



Across the Fence

What does Union County need to do to fully participate in a sustainable economy?

'If we don't participate in the decision process, we will be its victims'

A pig farm near Island City? A pesticide plant outside of Union? Not every new business proposal is a good one, and our economic choices affect us every day. If we don't participate in the decision process, we will be its victims.

Always ask, "Who benefits? How does this project make this a healthier, safer, more integrated community?" Obviously we need projects that enrich Union County, not out-of-state corporations. We're still recovering from Walmart's assault on our downtown businesses.

The Thriving Places Index, recently developed in England, goes beyond the flaws of the GDP, which considers only goods and services exchanged for money. It measures sustainability, equality and local conditions based on three questions:

- Is it a fair and equal place to live?
- Is it sustainable enough so that future generations can flourish?
- Are the conditions present for everyone to do well?

How would Union County rate? Without focus on sustainability, we can be sure that future generations will not flourish, and success will not be measured by economic vitality alone. It will include a healthy environment and a welcoming, interconnected diverse community.

What do we need? Job opportunities that improve the environment: sustainable agriculture, vocational training in skills needed to build affordable housing and to upgrade homes and buildings with energy-efficiencies, development of green energy sources, stream rehabilitation and forest thinning projects.

Subsidies for local individuals who have a skill, a talent or a passion to share with us. Incubator business plans have been offered. They need to be developed and supported.

Plans to shelter and feed hundreds of refugees from the western side of the state in the event of a massive earthquake. That will also assure essential resilience in the face of local natural disasters or toxic spills.

What do we value? Our beautiful natural setting and the wonderful facilities that make living here so pleasant: the university, theaters, restaurants, farmers market, museums, art center, bookstores, libraries, hospital and public services. None of these comes without a cost.



LOIS BARRY
UNION COUNTY
PROGRESSIVES/ DEMOCRATS

We should willingly support them through our taxes and our patronage.

Get to know your county. Stop by non-profit offices. You'll be impressed by all their activities and projects; perhaps you'll want to volunteer. Attend city and county meetings; elected officials need to hear from you. Explore the local shops. They usually offer far more than their signs indicate. It's fun to chat with owners and staff. Whether they've been here for decades or just started up, they're dedicated to providing the best service or products. They care about us. Amazon doesn't. Shopping locally brings us together, and that helps us flourish as a community.

We thrive when people volunteer their time and money for projects like the Elgin Opera House and the Elgin Health Center. We wouldn't have the Cook Memorial Library or the Liberty Theatre without generous citizens who invested in the community rather than the stock market.

Unlike many rural communities across the U.S., Union County isn't declining. Our population is growing at a measured rate, surely the envy of people who moved to Bend 20 years ago. We live in a beautiful natural area, unpolluted by major industries, with vast areas open for recreation. We have a wealth of talented, competent people. Retirees are moving here and young professionals are setting up new practices.

Union County is on its way to economic sustainability, and global challenges are creating opportunities for sustainable economies that we can't afford to ignore. What were the county's priorities 10 years ago? Be an informed citizen. Google UCEDC Publications, dive into the 2009 Strategic Plan and read pages 103-106.

We need volunteers and activists to share their skills and experience, to cooperate and develop a new set of priorities, work on them together. We can avoid past errors and build on our successes to create a new economic vision for Union County.

Lois Barry is a member of the Union County Progressives / Democrats and a retired English faculty member from Eastern Oregon University, La Grande.

'Look for ways to encourage creativity, support novelty and promote courage'

It seems there are as many ways to interpret this question as there are to answer it. The word "fully" calls for a measurement we would likely never agree upon. "Participate" requires we ask who is concerned — county residents or some larger group? And "sustainable." What does this word mean?

Let me begin with an opinion: A county, city or state is no more than a reflection of its population. This being the case, our county government must look first to the real rather than hypothetical, felt, as compared to imagined, needs of its citizens.

Our economy is the wealth we've created and the means by which we employ wealth (mental, physical and resource based) to generate more for ourselves and others. Our economy is only indirectly the concern and never the responsibility of government.

If Union County's primary duty is concern for the needs of the population, county government would do well to develop strategies that support our ability to produce and trade, all with a minimum of restrictions.

This is not to say that considerations of access and supply never benefit from oversight. But oversight and restriction often consume too much government attention, thereby too much of our economy. Add to this, there are larger, more interesting concerns.

The many fortunate circumstances that underlie a healthy economy cannot be ensured. They can be studied and, in some cases, understood. They must continually be re-evaluated as the physical world and societies change. Some call this examination "future proofing."

Future proofing attempts to look over the hills and around the corners of time and circumstance. Future proofing could be called an investigative consideration of the now-real and the future-possible. Future proofing considers that things do not stay the same, that changes may likely be to our benefit and occur for reasons known or suspected but, often, not known at all. Most important, in the face of uncertainty, future proofing is an affirmation of the human spirit's adaptability — our ability to encounter change and thrive.

By comparison, when the word "sustainable" is used, I hear the fearful voices of those who would tell me the resources we have now must be forever preserved to



TOM CARROLL
UNION COUNTY REPUBLICANS

ensure a life similar to but probably less fun than the one we've created. How unimaginative. How very unhelpful.

What does future proofing suggest citizens of Union County will do between now and some unspecified future date? Much! So many things that can't be adequately described because for the most part, they've yet to be imagined and created.

Sustainability is an illusion, as nothing — literally nothing — is sustainable for more than some limited time. This earth is always changing, as are we, the individuals who spend a little time here.

By comparison, future proofing is a term that recognizes life's promise to always find a way forward. The landscape may change. The people who see and participate with it certainly will be different. What will not change is life, its relentless reach for the good, the true and the beautiful. However much things change, "things" will be good, and we will make them better. Life and we, her children, insist upon it.

Grand as this sounds, why can't Union County be part of all this? As stated above, it can, we can, and in so many ways we're already doing them.

But looking back at the original question — "What does Union County need to do to fully participate in a sustainable economy?" — this sounds more like word-salad than a way to help us, as a county, to face the inevitable, always exciting changes happening even as I write this.

But again, the question: What does Union County need to do...? Our county would do well to continue its support of law and order, transportation, public health and many other important things that don't readily come to mind. But we should continue to look for ways to encourage creativity, support novelty and promote courage in the face of inevitable change.

Other than these? Not very much at all, I think.

Tom Carroll has been a La Grande resident since 1959 and a member of the Union County Republicans. He enjoys coffee but dogs not so much.

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Phone: 541-963-3161
Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214
Fax: 541-963-7804
Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com
Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com
Street address: 1406 Fifth St., La Grande

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