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Capitol

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Thursday's ceremony will start at 5:30 p.m. Schoolchildren will perform a few songs and lead a sing-along. This year's theme is "Holidays in the Northwest."

Kulongoski and first lady Mary Oberst will be joined by Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus in throwing a switch that will light the Christmas tree and power a model train donated by Al Bennett of Salem. The train runs through a model of historic Salem laid out at the foot of the tree.

Afterward, children can pose with Santa for pictures, courtesy of Best Buy. Roth's IGA will supply refreshments.

The rotunda also will be the setting for music performances each day except Sundays over the next three weeks, starting with the Oregon Music Teachers Association at 10 a.m. Saturday under the direction of Deborah Butler of Silverton, and will close with Golden Flute at noon Dec. 21.

All performances are free.

The Capitol will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. the next three Saturdays: Dec. 1, 8 and 15. Music performances are scheduled for all those days. The Capitol normally is closed on weekends.

Two other events are scheduled.

OPEN HOUSE: Oregon authors will sign their books, music will be performed, and food and wine will be offered for tastings at the annual holiday open house from 4 to 7 p.m. Dec. 5 in the Galleria.

Among the authors this year will be Brent Walth, whose 1994 book "Fire at Eden's Gate" analyzes the

life of Tom McCall, Oregon's 30th governor, who served from 1967 to 1975. The book is out of print; the Capitol gift shop has arranged for about 30 copies.

Others scheduled to appear are Steve Arndt, "Roads Less Traveled," three books in a series; Peter Marbach, "Hood River Valley: Land of Plenty," "Mount Hood: The Heart of Oregon," and "Mount Hood: Portrait of a Place"; Jerry McGee of Keizer, "It's A Long Way to Oregon"; Grant McOmie, "Grant's Getaways," two different books; Christina Melander, "Pacific Northwest: The Ultimate Winery Guide"; Janis Miglavs, the photographer for that guide, and Pat Wilkins, "Somewhere in Eastern Oregon."

Music will be performed by Portland pianist John Nilsen at 4 p.m., by the choir from Central High School in Independence under direction of Jeff Witt at 5 p.m., and by the handbells and choir from Livingstone Adventist Academy of Salem under direction of Matthew Sandvik at 6 p.m.

The Capitol gift shop will offer 10 percent discounts during the open house.

Mia Sonatina Wine Cellars of Tualatin and Willamette Valley Vineyards of Turner will offer tastings starting at 5 p.m. Food tastings will be supplied by Campagna Flavors of Lebanon, Cherry Country of Rickreall, Karmel Country, Pacific Northwest Foods, Smothers Specialty Foods of Springfield and Tandra Truffles.

Others scheduled to be on hand

Schedule

Scheduled events for the 26th annual Holidays at the Capitol:

THURSDAY: Lighting of the Capitol tree, rotunda, 5:30 p.m.

SATURDAY: Start of holiday music performances, 10 a.m., rotunda. The Capitol is open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on three Saturdays: Dec. 1, 8 and 15.

DEC. 5: Holiday open house, 4 to 7 p.m., Galleria. Book signings, food tastings, gift sales and music performances.

DEC. 18: Salvation Army receives toys donated by state employees and presented by Gov. Ted Kulongoski, 3 p.m., Galleria.

Go to StatesmanJournal.com for a link to the Capitol's Web site, which lists holiday music performances from Dec. 1 to 21, including three Saturdays. Information: Capitol visitor services at (503) 986-1388.

are Neil Austin of Evergreen Woodworking, Shawn Baty of Oregon's Reflection, photographer Bernard Dorann III, and Randy Weitzel of Oregon Trail Soap.

TOY HANDOFF: Needy children in Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties will benefit from the thousands of toys that state employees will collect and hand over to The Salvation Army at 3 p.m. Dec. 18 in the Galleria. Gov. Kulongoski will take part.

Collected toys will be on display until then.

The toy drive, one of the major charitable activities of state employees, is in its 23rd year. Celeste Hari at the Public Utility Commission is the coordinator.

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Our Viewpoint

Benchmarks show progress, or lack thereof

Communities must unite to boost achievement

Here's a Web address worth memorizing: <http://benchmarks.oregon.gov>.

Http — as in Hypertext Transfer Protocol, a forgettable name but important abbreviation.

Benchmarks — measuring our counties' and our state's progress in improving education, the economy and our livability.

Oregon — the first state to adopt such an innovative system for measuring progress.

Gov — for government, and in this case for the connections between government and Oregon's livability.

This Web address matters even if you don't own a computer. You can use one at the library or ask a relative or neighbor to look up the benchmarks. You may be startled by what you find.

Oregon has 36 counties, as you

undoubtedly remember from your civics classes. Here's how Marion and Polk counties rank on several key indicators, with 1 being best and 36 being worst:

- Per capita income — Marion, 11; Polk, 13.
- Third-grade reading — Marion, 36; Polk, 27.
- High school dropout rate — Marion, 33; Polk, 20.
- Voting — Marion, 15; Polk, 26.
- Teen pregnancy — Marion, 31; Polk, 22.
- Child abuse — Marion, 25; Polk, 18.
- Poverty — Marion, 28; Polk, 6.
- Crime rate — Marion, 32; Polk, 29.

Those rankings should be enough to catch your attention. If not, there are plenty more.

In the late 1980s, Oregon was far ahead of the rest of the world in establishing benchmarks to chart societal progress. The Oregon Progress Board and its Oregon Shines reports have attracted attention in almost every state, as well as in China, Australia, Germany and other countries.

The Oregon Legislature has begun tying agency budgets to specific outcomes — to demand performance instead of handing out money based on agency promises.

That's a good start. But too few civic and business leaders heed these same

data, which are available at their fingertips. The data virtually scream for community leaders to take a collaborative approach to these issues.

As an example, consider the third-grade reading scores. As noted above, they're dismal in Marion and Polk counties.

If students can't read, they fall behind in school. If they fall behind, they are more likely to drop out. If they drop out, they are more likely to fall into crime or other anti-social behavior. If more people commit crimes, insurance and other costs rise for residents and businesses.

However, if Oregonians volunteer as reading mentors through SMART or other programs, young students get one-on-one help. If businesses encourage employees to volunteer as reading mentors, even more students get assistance. If more students learn to read — on grade level and with confidence — fewer students drop out. If fewer students drop out, more go on to trade school or college instead of falling into crime. If more get post-secondary training, they become better employees and are better able to support a family.

That's why these data matter. They give us a snapshot of where we've been and — unless we change our ways — where we're going.

The picture isn't always pretty.