

WALDEN

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the day with the 61-year-old congressman who lives in Hood River, when he's not in Washington, D.C., and has served as the representative of Oregon's 2nd Congressional District since 1999. He said the answer to the question of "Where's Walden?" is simple: He's here.

"I grew up in this district. I own a house (in this district)," he told The Observer as he sat in the Maridell Center, which turned its skating rink into a community room to host a campaign dinner for Walden on Oct. 11. "I think representing this district is more than just town halls."

Walden said despite not holding town halls currently, he still has been more than any member who has ever represented the district in the House (of Representatives).

"I've held 147 in the last six years and I continue to do tele-town halls (over the phone) where we reach 70,000 in the district collectively. I just approach it differently,"

Walden prefers holding roundtable discussions with the relevant parties who can speak to the issues that are the most important to those who live in the eighth largest district in the country.

"I'm about solving problems and getting things done, and this is the format I choose to (use)," he said.

He said he really put the brakes on town halls when they began to be "weaponized."

He said after the last election cycle the town hall process became ineffective when the gatherings turned combative.

There's a website, he said, where people can download a playbook on how to disrupt a town hall.

"We looked at (the playbook)," he said. "It diminished, in my view, the value (of holding town halls). They turned the policy discussions into a political rally (Town halls) held a value and I did them, and we may get back into doing them when we can get back to having civil discussions."

Walden said a key example of a negative town hall experience occurred in Bend.

"(The town hall) became hostile," he said. "It's okay for me (to get attacked). I don't like it, but it is what it is. (But) the things they said to people on my staff (upset them, and) that's not right."

According to Justin Discigil, Walden's communications director in Washington, D.C., "The level of discourse wasn't productive."

The opposition isn't just in Bend. Tucker Billman, the field representative for the La Grande office, said people have repeatedly taped signs that read "Where's Walden?" all over the office windows. The town halls in Union County were not absent of aggression either.

The congressman believes the participants who generally attend the town halls are the people he goes to see in his roundtables meetings. Veterans, the agriculture community and the like are who he visits and hears from.

Malheur County

A week ago, Walden began his day in Malheur County at the Veterans of Foreign

Wars building in Ontario, surrounded by vets from the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as some students and other members of the community.

He wore an American flag pin on his lapel and jeans, which he usually wears when he visits Eastern Oregon.

"We wouldn't have our freedom if not for you," he told the veterans in the audience at the end of the day. "It shouldn't take a congressman to get you something you were promised."

The meeting was then opened to questions. Medical physicians were in the audience and stressed how difficult it was to keep doctors — or even recruit them — at the VA.

Audience members told personal stories about the difficulties they face getting access to health care. Walden said his staff would get their information so they can follow up and hopefully help out.

"This is where you learn about what's working and what's not," he told the audience at the end of the meeting. "This is where I get my to-do list."

His "to-do" list was the general theme for his travels to Malheur, Baker and Union counties, and is the reason he holds his roundtable discussions.

Driving to Nyssa, Walden joked about the abundance of his political signs along the road. Discigil laughed and said he had not chosen this route to show The Observer how many supporters there were in Malheur County.

The previous meeting in Ontario was over before the allotted time so Walden, Discigil and Riley Bushue, his legislative director — who is from Boring and used to work in Ontario for Walden — decided to stop in at a local coffee shop in Nyssa before their scheduled visit to Snake River Produce, an onion shipping facility.

Walden said he was expecting a call from the Under Secretary of Energy, Mark Wesley Menezes, any minute.

According to the Secretary of Energy's website, the office maintains a safe and effective nuclear deterrent, reducing the threat of nuclear proliferation, and manages 17 national laboratories, among other things.

Menezes was supposed to give Walden a heads-up about an announcement later that day. Walden made small talk with the employees at the coffee shop and talked to a customer who recognized the congressman immediately. He sat at the booth, sipping his coffee until Menezes called, exactly on time.

While Walden was talking to Menezes, Discigil and Bushue sat quietly and casually drank their coffee. Discigil said Eastern Oregon is one of his favorite places to visit. He later told The Observer that before he started working for Walden, he hadn't known much about the congressman or Oregon.

"When I graduated from college, I was told when you find someone who is hardworking, humble and keeps his roots, you don't leave him," Discigil said. "(Walden) is a genuine person. He cares about the people in his district."

Walden never loses his

energy from the beginning of the day. He gives his all until the very end, Discigil said.

