

A Beautiful Thing

Sighting the rare bird of democracy

One night this July, I saw one of the rarest birds in America today. It landed in the early evening in south Eugene, not far from the Amazon swimming pool. A crowd gathered as it scratched the ground for food, found enough to keep it going through the night, and then moved on to search for sustenance in another part of the county.



It was the bird of democracy, and it was beautiful.

I admit I wasn't expecting such a display. Like others, I came out of curiosity to the first stop of the five-meeting Lane County Board of Commissioners 2007 Listening Tour, billed as a community forum where "County Commissioners want your input, thoughts and ideas to help shape the future of Lane County Government."

Instead of platitudes from the politicians and single-issue bulldogging from audience fanatics, I found participation. The commissioners gave a short overview, and then the 70-plus roomful broke into six or seven tables, each hosted by a commissioner or county representative. Three broad questions framed the discussion: What brought you here tonight? What's your reaction to what you've heard so far? What principles, values and strategies do you feel should attend county decisions?

At the first table I visited, one man said the primary role of government is to

'We only get the message out when we're proposing a tax and telling you what you're going to lose.' —Bill Fleenor

protect the people, period. One woman said she worried that real estate developers were taking over the county. Another woman wondered why voters seemed to want services without paying for them. Another man said he feared the very fabric of society was disintegrating.

The first man said people won't do anything unless we cut all services except for public safety. Parks, libraries, permits — cut them all, he said. Then people will start paying attention.

We already don't have public safety in rural areas, a woman said.

Another woman said libraries are funded by the city, not the county.

It went on like that: general statements tempered with minor corrections. Assumptions countered with challenges. Personal experiences shared. Prejudices revealed.

At another table I visited, hosted by Commissioner Bill Fleenor, a woman asked about the news she heard that county managers were receiving healthy pay raises in this time of financial crisis. It's not the details here I want to highlight, but the exchange:

What about the managers' raises? the woman asked. The dozen or so people at the table leaned forward or looked at Fleenor. The message was silent but clear: Yeah, what about those raises?

Fleenor cited the source of the salary money and the limitations imposed by work contracts.

But wait, another person said, and cited some specific figures that could be construed as suggesting waste and mismanagement in county government.

Fleenor answered to each figure. One had been presented out of context, another was incomplete. He clarified the context, provided deeper meaning.

The body language of the entire table relaxed like a fight had been called off. We'd heard the challenge, the response, the counterpoint, and the clarification. We had the information we needed. Now we understood.

It is true that not everyone has the time to attend meetings or study thick reports. But we might have the time to check out succinct and clear summaries presented in readable terms. That was one message the commissioners heard: Use creative and innovative ways to communicate.

As Fleenor acknowledged, "We only get the message out when we're proposing a tax and telling you what you're going to lose." He's right. They should tell us more about what we're getting.

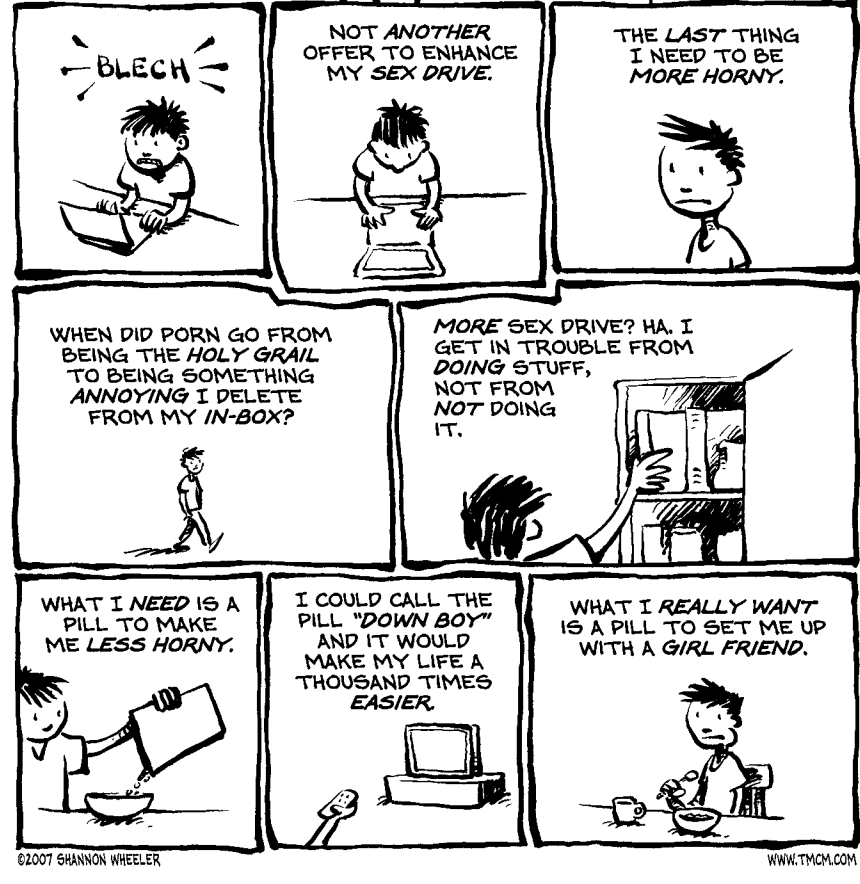
It is the job of government officials to complete their work in an open, participatory way. It is their job to make available to us the facts and information on the issues so that we can understand what's at stake when we make our voting decisions. But it is not their job to make sure we are interested or entertained. That part is up to us.

