

# Oregon has a few aches and pains as it turns 150 years old

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True confessions: I'm not a native Oregonian.

But I am a native Northwesterner; and after coming to Oregon for college in 1971, I stayed.

I didn't intend to. I expected to move around, working at progressively larger newspapers.

However, Oregon grows on you, and the Mid-Valley proved to be a wonderful place to raise a family. When job offers came from Washington state and Washington, D.C., from Las Vegas and the Midwest, I couldn't bear to make my family abandon Oregon.

But today I worry about the state I love. As Oregon celebrates its 150th birthday Saturday, here are six challenges:

## **Urban-rural divide**

It's actually more of a split between the Willamette Valley and the rest of the state.

People in the Portland-centric Willamette Valley don't appreciate the challenges facing rural Oregon, and vice versa. Too many Oregonians cling to outdated stereotypes of one another instead of recognizing our symbiotic relationships.

It's the geography of rural Oregon, from the stunning Columbia Gorge to the high deserts of the southeast and the secluded beaches of the coast, that builds the Oregon character. It's the taxes collected in urban Oregon that subsidize government services in rural Oregon.

## **Boldness vs. involvement**

Oregonians are passionate about public involvement. As a former Salem city councilor once said, Oregonians will let you do almost anything if you let them talk about it first.

Countless public officials, especially out-of-staters, have foundered because they didn't grasp that expectation. They naively, or smugly, assumed they were well-versed in public involvement and that what worked elsewhere would be sufficient in Oregon. Wrong!

I cherish that participatory democracy; I also fear that it inhibits bold action.

Certainly, many innovative ideas get talked to death. Interest groups can protect their turf by claiming there's been inadequate public discussion.

For example, the Chalkboard Project, for reforming schools, stands as one of the finest examples of public interaction in Oregon, maybe the nation. Thousands of Oregonians joined experts in evaluating Oregon's educational system and making cost-effective recommendations.

However, the Oregon Legislature and the education hierarchy have been slow to act. It's been left to small districts — places such as Albany, Tillamook, Sherwood and Forest Grove — to show bold leadership.

### **Hunkering down**

People have lost the concept of the common good. Selfishness has replaced selflessness.

Although this isn't merely an Oregon phenomenon, we have our own peculiarities. Only a few generations ago, communities subsisted on the family-wage jobs provided by the timber industry.

A breadwinner could make enough money to support his family and get home most days in time to participate in family, school or town activities. Those jobs provided a common reference point for the neighborhood, as well as philanthropy for community causes.

Our economy now is more diverse, which is good, but we've lost those common references.

### **Timber and habitat**

Isn't it time that we cease fighting about wilderness vs. logging?

Whenever a decision is reached, or a law is passed, someone challenges it in court (blaming the other side, of course).

My proposal: Provide certainty for all sides.

Define old-growth timber; declare it off-limits to logging. Establish final, inviolable borders for wilderness areas. Allow sustainable logging in other areas, heeding the Oregon Forest Protection Act and related laws. Define and allow salvage logging, but carefully monitor it.

Every five years, allow re-evaluation of forest rules and boundaries.

### **Brain drain**

Oregon has top-notch public universities; however, many of the brightest students leave Oregon, rarely to return.

Oregon's public tuition costs are outlandishly high and its financial aid abysmally low. For many students, it becomes cheaper to attend private college — whether in Oregon or in other states — than a public university. The private schools' greater financial aid more than compensates for their higher costs.

In my own family, our children were offered \$500 to \$1,500 scholarships at a state university. Out-of-state private schools gave \$12,500 to \$30,000 scholarships, which they accepted. Not surprisingly, they're now in Los Angeles and Tacoma.

### **Initiatives**

The initiative/referendum process was a brilliant idea in the early 20th century, when common citizens were responsible for collecting signatures to place ideas on the ballot.

Big money has defiled that process.

The courts have ruled that money is free speech. Anyone, or any cause, with enough money can hire signature gatherers and put an initiative petition before voters.

That process has created misguided laws and neutered the Legislature. And we wonder why bold ideas rarely emerge from Oregon anymore.

Is this the Oregon way? The Oregon we want?

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