"He's able to give a voice to those who don't have one in Washington, D.C.," he said. "People claim he's lost touch, but I've been here for three years and can't imagine him being more in touch."

Billman, who stayed in Union County that day, said he knew he wanted to work for Walden when he was studying political science at UO.

"The fact that people accuse him of selling out is not true," Billman said. "He works for them every day."

As the second meeting of the day drew close, Walden and his companions and staff made their way toward the onion shipping facility. Walden pointed out several buildings that had been destroyed in the winter of 2016 and said he had come to see the damage after it happened. A couple of those buildings were owned by Snake River Produce and had been rebuilt, including the one the roundtable meeting was held in.

Walden sat in the middle of the group, his back to the window where, below, shelves of bagged onions waited to be shipped.

Kay Riley, the general manager of the business, updates Walden about some of their previous discussions. The congressman recalled some facts about onion growing, and Riley said he's impressed with Walden's knowledge on the subject.

The group, which included members of the agriculture community in Malheur County, began a discussion on trade agreements and, very much like the meat industry producers who were concerned with foreign imports, the onion growers said they're afraid they'll lose the industry.

They discuss the massive amounts of onions coming from Mexico and Peru, which impact the prices of the crops. If they don't level the playing field, they tell Walden, the next generation of farmers won't be able to sustain itself.

They also discuss what they see as the over-regulation of growing crops — more specifically keeping up with the standards the Clean Water Act requires for the water they use for irrigating their crops.

Walden said the strict water regulations are partly based on the fear of salmonella being transferred through the water to the onions. However, he said, there has never been a case of salmonella that was traced back to onions.

Several people at the roundtable asked Walden to deliver to Washington, D.C., their letters explaining the challenges and frustrations they face. They hoped the letters would be read and their voices would be heard.

Next, Walden toured the facility and saw how the onions are separated and packed. Riley has known Walden for years and has visited him in Washington, D.C., many times.

"He's one of a kind," Riley told The Observer.

Baker County

The meeting at Snake

River Produce put Walden and his staff a little behind schedule. Walden said they'd need to grab lunch to go if they wanted to make it to Baker City on time. On the drive back to Baker County, Walden listed the things he has to do over the weekend before he goes back to work, visiting editorial boards and returning to Washington, D.C. Mowing the lawn, laundry and clearing out the sprinkler system were on the list, he said, adding he wasn't looking forward to it.

He also said he had to be in Pendleton first thing the next morning to speak to the East Oregonian's editorial board, then he'd meet with The Oregonian's editorial board a few days later. He admitted sometimes he gets tired, just like anyone else would at their job, but he said he loves what he does.

"I get to every county (in the district) twice a year," he said. "The bigger counties I go to more often. I think I've been to Jackson County 10 to 12 times this year. I set this as a minimum threshold. And I have a full-time job in Washington. But it's a commitment I want to keep."

After barely getting to the meeting on time at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City, Walden sat in the staff lounge to talk with them about the opioid crisis.

To his right was Chuck Hoffman, the medical director for New Directors Northwest, Inc., who Walden said has been helping him a lot with the issue.

"We need to address this crisis," Hoffman told Walden. "Unless I have counselors with training, I can't do much."

One of the burdens the doctors face with patients with an opioid addiction is the lack of treatment services. Patients who want to seek treatment have to wait a month to get a placement in an appropriate facility. When a patient wants treatment, they need to be able to receive it immediately. It doesn't work to make them wait because they may change their mind, said Shad Thomas, clinical social work specialist at the hospital.

There's the added challenge of addicts who do not want treatment.

"It's a huge problem we're going to need to figure out," Walden said. "There's obviously a demand and need for (addiction treatment services)."

Thomas said when addicts are arrested, there are no services in place to help them get clean. Putting them in jail doesn't do any good, and the hospital doesn't have the resources to keep them there.

"We're putting Band-Aids on it and hoping it'll stick," he said. "We don't have anywhere to keep these people safe for a month (as they wait to get into treatment). We need people who understand substance abuse and mental health."

Thomas said the problem is only going to get worse. Hoffman agreed.

"It self-perpetuates," he said, adding he's seen generations within families

passing along the addiction.

Walden said there are very few times in this job where he has been able to say a bill will save lives. However, the Substance-Use Disorder Prevention That Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) bill he authored to help advance treatment and recovery may do just that. The bill was passed 396-14 in June and is aimed to fight illicit drugs like fentanyl.

