



Publisher's Notebook

Matt Winters • October 2021

Pace of change puts a premium on local control

Little did I realize when studying regional economics in college 40 years ago that it would become a lifelong fascination. Although my math abilities fell short of pursuing an advanced degree, I still care very much about the simple realities of how entire communities fit together to create prosperity.

As a longtime observer of the ways in which local people make money, feed our families and keep roofs over our heads, the past 30 years have seemed a time of transformation mixed with occasional spells of near-stagnation. Economies all undergo times of turmoil as different industries rise and fall, as populations grow and change, and as factors like government policies interfere or encourage different activities.

Changes have been piling up for those who live around the mouth of the Columbia. Technology transformed forestry. Dams, mismanagement and deteriorating ocean conditions decimated fisheries. Tourism and retirement living gradually expanded to become major and nearly year-round sources of local income.

And then the pandemic came along, accelerating changes that might otherwise have taken another decade or more to play out. Suddenly, some non-urban settings like ours are viable places to work remotely. Tourism has set record after record as people have sought out nostalgic family

fun. Even some traditional industries have been doing alright, such as wood products benefiting from a surge in prices and home building.

Our amazing scenery, deep history and other advantages — like a lively arts scene and delicious food — are uncommon assets not shared by many rural places. Together, they ensure certain kinds of success. But at the same time, our increasing popularity is driving up housing costs. Other counter-currents for the economy include a relatively small workforce, many who find it increasingly difficult to afford a place to live.

Those who already own homes here get some satisfaction from seeing prices rise, but this is tempered by concern about property taxes and the ways in which younger family members have paths to home ownership blocked. I've watched Clatsop County prices climb from \$539,000 this April to \$721,000 in September. Meanwhile, average home selling prices in south Pacific County only hit about \$400,000 late this summer, but that's more than double what they were at the start of the pandemic. Some local communities are close to no longer being places where many actual local people can afford to live. Just one example: the 11 Cannon Beach houses that sold in September went for an average of more than \$1.6 million.

Employers in all our towns have to compete for workers who have to pay higher rents and take longer commutes — at a time when gasoline prices are around \$4 a gallon.

Communities and individuals don't have to passively sit back and be carried by economic currents. But steering our own boats takes skill and awareness. There's a wise old saying that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the second best time is today. By the same token, instead of regretting economic decisions we didn't get around to making 20 years ago, now is the time to get busy on setting the stage for what our region will be like a generation from now.

This is the time to make smarter zoning decisions that ensure an adequate supply of attainable workforce housing within convenient reach of jobs. Now is the time to lay the groundwork for the roads, bridges, broadband and other infrastructure that we'll need to avoid crippling levels of congestion. Safe and affordable child care isn't a luxury, it's a critical necessity for our families and our economy.

We won't get any of these things by just wishing for them. We must advocate for ourselves and make sure that tax, spending and planning policies all align with our future needs. We can get ahead of the juggernaut of change, but only if we take charge of today.



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