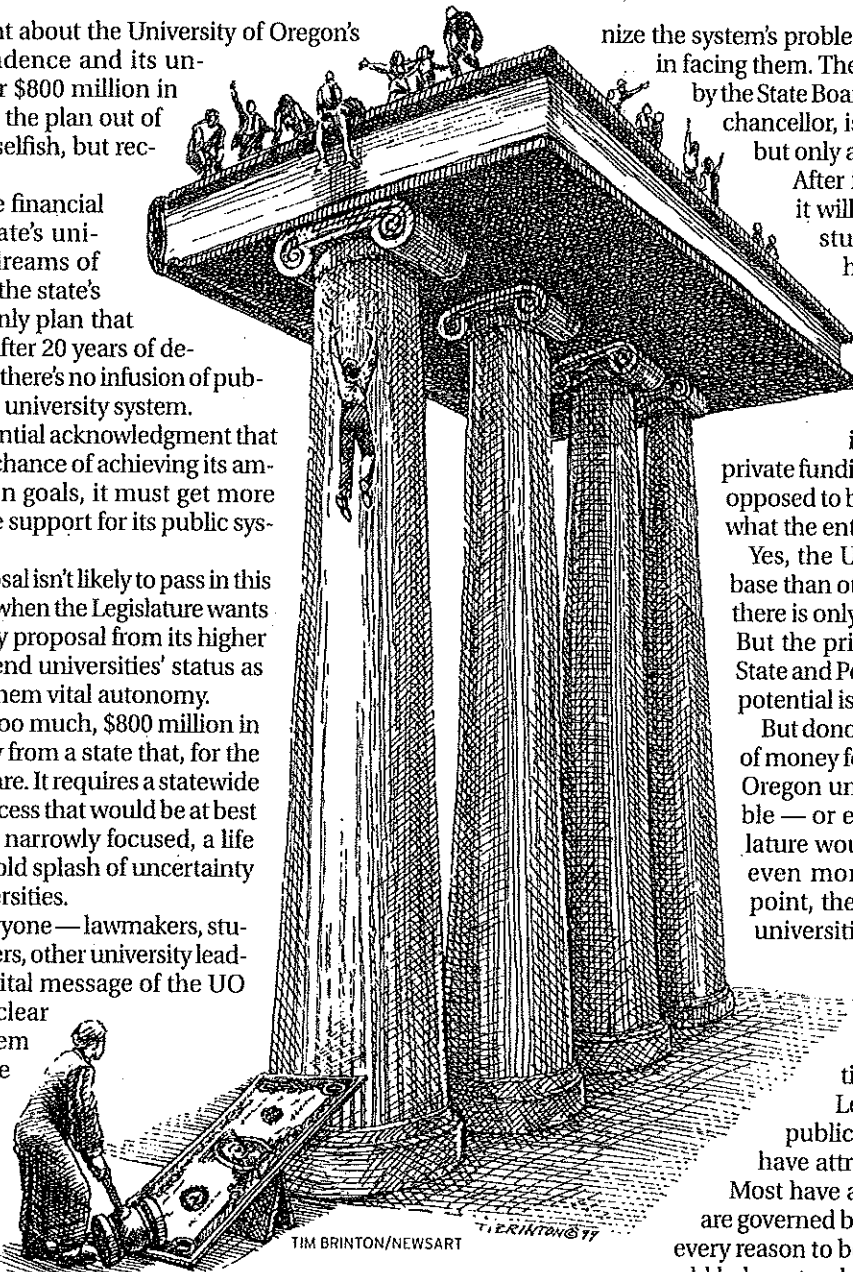
The essence of the UO proposal — the strong local board, the guarantee of state funding, the leveraging of very large amounts of private funding for operational support, as opposed to buildings or sports — points to what the entire system needs.

Yes, the UO has a much larger donor base than other Oregon universities. And there is only one Phil Knight in this state. But the private donor bases of Oregon State and Portland State have grown. The potential is there for much more.

But donors will not give large amounts of money for operational support at any Oregon university as long as it's possible — or even likely — that the Legislature would respond by withdrawing even more public funding. On this point, the UO is absolutely right: The universities must have the guarantee of dedicated state funding when they go to donors to raise matching funds to strengthen their operations.

Look around: Most of the great public universities in this country have attracted huge private support. Most have a level of independence and are governed by strong local boards. There's every reason to believe these kinds of reforms would help not only the UO, but also OSU, PSU and the others.

If nothing else, policymakers, lawmakers and the public must embrace the UO's sense of urgency. The University of Oregon may not have precisely the right answer, but it's posing exactly the right question.



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