

PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

May 6, 2016

Guest opinion: A Republican lawyer makes the case for PSU's \$35M business tax

By Jim Westwood

Signature gatherers are on the streets of Portland in an effort to get the Yes for PSU business tax measure on the ballot. Why is this business-friendly, tax-averse, registered Republican solidly in favor of it? Because it's a massive return on a tiny investment.

First, if you're a business person, I'm on your side. You've just been saddled with a mandatory state minimum wage increase that you'll have to make up for partly with increased productivity.

Thankfully, PSU is there for you. Nearly 80 percent of the university's in-state students come from the tri-counties, and 66 percent of all PSU grads stay here. They're your employees. College graduates tend to be more productive workers, and they'll often stay longer and be more involved in our community.

Yes for PSU will fortify that supply of employees by ensuring more students graduate.

Under current conditions, with tuition increases becoming routine, many PSU students can't afford four-year higher education anywhere else. Most of them work, but it's not enough. Nearly a third of them — one in three — have to drop out because of cost.

Yes for PSU will provide more and larger scholarships that will go a long way to reducing the dropout rate. Plus, these additional scholarships will only go to qualified Metro area residents.

Oregon once funded public higher ed at 80 percent. Now it's 25 percent. The most recent data rank Oregon 46th out of the 50 states in public funding for higher education. Worse, PSU gets less funding per degree granted than any other public university in the state. It's no wonder tuition has skyrocketed.

This November, Metro voters will have a chance to step up and help end this funding crisis by voting Yes for PSU.

The measure calls for a payroll tax (there, I said it) of a tenth of one percent — or .001 — levied on Metro area businesses, with the exception of sole-proprietorships.

That rate amounts to \$1 for every \$1,000 of a business's payroll. Half the \$40 million raised annually will go directly to scholarships. A quarter of it will go to hire and retain teaching staff. (Oregon college professors are among the worst-paid in the nation.) Lastly, a quarter will help keep students in school by paying for more advisors, counselors and tutors. Provisions prevent the money from being spent on anything else.

Yes, it's a tax, but please don't run for the hills yet. Let's consider again the minimum wage hike. That's a targeted tax by another name, but it's here now. A \$2.00 per hour wage increase on a \$10.00 per hour base is 200 times what you'd invest in the Yes for PSU measure.

If you're still skeptical, consider Exhibit A — me. I attended PSU because I couldn't afford to go elsewhere. I worked my way through, I graduated, and I've stayed in Portland. I've worked, paid taxes, been active in the community, and raised children who will be productive members of the local community. Thousands of people like me are all around us, but now tuition has gotten so high many can't attend college. We have a chance to change that. If ever the word "investment" could be applied without embarrassment to public funding of something, it's here.

Please vote YES for PSU to support Portland State University. You won't regret it.



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