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Opinion

Editorial Board

Publisher
Mike O'Brien
opinions@capitalpress.com

Editor
Joe Beach
Online: www.capitalpress.com/opinion

Managing Editor
Carl Sampson

OUR VIEW

Incoming Portland mayor offers hope for rural Oregon

Portland Mayor-elect Ted Wheeler could be one of agriculture's best friends in a city that has over-sized influence on Oregon's vast rural expanses.

We've written often on the divide between urban and rural America. The divide between Portland and rural Oregon is a chasm.

Farmers and ranchers may not fully appreciate Portland's importance as a market and a hub of vital services. But there's no mistaking Portland's willingness to push its agenda on farming practices, labor, economic development and the environment on its rural neighbors.

It's a problem.

"What can agriculture do," the



Ted Wheeler

Oregon Farm Bureau's Dave Dillon asks, "to better connect with city government and thought leaders who seem to have insularity and sometimes utopian vision of food

production that does not match the marketplace and the demands of a growing world population?"

In Wheeler rural Oregon may have a partner in Portland. His family made its money in the timber industry. He appreciates the urban-rural divide and urban-rural interdependence.

"You can't talk about success

in the agricultural industry without talking about the role urban areas play," he said. "Urban communities in America are increasingly clueless about the challenges facing rural communities."

And though Wheeler is sincere and earnest on the subject of the urban-rural divide, it's not the biggest problem he faces. Not by a long shot.

The police bureau is in turmoil — chronically understaffed, mistrusted by many residents, plagued by poor morale. There are miles of city streets that are still unpaved, and many more miles of paved streets that need repair.

As people flock to Portland in costume and in character to

become part of the city's quirky, offbeat fabric, they find rents are sky high and vacant housing hard to come by. Any development nixed outright by strict land-use policies will almost certainly be opposed by vocal activists.

Then there are the homeless — 4,000 largely substance-addled or mentally ill souls who have overwhelmed both the services available to help them and the patience of a town that prides itself on tolerance. Their situation is desperate and tragic.

Portland's situation is made more difficult because solutions to these and a host of lesser problems must be crafted, spun, bent and twisted — perhaps beyond recognition — with care so as not to offend the

sensibilities of a wide variety of progressive interests that will take to the streets at the drop of a hat.

Wheeler's plate is full. If he could get more of Portland's activist class to focus on the city's problems instead of exporting their agenda to rural Oregon everyone would be better off.

From our distant vantage, Wheeler seems the best choice Portland has made in recent years. He's a smart guy, a sensible choice for voters who often prefer the unconventional.

Though we won't know for sure until he takes office in January, Wheeler seems like someone agriculture can work with to advance both rural and urban interests.

OUR VIEW

Oregon forest land trust timeline

1929 — Until 1929, tax-foreclosure lands (typically harvested forest-lands) were passed on to the counties, rendering them untaxable and resulting in a financial crisis for counties.

1929-39 — Laws passed to allow conveyance of land to state in exchange for management and distribution of revenues.

• Additionally, legislature modified tax laws for forestlands.

1939-51 — State promotes conveyance of cutover land to be managed in trust for the counties.

• Current state forestland base conveyed to state.

1986 — Tillamook 1: Court case establishes that a protractable interest exists between the state and the forest trust counties and that counties have enforceable rights related to land management.

1994-2001 — State hosts public meetings to explain how forests will be managed and considers strategies for management.

1998 — Board of Forestry establishes that state forests don't need to be managed primarily for revenue, creates a new statutory definition for "greatest permanent value" (GPV) to guide all future management activities.

2001 — Northwest State Forest Management Plan adopted. Within months Oregon Department of Forestry identified that its faulty modeling data would result in a 50 percent reduction in actual versus projected harvest levels. State decides to implement anyway, resulting in the counties being deprived of at least \$35 million due each year from 2001-15.

2005 — Tillamook II: Court case affirms that a contract

exists between state and forest trust counties and that state has contractual responsibilities to counties.

Today — Both counties and ODF are losing money on state forest management and the situation is projected to get worse over time.

Source: Linn County, Ore.



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

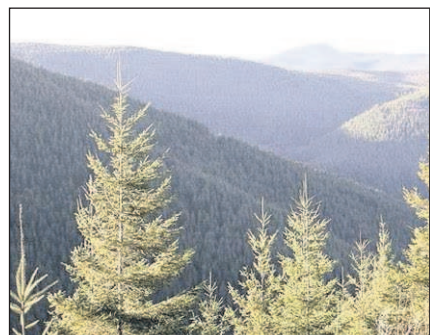
State of Oregon owes counties

Across the West, rural counties, school districts and local governments that once depended on natural resources such as timber have been slowly sinking into a sea of red ink.

The problem: State and federal land managers have unilaterally changed the rules of how natural resources are managed. The result has been less economic activity such as logging, leading to ever-tighter local budgets. Those local governments and school districts once shared the revenue from timber cut on public lands. Now they receive only a small fraction of what they previously received.

Those who defend the change in resource management say those counties and school districts should just pass special tax levies to cover the shortfalls. Such statements reflect their ignorance about the economy of the rural West. If logging is the primary economic activity and it is curtailed, then a tax levy will not cover the shortfall. People collecting unemployment insurance cannot afford higher tax bills.

This argument is playing out in a courtroom in Albany, Ore., where Linn County officials are suing the state for \$1.4 billion they and 14 other counties have been shorted since 1998.



According to Linn County's lawyers, that's the year the state changed the way it manages Forest Trust Lands. The counties gave those timber lands to the state to manage on their behalf.

Under the change, instead of managing the timber to produce revenue, the state decided to manage it for other objectives — without the counties' consent.

