



GREG WALDEN TALKS ABOUT TOWN HALLS, AGRICULTURE

By **Cherise Kaechele**
The Observer, Oct. 19

Congressman Greg Walden tipped back in his chair, the windows behind him overlooking a part of the Grande Ronde Valley in a home in Cove. He's surrounded by members of the ranching community. They joke good-naturedly about Oregon State University's rivalry with his alma mater, the University of Oregon, where he earned a degree in journalism. The discussion shifts and the group begins to talk about their frustration with the meat market, where foreign-imported meat is monopolizing the industry.

He leans in. The light-hearted conversation has died and the roundtable meeting he came to Union County for has started.

While his opponent in the upcoming election claimed Walden is "afraid of people who are frustrated with him" during the pair's debate earlier in October, the incumbent said that's simply not true.

In October, The Observer spent 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 held 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 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 gener-

ally 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.

Union County

At Sharon Beck's home, Walden was surrounded by 12 community members. The small group of livestock farmers 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 campaign and his opponent, Jamie McLeod-Skinner.



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Congressman Greg Walden, left, participated in roundtable discussions in Eastern Oregon in October.

"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, raised \$1 million in her campaign against Walden.

Walden repudiated the opposition's claims that he's changed since taking office and 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."

Joseph voters could overturn ban on pot

By **Max Denning**
The Observer, Oct. 10

With less than a month until election day, residents of Joseph are preparing to vote on whether to legalize the sale of recreational marijuana. But even if residents decide to allow dispensaries into their town, an ordinance passed in 2015 will severely limit where such a business could be located.

In 2015, Joseph banned medical and recreational marijuana dispensaries in the city after the sale of recreational marijuana was legalized in the state following the 2014 general election. Cities and counties where more than 55 percent of voters voted against recreational marijuana legalization in 2014 were allowed to opt out of the sale of recreational marijuana. Joseph was one of 80 cities in Oregon that opted out.

In 2018, Sean Flanagan, owner of The Peace Pipe, which sells smoking paraphernalia in Joseph, and his partner, Michelle Kramer, collected the necessary signatures to get a measure on the ballot to overturn the ban on the sale of recreational marijuana in Joseph.

Medical marijuana facilities are currently banned by Joseph and are not a part of the current ballot measure.

In August, Kramer told The Observer the two main reasons she supports legalizing the sale of recreational marijuana: the benefits for medical consumers and

the potential tax revenue.

In addition to the ban, Joseph also passed a zoning ordinance in 2015 that put limitations on where a marijuana dispensary could go. According to the ordinance, a dispensary can't be located within 1,000 feet of a school, public park, public library, licensed day care center, community recreation facility attended primarily by minors, a sports facility attended primarily by minors or another marijuana dispensary.

With Joseph having a total area of only 0.88 square miles, this ordinance severely limits the prospects for where a dispensary could be located.

Mayor Dennis Sands said that was the point of the ordinance.

"It was an effort, if (marijuana was eventually) legalized, to minimize the number of outlets," Sands said.

He also said he doesn't want the city to resemble other places where marijuana is legalized.

"I don't want to be like Portland where it seems like there's a dispensary every other block," he said.

Sands and other city councilors created a to-scale map of the city and drew circles around locations where a marijuana dispensary would not be allowed. The commercial zones where a dispensary would be allowed are confined to three blocks on Main Street, including East Maple, Poplar and Daggett streets. Sands said there are not currently any available storefronts in

that area.

Kramer said she does think it is possible to open a dispensary in Joseph, even with the ordinance's limits.

"We have the flexibility of either building or working with established (buildings)," Kramer said. "We'll do what we can. We're just going to keep fighting until the building is there."

Dan Stein, who manages Stein Distillery, which is on Main Street north of Maple Street, said he is against having a dispensary anywhere in Joseph.

"I just think there are too many things out there to diminish people's senses," he said. "Why make it easier (to buy marijuana)?"

