



Summer is nearly upon us. Toward the end of this month one of the most notable and (in the eyes of locals at noted tourist hot spots such as Cannon Beach and the wine country) dreaded weekends will arrive, sending people bounding into their RVs. Memorial Day Weekend. As much as many of the year-rounders would like folks from afar to take the safe advice of Mr. Dylan and "stay home, have a picnic in my bathroom", those starry eyed wishes will simply not come true. It is a love-hate relationship. People "away" for the "season" tend to spend generously and while, in general, most of us (I speak from experience, having grown up in the summer playland of Massachusetts) wish folks would just send us their Visa card numbers or preferably some cash, and stay at wherever they already are, that simply is not the way of the world.

My interest in this and what exactly this topic has to do with wine stems from an article I read in Oregon's other paper, The Oregonian, a week or so back. The article concerned the proposed construction of a toll highway extending south from Northern Newberg, through Yamhill County, and intersecting a few miles later with Hwy 18 just south of Dundee. You see the thing is that people can't get from where they are to where they want to go as quickly as they would like to these days and, quite frankly, it pisses them off.

It is a fact that Hwy 99 can become akin to a parking lot for good stretches on certain days. The problem has gotten worse as the popularity of Yamhill County has grown over the past few years and the increasing population in Portland has produced more weekend travellers than in past years. Yes, we have what the Californians have been fleeing from: Too many people and not enough space between the white lines to put them at 55 mph. In modern times few problems are as tragic or as contested as this dilemma. You can almost hear the beads of sweat building on the foreheads of numerous public policists out there. There's blood in the water, folks.

Several years ago folks in California noticed that it took them a little longer to get to work in the morning. So they built a new road. Then things got a little tight there, so they built another road and another and, well, you know the story. Soon enough there was no more land on which to build roads and they were still really crowded. Then people started shooting each other on these roads. Then they moved to Oregon. One of the problems with roads is that they somehow manage to breed more vehicles and congestion rather than less. Funny thing.

So, anyway, someone has proposed a toll highway that they say will make commuting shorter, take pressure off of business routes, etc., etc. (Having driven on the New Jersey Turnpike enough times to hate toll roads with a passion, I could go on for hours but I won't. Suffice it to say that someones moved west of Ohio and decided toll roads in vast tracts of land were a silly idea and they stopped making them. Those someones had the right idea.) The theory is quite elegant, but has basically been discredited so many times that one wonders at how people can still bring it up without cracking a least a bit of a grin.

I still have a driver's license, much to the chagrin of my esteemed editor, so I am certainly a part of this nationwide problem. I believe, as everyone does, that when I am driving I am most certainly the greatest driver who has ever lived and everyone else is a moron. Fortunately I am not in my car while writing this column so my brain can be engaged. Driving is highly overrated and will no doubt be the downfall of humans. It is imperative that we not worship at the altar of "The Car" at every slight traffic jam. When we devise plans to further convenience the almighty automobile we are taking a gigantic step backward. The crazy scientist in the movie 'Repo Man' said it most eloquently: "The more you drive, the less intelligent you are."

There are two other problems wrapped up in this babble other than the somewhat philosophical issue of people, cars and roads. There are even more esoteric issues than this at stake. They involve the concepts of land use planning and what the government should and should not be able to do. As confused as this surely must read, let us begin with the latter first.

I have very strange ideas about our government. Building roads is not a business I am happy our government is the monopolist in. To build the proposed Yamhill County Superhighway, the government would have to first purchase the land on which the road itself will lie. The strange thing is that when the government decides to build a road and all the wheels are in motion and YOU own the land on which the road is going to be paved, the odds of you not selling your land are not so good. Now before all you Dittoheads (whom I am sure are real big readers of this paper) get all excited about my views on property rights, check this out: If you are a big timber company and you own a bunch of forested land, especially old growth forest or forests critical to a watershed, I think the government not only has the right, but the responsibility to take that land from you.

And if you don't get a dime in the bank from it, too bad, because you're getting what they call a "Societal benefit", even if you don't like it. You see, I think we have enough paved-over cow fields and not enough other things like truly wild areas and clean drinking water. I believe government has a duty to contradict its own policies when there is a need. Traffic does not qualify as one of these needs.

The other issue, land use planning, is all tied up in this somehow. I'm not exactly an investigative reporter so it's not like I did any research but I think I have a decent grasp of the issues I am inclined to give a damn about. Oregon has fairly reasonable land use planning laws. Actually, we have some great ones. "If it's sand, it's public property" is one of the best. Good old Tom McCall came up with that one (anyone at the GOP listening?). There are all sorts of them and some are sort of stupid and convoluted, but by and large laws have been established to keep the Metro area from completely over-running outlying areas willie-nillie. Amazingly enough, these laws have worked fairly well and it drives some people crazy (which is part of the benefit). Building roads because there are too many cars flies in the face of solid land use ideas and, essentially, puts the cart before the horse.

One of my jobs is at a winery in Newberg. It seems like I would be crazy to not want to bring more people out to the area, and, theoretically, into the tasting room in which I work. I say business is fine and that what would be gained from additional business would be lost in overall quality of everything. I don't even live out there and I can tell that. The good people of Cannon Beach, formerly a residential community, certainly would be willing to testify to that.

So, in summary, this toll road concept is simply a tremendously bad idea. Extra roads are certainly not the direction we need to be going in this world, especially roads that you have to pay money to drive on. If you own a cow pasture you should be able to feel confident that the government will not take or offer to purchase your land from you for purposes other than growing experimental hemp fields. If you own large tracts of land that more than 30% of the population would consider scenic then, well, tough.

Currently I have about 60 bottles of wine and a couple of cases of homemade beer lying about the house. Other than to support these two habits via working I feel I have few reasons to go anywhere. If you have to drive, go late at night when there aren't many people around so you will feel less inclined to think that public policy and automobiles should have a cozy relationship. To the people of Yamhill County, good luck.

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