

The Oregonian

On stimulus, Wehby sells voters a bridge

By Dana Tims
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Monica Wehby, a Portland pediatric neurosurgeon, is seeking to unseat incumbent U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, a Democrat. The jabs they've traded so far include who would do a better job managing the economy.

Wehby, a Republican, took Merkley to task for recently reiterating his support for the Rebuild America Jobs Act. The bill, proposed in late 2011 by President Barack Obama, called for an immediate \$50 billion investment in roads, bridges, airports and transit systems.

The act died when Democrats failed to rally enough votes to overcome a Republican filibuster.

The claim:

Wehby described Merkley's vote for the act as "typical of a Washington insider like Senator Merkley."

Then she added this: "I would have voted no because this legislation would have cost the average American family \$1,000 a year while making no significant impact to fix our infrastructure and roads."

PolitiFact Oregon wondered about the cost figure and checked.

The analysis:

Wehby's criticism of Merkley's vote included the assertion that the "nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office's own analysis of the bill identified the cost of this legislation for every Oregon family to be \$958.40 per year..." We checked the CBO's website to see if that's what it found.

No such figure appears in the CBO's analysis of the Rebuild America Jobs Act. Instead, the one-page analysis estimated only that the act, if implemented, would have brought in \$56.7 billion in revenues through taxes, while spending \$56.5 billion for infrastructure projects. In other words, it would have been nearly revenue-neutral, according to the CBO.

We emailed Wehby's campaign. Her communications manager, Dean Petrone, wrote back saying that the \$958.40-per-year figure "is backed up by Jim Harper, director of Information Policy Studies at the Cato Institute."

We emailed Harper, who wrote that "it appears very likely" that Wehby got her number from WashingtonWatch, a policy analysis site he maintains in his spare time. (Harper, incidentally, said he considers WashingtonWatch to be a libertarian-leaning site.)

Harper faulted Wehby's claim on two counts.

The first involved the \$958.40 figure itself. In reality, he said, only half of that would come in the form of new taxes. The remainder really doesn't count since it's in the form of new spending. And while it could be argued that new spending amounts to a long-term debit, the CBO's own finding that the bill was budget-neutral negates that point.

His second point was that "average families" would not have borne the burden of any new costs because language in the bill made clear that it would be financed by a 0.7 percent surtax on millionaires.

"It's important and relevant to many ... that the incidence of the taxes would have been on relatively rich people," Harper wrote. "The \$500 in taxes would not have hit the "typical" American or Oregonian family."

The median household income in Oregon from 2008 through 2012 was \$50,036, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In fact, only about seven percent of all Oregon households made more than \$150,000 in 2012, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

The ruling:

Monica Wehby, in criticizing U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley's support of a major transportation spending bill, said the legislation would have "cost the average American family \$1,000 a year..."

The source the campaigned relied on, Jim Harper of the Cato Institute, for the figure said only half that amount could be attributed to new taxes imposed on any household. The rest would come in the form of new spending for infrastructure projects.

Harper acknowledged that the bill in question -- the Rebuild America Jobs Act -- contained language specifying that all costs would be financed by a 0.7 percent surtax on millionaires. Harper noted that any new taxes from the bill would not have affected the "typical American or Oregonian family."

Wehby's campaign attributed the original \$958.40-per-year figure to the CBO's "own analysis." When asked, the campaign said the figure actually came from a partisan political organization. The bill ultimately failed, but had it passed, it would not have cost the "average American family" a dime.

We rate the claim False.