

Opinion / Local

— GUEST OPINION —

What did the SOS do?

By Dennis Richardson

Being out of politics this past year has given me time to reflect on my time in the Legislature, reconnect with family and friends, and recharge my spirit through volunteer work in the community. The journey I've been on has been one marked with creating new relationships and building a deeper understanding of just how difficult life is for some of our neighbors.

Whether it's been helping people find jobs or serving someone a hot meal, I find that the challenges in our state haven't gotten better. For many, they've gotten worse. Housing prices may have rebounded since the Great Recession and unemployment rates in certain sectors may have decreased, but these indicators are masking what's really happening in Oregon. Far too many Oregonians are accessing social service programs and face hunger insecurity. I serve on the Board of Directors for ACCESS Food Share and I've seen first-hand how the demand for food and shelter continues to grow. Great work is being done by dedicated individuals across our state to help alleviate suffering and want, but it's not enough.

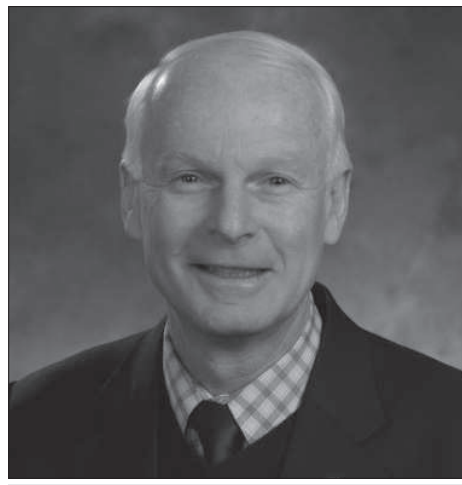
The work Cathy and I have been doing to help individuals prepare for and get jobs has reminded us that poverty may be statistical in the State Capitol, but it's a real life problem for the people who are suffering without a good income.

Let me tell you about a man named Jermaine. It had been more than a decade since he graduated from high school, yet he had never had real employment. When I saw Jermaine last January, he saw himself as a failure without even the basic skills needed to get a job. He was depressed and felt like no one would hire him.

Like so many job-seekers in Jermaine's situation, he needed a mentor and an opportunity. It was a pleasure for me to help him realize he had value and was worthy to be hired at an entry level job. I brought coins to the office and taught Jermaine how to make change so he could qualify for a job working for a fast food establishment. I helped him prepare a clean, one-page resume and coached him on interviewing skills. Eventually, Jermaine stood a little taller, had a successful interview and got hired. He has now been on the job for nearly six months. The pay is a starting wage, but Jermaine's self-worth has never been higher. As a result of working, he now helps his mom with the family bills, and someday, I hope he'll take the next step and move up the economic ladder. Jermaine is learning what it means to have a budget and not spend more than he earns.

Unfortunately, the State of Oregon, with its \$69 billion 2015-17 State Budget, still hasn't learned such a basic lesson. In the past ten years Oregon spending has increased significantly, while our educational system has too many drop-outs and sends too many high school graduates out the door without sufficient skills and guidance to go on to higher education or, like Jermaine, to even get a basic, entry-level job.

We know too few of our education funding dollars are reaching the classroom, so where is all of the money going if not to educate students? The Oregon legislature has projected more tax revenue than ever, yet we are told Oregon is going to be facing a multi-billion dollar budget hole in 2017-19,



Submitted Photo

Dennis Richardson is a former State Representative who ran for governor in the last election. He is considering a run for Secretary of State.

largely driven by rising PERS and healthcare costs. Focusing beyond the budget, we should look to another culprit of financial mismanagement—the on-going corruption and waste of hundreds of millions of precious tax dollars that could be used to educate our youth and help prepare them with the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century economy.

For example, recently we've read in *Willamette Week* and *The Oregonian* about sweetheart deals benefiting certain wealthy tax-credit brokers who have been abusing the tax credit system. The articles tell of how Oregon's Department of Energy (D.O.E.) which is in charge of administering hundreds of millions in Business Energy Tax Credits, showed favor to one tax credit broker, giving his firm a huge discount while all the other brokers paid full-price.

When pushed by reporters to respond, what explanation did the D.O.E give? Silence. The D.O.E. did what we've become accustomed to over the years of one-party rule. They went straight into cover up mode and tried to pass a rule that would have been retroactive to July 1, 2012.

The Secretary of State told *The Oregonian* that while her office was looking into the situation, there was not going to be an official audit of the D.O.E. What is apparent in the post-Kitzhaber era is that very little has changed. Public officials continue to avoid accountability and the Democratic leadership team in the legislature continues to block ethics reforms.

