

OPINION

Time for a change in fire district leadership

BY GARY DESIMONE

I have been serving the Applegate Valley Fire District for more than nine years: five years as a volunteer firefighter, more than seven years as chairman of the safety committee, and, since 2019, as an elected board director. I serve on the board with four other elected directors.

Here are some facts you might not have known:

- An anonymous survey given to staff and volunteers in late 2019 shows that 23 percent of the staff and volunteers rate morale at the district as “poor,” and 50 percent rate morale as “poor or average.” This survey, conducted by Emergency Services Consulting International as part of a study commissioned by the fire district, also found that 46 percent of staff and volunteers thought that overall employee morale was lower than the year before.

- During the April 15, 2020, board meeting, I was the only board director to advocate for meeting with staff and volunteers to obtain objective data for Chief Michael McLaughlin’s annual performance evaluation and contract negotiations. The other four board directors voted for using input solely from the chief himself for determining how well he manages staff.

- Our policy states that the standards, criteria, and policy directives to be used in evaluating the chief must first be adopted by the board in meetings open to the public in which there is an opportunity for public comment.

- Last year I filed a complaint with the Oregon Government Ethics Commission (OGEC) against the district board regarding the way the board handled the disposition of an alleged claim of a hostile work environment against Chief McLaughlin during an executive session (see note). After an investigation, the commission found that the board did violate the executive session provisions of

Oregon Public Meetings law. (Note: I have not and am not making any statements and/or judgments about the alleged claims. The findings from the OGEC were about Oregon Public Meeting laws regarding executive session in the handling of the alleged claims and not about the alleged claims by the employee.)

- As per district policy, any resident may request that matters be placed on the board’s agenda up to two days prior to the board meeting. The Fire Board shall provide in the agenda of its regular meeting a specific time to hear the comments, concerns, and suggestions from its citizens or from visitors with interests in the district.

- A week before the January 20, 2021, board meeting, I asked Board President Michael Parker to put on the agenda the following item: Motion to seek legal advice from neutral third party to investigate cause of executive session meeting violations in 2020 (Oregon Government Ethics Commission Findings). He did not put it on the agenda, even though several changes and additions to the agenda were made up to two days before our board meeting.

My goal as director is to serve the taxpayers and constituents of the district with courage, honor, integrity, and transparency. I feel there is a need for a change in district leadership. This spring there are two board director positions open for election. If you want to find out more about what is happening in the district from one board member’s perspective, please attend our monthly board meetings or email me at gdesimone@applegatefd.com.

You can also visit the district’s website, applegatefd.com/board.html, to read board meeting minutes, see agendas for upcoming meetings, and get the information you need to “virtually attend” any upcoming board meetings.

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Email opinion pieces and letters to gater@applegater.org or mail to *Applegater*, Applegate Valley Community Newspaper, Inc., PO Box 14, Jacksonville, OR 97530.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Thanks to you, we've met our (News) Match!

BY BERT ETLING

Wow!

The last year has been a heck of a ride for all of us. But thanks to all of you in the *Applegater* family, we ended it on a high note.

As in most of the rest of the world, the ground seemingly dropped out beneath our feet last March with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of the world as we knew it. Our habitual ways of doing things necessarily fell away.

The *Applegater* was in danger of falling away, too. Your community newspaper has traditionally been supported by something of a three-legged stool of advertising, donations, and fundraisers.

With the fundraising leg kicked away due to the danger of holding large in-person gatherings, we were in danger of falling over. Treasurer’s reports were laden with ominous wording, like “enough funds for one or two editions” and “saving something for winding down operations.”

But then you, our readers, our contributors, our neighbors, responded to keep the Gater upright—first with a burst of donations in the summer, then, spurred by the promise of doubling your donations after the Gater qualified for the NewsMatch fundraising campaign, a veritable tsunami of contributions in November and, mostly, December.

Our treasurer now offers up more encouraging phrases, like “astonishing success” and “the highest balance in years.” We not only met but exceeded the \$12,500 match cap of the NewsMatch campaign, meaning that up to \$12,500 that you, our local donors, gave out of your pockets will be matched by national donors supporting nonprofit journalism!

We know that’s not about us—that’s about you, our *Applegater* family. With that wind under our wings, confident we have more runway ahead of us, more track before our train, we want to know how we can best serve you, our readers, donors, advertisers, neighbors, and contributors.

I’ve worked in community journalism for decades, for a variety of enterprises, from sole proprietorships to public corporations. I’ve always been somewhat torn at having to serve two masters: readers and owners. Their goals are not always the same.

That’s not the case here, at the *Applegater*, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is publication of a communications vehicle that, as we say in the “Fine Print” on page five of every edition, “reflects the heart and soul of our community.” That’s the sole goal of the *Applegater*.

After all you’ve given, I’m going to ask just a bit more. In coming weeks, as COVID-19 permits, your *Applegater* Board of Directors will have a retreat—a meeting where we take some time to reflect on our broader goals, instead of the day-to-day business of getting out a newspaper.

Here’s the ask: Let me know what you want the *Applegater* to be, to do. You’ve kept us going; now let us know where you want us to go. Email your suggestions to me at the address below, and I’ll share them with the board. Together, we can make the years ahead better than the year we just went through.

Thank you, again!

Bert Etling, Editor in Chief

Applegater Newsmagazine

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Love in the time of COVID

BY SANDY OLKEN

Regardless of political affiliation, the COVID pandemic has most likely had an influence on your readers in some, if not many, ways. We are all dealing with the challenges and changes as best we can, each in our own way.

If you are among the relatives, friends, or colleagues reading this who have lost someone during this last year, my most sincere condolences go out to you. The experience of missing a loved one is universal. It hurts, and the emptiness left by that absence knows no borders.

The economic repercussions have many of us spending less on nonessentials. Many, like myself, are discovering what it’s like to live more simply. Our former pleasures of going out to eat, dance, and gather in all the previous ways have mostly vanished.

What remains for me is more time and space for a deeper gratitude for where I live and a more acute knowledge of how lucky I am to be residing in a home replete with nature, including the forests that support our waters. Our forests, rivers, and mountains offer their sanctuary for our renewal.

This moment’s breath of something other than a mad dash to shop, consume, and fill up space actually leaves enough

space for us to feel, to find, and to cultivate within ourselves and our community new avenues for a life more aligned with love than hate, with help than harm, and with creation instead of destruction.

Meeting critical needs of the community, including the forests, waterways, flora, and fauna, could become our priority during this time of transition. Helping each other to fill the gaps left by a changing economy could become the new economy: an economy based on the protection of life, our elders, our children, our neighbors. Sustainability is not only a viable economy, but an imperative one. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, “Companies that value and integrate biodiversity and ecosystem services into their strategic plans are best positioned for the future.”

Because of our gratitude and for the protection of our water, Williams Community Forest Project (WCFP) continues to work toward saving the Pipe Fork Creek area from clear-cutting. WCFP invites you to join us in using this time of new knowledge, of renewed perception, and of this new year to herald the coming of a more balanced existence on our planet.

Sandy Olken
Williams, OR