

## Benchmarks don't move us forward

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When he was governor, Neil Goldschmidt launched the strategic plan for Oregon's economic development and livability. What became known as the Oregon Progress Board and its "benchmarks" grew out of a popular mindset that Oregon should be run like a business, and the idea gained traction in the 1990s with then-Vice President Al Gore's effort to "reinvent government."

Unfortunately, the benchmarks have accomplished little, and the progress that Oregon has achieved has been despite, not because of, the benchmarks. The main problems with the benchmarks are that they fail to specify how to fund progress on the fundamental issues facing the state and that too few Oregonians know about the benchmarks or use them.

To its own undoing, the Progress Board is silent on the state's failure to fund fairly and adequately the public structures needed to accomplish the benchmark goals. Oh, there are a few tax-related benchmarks, but none that set Oregon on a strategic path to meaningful revenue reform.

The benchmarks ignore Oregon's failure to save adequately for economic downturns and our fiscally irresponsible squandering of unanticipated revenues. To their great credit, the Legislative Assembly created reserve funds (the Education Stability Fund in 2002 and the Oregon Rainy Day Fund in 2007), despite our so-called strategic plan's silence on the matter.

Oregon's revenue system still is neither fair nor adequate. The poor pay a greater share of their income funding state and local services than the wealthy, and profitable businesses are not paying their fair share. And the funds come up short. For example, we have yet to fund Oregon's Quality Education Model and have starved the Oregon Health Plan.

You'd think that a strategic plan for Oregon would address how to fairly and adequately pay for progress. You'd think it would address Oregon's accounts receivables — our revenue system. It doesn't.

Interestingly, the biennial benchmark reports regularly have documented that few Oregonians understand how government raises and spends its revenues. Yet the strategic plan has offered no guidance on how to fix that problem. So, not surprisingly, our fiscal situation is not significantly better than when Goldschmidt created the first strategic plan. In fact, since the advent of the benchmarks, voters approved Measures 5 and 50, which created havoc in funding local government services and strained the state budget, as well. We can't expect good votes on tax policy when Oregonians don't understand how government is funded or services are provided.

Hunger and food insecurity are another example of the Progress Board's failure to tackle fundamental issues. The initial strategic plan failed to identify them as a problem. Then, in the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that Oregon had one of the highest hunger rates in the nation. The strategic effort that resulted in significant improvements in our hunger and food insecurity rates came from anti-hunger and anti-poverty advocates pushing for new policies, not the Progress Board. The Progress Board initially tried to discredit the

USDA findings. Fortunately, despite the benchmarks, Oregon made progress.

A few years ago when the Progress Board was seeking input about updating the benchmarks, I asked a health advocate whether she thought the benchmarks provided any assistance to her efforts to expand health coverage for more Oregonians. This advocate, with many years in the trenches, responded, "What are the benchmarks?"

Sadly but true, the benchmarks have been the province of a small group of government insiders. Too often the only people who know about the benchmarks are those who pushed to have the Progress Board include a benchmark for their pet program so they can point to the benchmark when seeking funding.

Should we scrap the Progress Board and the benchmarks? No — Oregon needs a strategic plan. But for that plan to be embraced by a broad spectrum of the state, it must focus on the big issues and explain how best to pay for progress in those areas. And there must be a strategic effort by the governor, as the Progress Board's chairperson, and legislative leaders to make Oregonians aware of the benchmark plan.

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