

# The Long Con

OREGON GOVERNMENT AND THE LAND OF MAKE-BELIEVE

**M**y son Chris recently gave me a poster from the 1973 movie *The Sting*, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford, as a couple of conmen in the 1930s who pull off a complicated con on their mark, a ruthless gangster played by Robert Shaw.

It's one of my favorite movies, and it's a nearly perfect parable for my time in the Governor's Regional Solutions Center.

The movie was inspired by the 1940 book *The Big Con* by David Naurer. It documents a time in America during the Great Depression era when big cons, not unlike the one portrayed in the movie, were not uncommon. There was a "con" subculture employing thousands of people across the country. Every big city had its own semi-permanent "store," the make believe location where the con takes place. These "stores" were rented for the expressed purpose of pulling off "big cons," also called "long cons." In the movie, it was a phony off-track betting parlor.

Toward the end of my career in the state's economic development department, I was forced to suspend reality and move my office to a "store." It was the Governor's Regional Solutions Center in Eugene. A totally make-believe state office. It was the equivalent of the phony off-track betting parlor in the movie.

Shortly after Gov. John Kitzhaber started his third term in 2011, the director of Business Oregon, Tim McCabe, told a gathering in Portland that we would all be required to move our regional offices into the new Regional Solutions Centers. McCabe told us, "We all know this is ridiculous, but it's what the governor wants, so we will do it."

This phony state office was hidden away on the third floor of a nondescript office building on 13th Avenue near the University of Oregon campus. This was a legitimate state agency office the way Pioneertown,

the old movie set in Southern California, is a legitimate Western town. It was like I had moved my office into the Twilight Zone, into an alternate reality.

There was no useful purpose for me, or any of the other state agency reps, to be located in the "store." In fact, it got in the way of doing our real jobs because it was not a real state office. No one would ever come there looking for any of the five state agencies forced to be there. It was all about smoke and mirrors and appearances, nothing about reality or doing anything real.

Every Regional Solutions "store" had a coordinator assigned from the governor's office, who functioned much like the Paul Newman character in the film, Henry Gondorff. The only people who ventured into the "store" were the marks invited in by Gondorff: mostly city, county, and state officials and their staffs. Gondorff would bring them in for make-believe meetings, in a make-believe meeting room, surrounded with white boards with make-believe flow charts, showing make-believe projects.

The Regional Solutions Center was created to solve problems that did not exist. After forcing the relocation of state agencies into a make-believe state office, each center then needed to create "projects" so they could say the team was working on, well, something. Which, of course, we weren't. We had real jobs to do instead.

The Oregon Department of Transportation staffer was constantly traveling across town to the real ODOT office for real ODOT business. The Department of Environmental Quality staffer needed to be out in the field, and in the real DEQ office, in order to get real DEQ work done, not sitting in the "store."

I worked in three counties, and I needed to be in those counties, not sitting in the "store" waiting for the next mark. But, since the "store" existed outside of reality, the governor's office insisted that we be in the "store," and Gondorff would complain to our directors when we were out doing our real jobs.

Fourteen years earlier, in 1997, Kitzhaber created the Community Solutions Team (CST). The CST consisted of the directors of the same five state agencies: Economic Development, DEQ, Land Use Planning, ODOT and Housing. The agency heads would meet as a group with the governor monthly, while regional teams also met monthly, hosted by a different community each month. There was no co-location of agencies into make-believe offices.

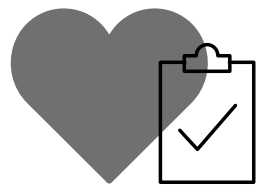
The CST, renamed in 2003 to the Economic Revitalization Team (ERT), was replaced by the Regional Solutions Centers nonsense even though it was working just fine. I suspect the team in the governor's office that dreamed up Regional Solutions was clueless as to the existence of the CST/ERT. Maybe it was a "Hey guys, wouldn't it be cool if ..." moment.

How could this have happened? How could Gov. Kitzhaber, someone I respected and admired, someone as savvy with government as he was, create something as dishonest and dysfunctional as the Regional Silly Centers? I don't think he did.

I believe it was someone with no government experience and no history with regional economic development or knowledge about how state agencies actually functioned. Someone so close to the governor, a self-proclaimed expert in all things green and sustainable, that his or her ideas would be treated as brilliant and followed without question.

It was probably my worst experience in state government in more than 20 years. Such a silly waste of everyone's time. And it left me with two questions. How could so many seemingly smart people spend so much time pretending it was real? And why didn't Kate Brown just pull the plug on this nonsense?

*Bob Warren retired in 2012 as the regional business development officer for Business Oregon for Lane, Lincoln, Linn and Benton Counties. Prior to that he was a political advisor to state and federal offices.*



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