Government is not the problem; our lack of participation is. The fabled bird of democracy is not extinct. But it will come only if we call.

Steve McQuiddy is a longtime Eugene resident and journalist who currently teaches academic learning skills at LCC. The Lane County Commissioners Listening Tour continues Aug. 28 in Cottage Grove and Sept. 12 in Springfield. Learn more at www.lanecounty.org

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHAT WE ASKED FOR?

What are the implications of Alan Pittman's (8/2) question, "Will Eugene firefighters subsidize Springfield's urban sprawl in the Gateway Area?" Simple answer: As long as Eugene is the "Gateway to Gateway," I believe Eugene is getting what it bargained for.

As the former mayor of Springfield, I fought the idea of PeaceHealth moving to our Gateway area from the very beginning. To move 6,000 individuals overall to the urban fringe that is without the infrastructure to handle them is dumb, to say the least. The Eugene policy makers should have allowed PeaceHealth to build on Chad Drive, which was the hospital's first choice. However, they did not want sprawl in Eugene, but it seemed OK to push sprawl to Springfield.

In addition, part of that bargain, as it turns out, is to allow the McKenzie-Willamette Hospital (or whatever their name will be) to move to an even dumber place — a dead-end road off the most congested off-ramp on Beltline, with even less infrastructure — like in "dumb and dumber."

I did not ask or encourage any Eugene company, including Symantec, to move to Gateway. And I'm still furious that our small Springfield nonprofit hospital, built by volunteers, was forced to prostitute itself to survive and to abandon my neighborhood in Springfield in order to backfill a bad policy decision made by Eugene. So I answer, "Yes indeed" to Pittman's question.

*Bill Morrisette
Springfield*

COME JOIN US

As a longtime participant in the Oregon Country Fair, I feel badly for Sian Nelson (7/26) that he has not found a niche within the Family festivities for himself. At present I work with two teams within the Fair (the Jill Heiman Vision Fund and the Neighborhood Response Team) and am reaching my hand out to you, Sian, inviting you to meet with me

to talk about possible ways you could participate in the 2008 Fair.

Please drop me a note at the Fair office (442 Lawrence St. in Eugene) so that we can talk and see where and how a Fair connection might be made.

We do view ourselves as inclusive rather than exclusive, and I would like to work with you to embrace and actualize your desire to become an active member of this magical experience.

*Michael Connelly
Eugene*

DUPLICATE THE MODEL

Thanks for the coverage (8/9) you gave Skinner City Farm (SCF) and the other small, grassroots, decentralized efforts that keep organic materials from going into our landfill. Kudos to the city's household / grocery store composting programs and the work of our local schools.

Where SCF stands out and can serve as a model is in its usage of human power to move materials and its direct application of compost and worm castings into community gardens. Envision the city of Eugene, perhaps with the Neighborhood Matching Grants Program, initiating a citywide, decentralized, human-powered solution by duplicating the SCF model in each community garden to start and then expanding into neighborhoods throughout the city. The low capital investment in bicycle cargo trailers like SCF uses and the volunteer work force should look good compared to the costs of running a centralized, citywide collection service.

I see SCF and the other efforts as examples of projects that could challenge the status quo, which generally advocates for large scale, expensive solutions. Rather than having trucks take our organic materials out of town (to then bring it back in to sell to us) let's keep our organic household and restaurant kitchen scraps in our neighborhoods.

*Karl Benedek
Eugene*