The business practices at the D.O.E warrant a full audit. Instead, the Secretary of State and agency officials just hope the taxpayers won't notice and that these issues can simply be swept under the carpet.

Few Oregonians realize Oregon's Secretary of State (SOS) has the assignment to be the watch-dog over the people's tax dollars. The SOS has had the ability to audit and expose hundreds of millions in waste by state agencies. Instead, Oregon is a favorite foil of late-night comedians, who ridicule our state for its growing list of expensive failed projects. Oregon's Secretary of State should do better. That's not how we want our state to be known.

I've asked myself repeatedly, why didn't the Secretary Of State empower her team of auditors to properly oversee and stop the Cover Oregon debacle before more than \$250 million was wasted? How much could have been saved from the \$175 million wasted on the Columbia River Crossing bridge project or the \$70 million on the failed DHS Modernization Project? Better oversight by the SOS on those and many other projects could have warned the Governor and Legislature of the impending failures.

So, the question remains unanswered, "Who's watching out for the people of Oregon?"

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— GUEST OPINION —

Graffiti and gangs: the correlation

By Jerry Boyd
Special to The Baker County Press



Submitted Photo

Jerry Boyd is a retired Chief of Police who during his career worked in areas where gangs were well established.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," some say.

True, except when it comes to informal "art" like graffiti.

Living in a town like Baker City where "nothing bad ever happens" we are often lulled into complacency regarding those things which, elsewhere, have proven to be detrimental to quality of life and safety.

The temptation to ignore something as innocuous as graffiti is compounded when the city in which it occurs was ranked "safest in Oregon" in 2014 and when people fail to understand the nexus between graffiti and gang related crime.

That's a stretch you might say.

Baker City has no gangs. True, and I'd like to see it remain that way. Baker City has no established gangs for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is a concerted effort by local law enforcement to keep gangs out. But to think we do not have the potential for gang activity is to bury one's head in the sand. And to think that there is no connection between seemingly harmless "art on a wall" like "Movie Rat" behind the Eltrym Theater and gang graffiti is to fail to understand the connection.

Baker City does have the potential for gangs. We are bracketed by cities in Malheur and Umatilla Counties which have them and wish they didn't. Those folks travel through Baker on I-84 and stop here.

We have a prison in town. It houses some folks with strong street gang affiliations.

Friends and families of those incarcerated, also with gang affiliations, migrate to our town and stay for the duration of their inmate's incarceration.

Over the past year the police department has had much success in attacking the drug problem, which undeniably exists in Baker City. It is a battle that is far from over, and one our citizens wish to see continued. Drugs and gangs are inexorably wedded together.

The sources of the heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine we see on our streets are gangs.

Among the drug dealers sentenced to state prison from Baker County over the past several years are those with gang connections.

So how is spray paint "art" like "Movie Rat" related to the potential

proliferation of gangs in our community? It's really very simple and easily understood by those who have seen how gangs operate in other communities.

Any, I repeat, any graffiti on walls, doorways, or sidewalks visible to passersby are an invitation to gang members to add their "tags."

Those tags tell others in the gang world that this is their territory. It is nothing more than a challenge to those from other gangs to block out the graffiti they see and replace it with their own.

In addition to being unsightly and a nuisance to remove, gang-related graffiti causes tempers to flare. Violence on the part of opposing gang members is an inevitable result.

Not good for any community I think you'd agree.

So, again, what is the nexus between "Movie Rat" and gang graffiti?

Unbeknownst to some, before it was removed, on the same wall adjacent to "Movie Rat" was a gang tag that referenced a particular "set" of one of America's most violent gangs: the Crips. Yes, it was removed, but until "Movie Rat" is as well, it will serve as an invitation to other gang-banging taggers.

There is some thought being given to modifying the existing anti graffiti ordinance. Why?

The existing code and the manner in which it is enforced are entirely fair and reasonable. Property owners are given more than adequate time to remove graffiti and the services of the Baker County Juvenile Department are available to assist in that regard.

Overreaction to a nonexistent problem may be your reaction to what I have written.

Based upon experience elsewhere, my response is that an ounce of prevention is much more desirable than a pound of cure.

True, because if gangs become established—and graffiti is the first step in that process—getting rid of them is almost impossible to accomplish.

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Published weekly every Friday.
Subscription rates per year are \$29.95 all areas,
e-mail delivery. \$39.95 print issue, home delivery,
Baker City city limits only. \$49.95 print issue,
mail delivery, outside Baker City city limits only.
Payment in advance.

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