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### **EDITORIAL: A lame duck governor's legacy**

**(<http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/polls/24963919-56/recommendations-kulongoski-state-cabinet-governor.csp>) |**

### **Kulongoski frames debate — if Oregonians will listen**

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The state leader who shows the strongest evidence of a willingness to face hard choices about Oregon's future turns out to be the one who is best positioned to avoid those choices.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski soon will leave office, and he easily could leave the state's troubled finances in the hands of his successor and the Legislature. Instead, Kulongoski has surveyed the options for sustaining strong public services in the face of tight budgets and recommended a series of politically difficult steps toward fiscal stability. A hard-working lame-duck governor could be an asset, if Oregon will take advantage of it.

Kulongoski appointed a group of advisers he calls his Reset Cabinet last year, and he charged it with coming up with recommendations for slowing the growth in the cost of state government. The need for such a review has become apparent this year as a slow recovery and stubbornly high unemployment have resulted in downward revisions in state revenue forecasts.

Last Friday, the governor summarized the Reset Cabinet's recommendations in a speech to the Portland City Club. He warned that the results of the economic downturn will be so long-lasting as to require permanent changes in Oregon's public finances.

The Reset Cabinet's recommendations, now embraced by the governor, touch upon nearly every major category of state spending: Reduced funding for higher education, coupled with more autonomy for universities. Increased health care and pension contributions by public employees. Statewide collective bargaining for teachers. Changes in criminal sentencing laws to slow the growth of the prison population. More online courses and charter schools. A slower rate of growth in the cost of medical services for low-income people. A budgetary reserve fed by money that otherwise would be refunded to taxpayers under Oregon's "kicker" law.

Kulongoski can do little more than make these recommendations public. Acting on them is up to Oregon's current and prospective leaders. But the Legislature, which has the authority to approve budgets and adjust statutes, is not scheduled to meet until the next governor takes office, and it can avoid hard choices simply by doing nothing. The leading candidates for governor, Republican Chris Dudley and Democrat John Kitzhaber, will be inclined to respond only in vague terms, knowing that each of the Reset Cabinet's recommendations runs counter to the interests of a powerful constituency.

Yet the Reset Cabinet's recommendations are what this year's elections should be about. Candidates for the Legislature and for governor should be asked which of the recommendations they support — and how they would balance the budget if they reject a large number of the cabinet's ideas.

What's more, the state's current and prospective leaders should recognize the opportunity created by Kulongoski's willingness to step out front with a plan for long-term fiscal stability. If a consensus in support of any of the Reset Cabinet's recommendations can be found, they should be implemented during the current biennium. That would allow savings to be realized soon, reducing the need for the across-the-board budget cuts that otherwise would be needed to balance the current budget. Recommendations that produce a lower baseline for state spending — and most are intended to have this result — would yield larger savings if they can be put in place early.

Implementing any of the recommendations would carry a political price. Kulongoski is well-positioned to pay it: He'll leave office in January after a 40-year career in state government, during which he proved himself a supporter of strong public services. All projections show that the cost of those services cannot continue to grow at their former pace.

Kulongoski is offering to make cost-control his final legacy. Current and prospective lawmakers would be foolish to refuse the offer.

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