

May 3, 2021

To: House Committee on Health

From: Lee Mercer

Chair Prusak, co-chairs Hayden and Salinas and Committee,

The Oregon Senate passed a historic resolution this year, SJR 12, the "Hope Amendment," which would give the Oregon electorate the opportunity to vote on an amendment to the Oregon constitution declaring healthcare to be a fundamental right.

On Monday, May 3, you will debate this resolution. If you pass it, which I hope you will, voters will decide if the constitution will be amended to ensure that every resident of Oregon has access to cost effective, medically appropriate and affordable health care as a fundamental right.

In the debate over this constitutional amendment, the opponents most often cite that, though they believe in universal health care, they are afraid this addition to our constitution would be promising something Oregon cannot afford and the legislature can't deliver.

They cite the state budget shortfall, the rising cost of the state share of Medicaid and how the cost of health care might threaten funding for education and other needs.

But let's think for a moment about what is enshrined in a constitution. It should be the values and rights that we agree upon as a society.

Do we as Oregonians and Americans believe that health care is something that should be available to all? According to a Patinkin Research Strategies poll commissioned by Health Care for All Oregon, 77% of likely Oregon voters believe health care is a human right and only 19% don't

If our values tell us health care is a human right and we believe it is a value we need to strive to manifest in our state, should we put it in our Oregon Constitution? And should the cost of providing health care be a reason not to express our values?

When the founding fathers wrote the US constitution, had they sat down and figured out how they were going to pay for the rights enshrined in that document?

When they said "*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America,*" had they calculated all the revenue formulas for paying to provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty?

I don't think so.

So, as Oregonians, we should view SJR 12, the Hope Amendment, as a values statement that we believe everyone in our state should receive health care. And that, by voting for this measure, we are putting a stake in the ground saying this is where we want to go. And if we work together, having this goal set, we can make it happen.

But those who feel there isn't an affordable path to universal health care should be aware that there is work progressing to move this forward.

A study by the national RAND Corporation done for the Oregon Legislature under contract by the Oregon Health Authority, basically says a financing model is possible that would cover everyone in Oregon for what we are paying now. Restructuring our system to minimize administrative and healthcare costs would, of course, require state revenue, and some options on this are explored in the RAND study.

This year, the Joint Task Force on Universal healthcare is currently working to design such a system and will be bringing their recommendations to the legislature in June.

So if we as Oregonians believe health care is a human right, the time is ripe and appropriate to put a stake in the ground and vote for it when the Hope Amendment reaches our ballots! Please pass SJR 12 for the good of all Oregonians, and in the memory of Mitch Greenlick!

Lee Mercer

Lee Mercer is a retired business owner living in Silverton. He is Chair of the HCAO Business Engagement Committee and HCAO Marion County chapter and member of the executive team of Main Street Alliance of Oregon.