Stein said he didn't think having a dispensary in Joseph would affect the distillery's business, which sells handcrafted whiskey and other spirits, but was still against the idea of allowing legal marijuana in town.

Kramer noted she and Flanagan are willing to petition the city to change the zoning if they need to in order to open a dispensary.

Yet, before these zoning laws would even need to be considered, voters would have to overturn the ban. The mayor said he doesn't think they will.

"I think it will be voted down," Sands said.

Kramer said she is hopeful the ban on marijuana in Joseph will be overturned.

"I'm hoping, that's all I can say," she said with a laugh. "I really have no idea. It's up to the people. It could go either way."

Faith community responds to shooting

By **Cherise Kaechele**
The Observer, Oct. 31

After 11 people were shot and killed at the Tree of Life synagogue on Oct. 27 in Pittsburgh, local churches are emphasizing a message of love and hope — but also talking about how they can protect themselves.

"We're a people of love and hope — not of hate or division," said La Grande Methodist Pastor Al Trachsel. "Our best armor is the armor of love. We can remain hopeful."

Trachsel said the synagogue shooting will spark a conversation with his congregation about what they would like to see regarding possible safety measures.

"I abhor the idea of having armed guards in church," he said. "It's (the) eternal question of 'What would Jesus do?' My suspicion is he wouldn't get an AK-47."

He said he's envisioned the nightmare of having a shooter walk into his church many times before.

"I hope my faith is not challenged," he said. "Should such a disaster befall us, we can only pray for forgiveness."

Robert Bowers was the sole gunman in the Pittsburgh shooting, which lasted 20 minutes and injured six, including four police officers. He walked into the synagogue and was shouting hate for Jews, according to a USA Today article.

Father Saji Thomas of Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church in La Grande said his congregation prayed for the victims and their families.

"Life is important — it's a gift from God," Thomas said. "Hate is spreading all over the country."

He said strangers come through the doors of Our Lady of the Valley all the time and it's always a concern that something may go wrong.

Thomas said he's been talking to members of his church who may be willing to monitor the door and those who enter the church as a security measure on Sundays. He said he believes there are previous military personnel who may be willing to fight if the need arises.

The leaders are responsible for protecting the members of the church, and Thomas plans to talk to the parishioners to see what they would like to do.

In Island City, Faith Center's acting lead pastor, Jeffrey Forbes, said the idea of a shooting in the church weighs heavy on his mind.

"We have to recognize the world we live in," he said. "We live in a broken world."

He said the problem is not a political issue, but a heart issue. Violence stems from hate. Someone doesn't decide overnight that they're going to kill people, he said.

While no one can predict what is going to happen, he said he has to trust God is in control. The church's leaders have a moral obligation to protect those who worship at Faith Center, though, and they have talked to law enforcement — including officers who attend the church — on how best to keep the church safe.

"Do we need to get armed

guards? Metal detectors?" Forbes asked, adding those measures are unlikely to happen. "There should be safety measures taken, but what's the answer?"

Forbes said one challenge is finding a balance between taking necessary precautions without responding out of fear.

He said he doesn't have the answer but he knows he doesn't want to operate out of fear.

"We should be asking ourselves, in our community, how do we love people?" he said.

As local faith communities grapple with these questions, Tree of Life has received some hope and support from other religious organizations. A Muslim-focused crowdfunding site raised more than \$50,000 to help the victims of the shooting and their families within a few days of the shooting. It surpassed the \$25,000 goal within six hours of posting, and in less than 24 hours reached \$50,000.

"We recognize that the money can't bring back loved ones that (families) have lost so tragically, nor can it physically heal any of the wounds," said Tarek El-Messidi, the founding director of CelebrateMercy, one of the two nonprofit organizations that organized the fundraiser, according to a TIME magazine article. "But we do hope the money can in some way lift their spirits, lift the burdens of funeral expenses and medical costs."

Forbes said in times of tragedy and adversity, the faithful must "rise up and be driven by love and not fear — to stand firm. It'll give people hope."

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

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