During a hearing last week, the state's lawyers essentially tried to duck the question of whether the state owes the counties any money. They talked about "greatest permanent value" — whatever that means — and that the statute doesn't require "revenue maximization."

What they didn't argue is whether the state has a moral and ethical obligation to manage those lands in a way that doesn't leave the counties and school districts broke.

It should be noted that across the West, the federal government has

also done its best to squeeze natural resource companies out of business. In many rural areas, where once a thriving timber industry existed, there remains only abandoned mills or a mill operating at a fraction of its capacity. The only mills that remain profitable are those that own timber and don't depend entirely on government timber sales.

This is a direct result of federal managers — Uncle Sam owns most of the land in the West — deciding to shut down or vastly reduce logging in many areas.

With the state of Oregon managing timber land for "greatest permanent value" and the federal managers tightening the timber supply, rural counties and school districts have suffered financially.

Instead of ducking this lawsuit, we'd like to see the state's lawyers argue in open court that precious few bigwigs in state government care one bit about rural communities. We want them to argue that the trees — a renewable resource — are more precious than rural economies. We want them to tell the judge that it's more important to the state of Oregon to protect as many trees as its managers see fit, no matter the impact on rural Oregonians.

Of course, they won't say that outright, but that's what they mean.

The rest of the story of a county's threat to farmland

By **BEN WILLIAMS**
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Ben Williams



As a long-time subscriber, I say "kudos" to the Capital Press for publishing Eric Mortenson's article on farmland development in Clackamas County (Conservation district fights farmland development, July 8).

One county within Metro Portland, Ore., is a small part of the Capital Press' publishing coverage, but this a story that merits consideration. Eric captured the essence of the matter: A local Soil & Water Conservation District is asking, "What is going on?" And their concern is loss of irreplaceable farmland.

The devil is in the detail, or as Paul Harvey used to say, in "the rest of the story!" This story has four or more chapters, and the first has to do with campaign contributions — but let's skip the gory details for now.

The second has to do with the reference to "an economic study by a consulting firm, Johnson Economics and Mackenzie, that said the county is short between 329 and 934 acres of industrial land and up to 246 acres of commercial land, and there is an overall shortage of up to 1,180 acres over the next 20 years."

Guess who hired the consulting firm and engaged them to do the study: The Clackamas County commissioners! They got the results they were looking for, and then they used the results of the study to issue a new county strategic plan in late 2014 which defined the need for employment lands and other development, but never involved any of the cities in the county or any of the Community Planning Organizations within the county in the process or in the roll out of the new strategic plan.

Hire a consulting firm, get a study, issue a new strategic plan. Very efficient, right?

As if that wasn't enough, one year later, after publicly and privately playing a game of chicken with Metro (metro Portland's tri-county planning body) by holding up the finalization of the Urban/Rural Reserves designations, they appropriated almost half a million dollars to "re-study" the Rural Reserves.

This was presumably a settled matter, but their argument was that the county was short of "employment lands," and the basis for the assertion? The study they had commissioned a year earlier.

To add insult to injury, on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the Fourth of July holiday weekend they held open houses on the question of employment lands and re-studying the Rural Reserves to "seek public input."

The shocker was that none of the three cities within the county in which the meetings were held — Canby, Wilsonville and Estacada — were

given the courtesy of being notified of the meetings, nor was there any normal public notice. Only the property owners immediately adjacent to the areas of study received a notice.

The mayor of Canby attended the Wilsonville meeting on Tuesday evening because he didn't find out until Tuesday morning about the meeting in Canby on Monday evening.

What's the fuss? If ag land is rezoned for development and the local cities have to provide the infrastructure like water, sewer and roads, what's the big deal?

The fact is that Metro and others have put the "facts" on the table. There is more than enough "employment lands" within Metro and within Clackamas County to meet the development requirements of Oregon's land use laws (a 50-year supply).

The problem is that those employment lands aren't where Chair Ludlow and Commissioner Smith want them. And, those employment lands aren't owned by their major campaign contributors. So, this is crony capitalism at its best, compounded by a blatant attempt to avoid public involvement.

So then, the Soil and Water Conservation District's concern is first and foremost one about what's missing: transparency and public accountability.

The consequence of that, in this case, is the loss of irreplaceable farmland. And, these kinds of shenanigans probably aren't just going on in one Metro County in Oregon.

Ben Williams of Aurora, Ore., is president of Friends of French Prairie, a land use advocacy group in the north Willamette Valley that works to preserve farmland and promote local farming.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agrifood community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.

Readers' views

Verner backed for public lands commissioner

Commissioner of public lands elections typically receive little attention. Yet the actions of the commissioner of public lands dramatically impacts our lives every summer during fire season.

Mary Verner is the former

mayor of Spokane. She is the only candidate for commissioner of public lands with executive branch experience.

Furthermore, Mary has served as deputy for wildfire and administration with the Department of Natural Resources for the last three years. She will not need two or three years of on-the-job training. Mary would be ready to hit the ground running the day she is sworn in.

Washington has suffered back-to-back record fire seasons due to exceptionally hot and dry summers. Mary Verner has worked tirelessly with fire chiefs and other officials to address the daunting challenges faced by the fire service and those affected by wildfire.

She has earned the respect of fire service professionals around Washington. She has solid roots in rural Washing-

ton. Mary Verner is the only candidate with experience who understands our needs first-hand.

Please join me and fire service professionals around Washington, and vote for Mary Verner, commissioner of public lands.

*Thomas R. McGarry
Commissioner,
Spokane County Fire
Protection District No. 9
Spokane, Wash.*