After speaking with hospital staff, Walden, Discigil and Bushue headed to Cove for the most casual meeting of the day. Walden and his staff have been going from meeting to meeting for eight hours straight but show no signs of slowing down.

Union County

At Sharon Beck's home, Walden was surrounded by 12 community members. The small group of ranchers said they are competing with foreign producers who are allowed to put a United States Department of Agriculture sticker on their packaging.

"People make the assumption when they go to the meat section and see 'USDA' that the meat is from the United States," Walden said. "(Knowing) where the meat came from (is) important to the consumer."

Curtis Martin, who sits on the Board of the U.S. Cattleman's Association, said the labeling situation in the industry is worse now than it's ever been.

"We're asking for product identity," he said. "We want truth in labeling. We're looking at the genocide of agriculture (in the U.S.)."

Eventually, the conversation turned to a discussion of the congressman's current campaign and his opponent, Jamie McLeod-Skinner.

"She's raised more money than any of my (Democratic) opponents in the last 20 years combined," Walden said.

McLeod-Skinner, the Democratic challenger who currently lives in Terrebonne, has raised nearly \$1 million in her campaign against Walden, according to reports.

Walden repeated the opposition's claims that he's changed since taking office and has stopped working for the district.

"We've gotten a lot done," he told the group gathered in Cove. "Don't lose faith."

In the past, Walden has defeated each of his Democratic opponents by a large margin. In 2016, Walden received 71 percent of the votes. In 2014 and in 2012, he received nearly 70 percent of the votes.

Walden ended the Observer's ride-along with some final thoughts:

"At the end of the day, voters expect you to go and do the work," he said. "That's what I focus on. The results, I think, show that I'm doing that. I'm an Eagle Scout and I (learned to) leave the campsite better than I found it. I feel good (about the election). We ran out of lawn signs and needed more, and that's never happened (before). The people are energized."

ESCAPE

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"I think we're starting to pick up steam and people are beginning to understand what (escape rooms) are," Nitz said. "A lot of businesses are using them as team-building exercises."

La Grande Parks and Rec offered their first escape room experience in fall 2017, and given the spookier aspects of previous themes, Nitz set out to create a more whimsical experience this go-around to accommodate all ages. Upward of 120 people have tried to "escape" from each of the previous rooms, and with half that amount already signed up for "Oz," Nitz predicts this year's adventure will exceed past numbers.

"We're trying to expand our offerings to a wider audience. There's not a lot for college-age people, specifically, to do in this town," Nitz said. "This was something we thought would appeal to them, and a lot of community members ended up enjoying it too. The goal was originally to help incorporate students into the community, but it ended up being something for everybody."

In past rooms, staff have been able to observe groups from an adjacent room through mirror-filmed windows to ensure escapees are following the rules. With "Oz," however, a live actor will be in the room with participants as part of the experience and can give groups up to two clues to help them solve the puzzles. Groups can technically ask for more than two clues, though two is the limit to count toward an official solve.

It also helps to work with those you're familiar with.

"The room becomes easier if you know the people you're solving with because you know how to work together," Nitz said. "The reason it works so well for team building is because you're all working (with) a deadline and working together in small ways (toward) the same goal."

Escape rooms have become a popular American pastime over the last several years, with nearly 2,300 escape room facilities in the United States, according to USA Today. However, the experience is one not often found in Eastern Oregon.

"It's something different," Nitz said. "It's a little bit like going to the theater but getting to be involved. We don't often have a similar kind of experience here — there are very few things (designed) just for your group, specifically. This is more tailored."

La Grande Parks and Recreation is hosting the escape room Friday and Saturday nights through Nov. 10 at the Riveria Activity Center, 2609 Second St. Cost is \$15 per person, with a maximum of 12 people per group. Time slots start on the hour from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and participants are urged to schedule in advance at www.lagrandparks.org or 541-962-1352.

"Going in and being able to solve a puzzle is super satisfying," Nitz said. "I think the other draw is (a sense of) escapism — experiencing something brand-new and kind of stepping into a fantasy book — the experience of being in Oz."

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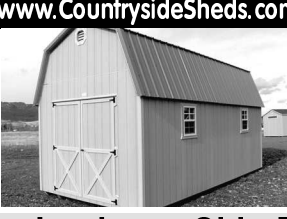
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