

Victory, defeat and alternative facts in two coastal county elections

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In the battle to protect the environment, activists are increasingly turning to a model of local organizing that mixes face-to-face democracy with the power to create law.

Not everyone is happy with that.

Two recent law-making initiatives on the Oregon coast provide a striking case in point: Measures 6-162 in Coos County and Measure 21-177 in Lincoln County.

Measure 21-177 focused on banning the aerial spraying of pesticides – a longstanding issue in the county that’s involved lawsuits, coupled with reports of sickness, death and miscarriages throughout the valleys. After a hard-fought campaign, this measure appears to be passing by a margin of just 28 votes – which could make it the first such ban in the country. According to the county clerk’s office a final count will be available June 5, after voters get a chance to fix a small number of unsigned ballots.

A similar proposal in the Oregon State Legislature died this session.

Measure 6-162 focused on the proposed Jordan Cove LNG and Pacific Connector pipeline – a project that some residents feel has been forced on them for years despite major objections concerning climate change, safety concerns, property rights and fracking. The measure also used expansive language granting the right to locally owned renewable energy and defining other types of ownership as inherently unsustainable.

Business interests came out in force against both measures. According to Coos Bay’s The World Newspaper, opponents to their local initiative spent or received more than a million dollars, making it the most expensive campaign in that county’s history. With a majority of opposition funding coming from Canadian gas company Veresen Inc. (which has bet big on the Jordan Cove LNG), the measure ultimately failed, garnering just slightly more than 24 percent of the vote.

Backers of the measure say this kind of spending should not be allowed, but they also say they are not daunted by the loss. According to Mary Geddry, a co-petitioner, organizers are already in discussion about how to re-file in a way that puts a laser focus on Jordan Cove LNG, with separate measures addressing the need for renewable energy.

Backers of the measure blame the loss primarily on out-of-town money and dishonest advertising.

“As is becoming the norm in our nation, elections are won and lost by whoever has the fattest wallet, and I think that was much the case in Coos County,” said Coos County resident Stacey McLaughlin. “It was, in my experience, about as oppressive an electoral environment as I’ve ever seen.”

Geddry said she is actively challenging falsehoods from the “no” campaign with the Secretary of State’s Election Division – particularly incendiary claims that say the law would permit violence against people and property. One mailer stated, “... the measure will allow anyone to damage buildings or vehicles in the name of the environment,” and another stated the measure will “Allow anyone to trespass on a homeowner, farmer or business’s private property and damage buildings, vehicles or other items deemed harmful to the ecosystem.”

Such claims were apparently lifted from Lincoln County – where opponents of 21-177 attacked a last-resort provision of the measure that allowed citizens to protect themselves from aerial pesticide spraying with “direct action” if all other options fail.

This provision opened a floodgate of unhinged speculation – including claims that voting yes would legalize violence. That sentiment was echoed by County Sheriff Curtis Landers, who appeared in radio spots opposing the measure, and re-enforced fears that the sheriff might openly defy the law.

The claim became increasingly bizarre when it landed in Coos County. Here, property owners have raised the alarm for

years about the threat of eminent domain – and recently secured a pledge from U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden to oppose eminent domain across the entire length of the project. But when those attacks were lifted from Lincoln County and dropped in Coos County, something truly special happened – the Canadian-based Veresen not only got the local facts wrong, but also managed to use the idea of property rights to shut down real property owners.

And back in Lincoln County the story wasn’t much better.

“The sheriff just stuck to their message, which was full of lies,” said Maria Sause, a chief petitioner of 21-177. “They were just raising hell about possible violence, but what they’re doing is using these pesticides on people. I mean I can’t imagine anything more violent than poisoning people.”

“Their strategies weren’t working, so they just kind of kept pivoting,” said Rio Davidson of Citizens for a Healthy County. “At first they made it all about the fishermen not being able to paint their boat, but I’ve never seen a helicopter paint a boat before. Then it was all about the poor blueberry farmer who wouldn’t be able to spray his crops. And then at the end it became all about vigilantism. Things just weren’t working, so they wanted to talk about literally anything except the aerial spraying of pesticides.”

Davidson said he knows about a dozen people with personal stories of people experienced health problems after aerial sprays.

“There’s more than ample proof that people have been poisoned by this aerial pesticide spraying for a long time,” Davidson said.

“The opposition’s claims about violence are completely unfounded,” Davidson added. “The purpose of this measure is to create safety, which is guaranteed to us in Article 1, Section 1 of the Oregon Constitution. You cannot create safety with acts of violence.”

Mary Geddry said a dizzying array of misinformation was also pushed in Coos County by Veresen and allied groups –

under the auspices of the newly formed Save Coos Jobs.

“They said people were going to set up checkpoints to see how much gas you had, people wouldn’t be able to drive fuel trucks through town, the ferries wouldn’t be able to fuel themselves,” Geddry said. “But oddly, there was no mention of Jordan Cove LNG.”

The barrage of misinformation, combined with the loss in Coos County, has backers of a similar initiative on edge.

CCSAGE, or Columbia County Sustainable Action for a Green Environment, is a community group promoting a similar law near Portland. Their law aims to block the export of fossil fuels, a fracked gas generating station, and a China-backed fracked gas facility that would convert the substance to methanol for the purpose of export.


Spokesperson Nancy Ward said their group has been impacted by the giant ball of cash thrown into the Coos County election – something their small group doesn’t know how to handle.

“We’re kind of taking a deep breath here. We don’t think there’s going to be an issue with getting signatures. But once we get them, should we put it on the ballot? I can’t stress enough what a difficult decision this is for us to make,” Ward said.


“One of the reasons (the opposition) spent \$1.4 million is not just to crush the Coos issue, or even statewide, but they want the message out to all activists, all environmentalists ... that you are going to be outspent, and we will win. So what do we do?”

Speaking on the likely victory of the aerial spraying law, Davidson said. “The citizens of Lincoln County did not believe the propaganda and the twisting of the truth that the corporate-led opposition did. We’re really excited, and we’re really grateful that the community came together and spoke with one voice and finally put a stop to this.”


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