

**If not now, when?**  
**A REGISTER-GUARD EDITORIAL**

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Oregon's income tax and lottery will generate \$150 million more in the 2007-09 biennium than earlier predicted, the state economist announced Tuesday.

Legislative leaders have revised their higher education budget proposals to account for the windfall, but lawmakers are still finding excuses for continuing to starve the state's universities.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski understands the need to get higher education budgets moving in the right direction, and found room for a helpful increase long before the revenue estimate was revised upward. He proposed an \$859 million general fund budget for the Oregon University System, a 12.7 percent increase from the current biennium. The governor also proposed selling \$400 million in bonds to finance maintenance and construction at Oregon colleges, such as an Integrative Science Complex at the University of Oregon.

These are not spectacular sums. If the OUS budget had grown 3 percent a year from its 1999-2001 level, general fund support would total \$901 million in the next biennium. Restoring Oregon's institutions of higher learning to financial health will require a long-term effort; the governor's proposals were no more than a good start.

Legislative leaders soon made it clear that they had other priorities. The House and Senate co-chairs of the joint legislative Ways and Means Committee scaled the OUS budget back to \$843 million. They also eliminated all but \$50 million of the governor's proposed bond-financed capital program. As if to underline their low opinion of the importance of higher education, the co-chairs called for giving kindergarten through 12th grade education \$239 million more than the governor requested.

The response from the powerful public education lobby has been disappointing. Leaders of its various organizations had a chance to say that education doesn't end with high school, and that while an increased appropriation for schools would be welcome, it shouldn't come at the expense of higher education. Instead, the long-standing pattern of budgetary competition between the different levels of the educational system has been allowed to continue.

The best possible spin anyone could give the co-chairs' recommendations is that

they were attempting to force House Republicans to rescue higher education with an increase in the minimum corporate income tax, which has been unchanged since 1931. If that was the strategy, it looked like a losing one - House Republicans have refused to support tax increases of any kind, even a tobacco tax increase to provide health insurance for children. Now, with an additional \$150 million on the table, Republicans will harden their already solid no-new-taxes position.

What's more, the Ways and Means co-chairs have released one of their hostages: On Tuesday they added \$35 million to their proposed budget for community colleges. Though still far short of the \$560 million that community colleges would receive if their 1991-2001 appropriation were adjusted for inflation, the new figure of \$493 million is \$10 million more than Kulongoski requested - leaving Republicans even less inclined than before to see the need for additional revenue.

The co-chairs made an upward adjustment of \$8 million to their proposed general fund budget for higher education, still short of the governor's recommended figure. And they proposed funding half, rather than one-eighth, of the governor's proposed capital construction program for universities. The OUS is better off today than it was on Monday - but even with extra cash in hand, lawmakers aren't willing to spend as much as the governor on higher education. Although events in Salem are moving in the right direction, they're not moving far enough. A time of prosperity brings opportunities to invest in the future. Now is such a time.