

It's All We Got

PINNING HOPES ON TRAVEL AND SPORTS

A July 31 editorial in *The Register-Guard* highlighted Lane County workers' low wages relative to other Oregon counties. The *RG* is correct and points to our affordable housing crisis as one symptom of these low wages, making a good case for why we do economic development.

However, no one should be holding their breath for improvement any time soon. The local economic development agency, the Lane Metro Partnership, was dismantled by Lane County in 2014. Since then, there has been no one in charge. And the state's economic development agency, Business Oregon, offers little or no help to communities outside of the Portland area. Under the current governor, Oregon doesn't really do economic development anymore and Business Oregon is a shadow of its former self.

Our best hope for job growth in Lane County now rests with Tracktown USA and Travel Lane County.

There was a time when Lane County had an effective and successful economic development agency. In those days, the state of Oregon was also actively engaged in statewide economic development, putting staff and resources out in the field to help create family wage jobs. The state had a core team of business recruitment and regional development professionals linked with Oregon communities. All of this grew out of the recession of the 1980s.

Neil Goldschmidt ran for governor on "The Oregon Comeback," and, as governor, he delivered. Goldschmidt created an effective economic development department within his office and hired seasoned professionals to run it. They identified and focused on "key industries" that included the newly emerging high technology sector. Intel was one of the early recruitments, creating thousands of high wage jobs, and is still one of the state's largest private employers. Goldschmidt was governor for only four years but he put the state economy on a recovery trajectory that was continued and enhanced by Barbara Roberts, John Kitzhaber (before Cylvia Hayes) and Ted Kulongoski.

The Goldschmidt team created economic development regions with designated non-government organizations contracted to coordinate economic development in their communities. For Lane County, that agency was the Eugene Springfield Metro Partnership, later changed to Lane Metro Partnership.

Big changes in economic development came with the new Kitzhaber, after Hayes. The deterioration was almost immediate, taking people out of the field and putting them in offices. By the time of Kitzhaber's resignation, economic development by the state had been relegated to the Regional Silly Teams (see "The Long Con," *EW* 12/13/17). Business Oregon quickly lost focus and, with the elimination of regional staff, agency morale and effectiveness plummeted.

In Lane County, the Metro Partnership had been managed by a string of highly qualified economic development professionals that included John Lively, Lee Beyer and Jack Roberts. And the results were spectacular. Working closely with the state, the Metro Partnership was instrumental in recruitments that included Hyundai, Sony Disc Manufacturing, Symantec, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, Enterprise Car Rentals, Levi Strauss and others.

Regardless of your opinion about recruiting big companies to locate here, they created thousands of good high wage jobs and, I believe, it was the right thing to do at the time. Don't kid yourself: We would welcome any one of those recruitments today.

Metro also helped hundreds of local businesses to expand and grow and create thousands of jobs. Williams/Franz Bakery and Invitrogen, now Life Technologies, are just two examples of high-wage jobs that likely would have left Lane County were it not for the effectiveness of the Metro Partnership. But, rest easy folks, none of those recruitments could happen now. Those days are gone. Neither the state or local agencies are capable of anything close to that level of performance today.

Lively, Beyer and Roberts have gone on to other things and the Metro Partnership is no more. Gov. Kate Brown just accepted the Regional Silly Team nonsense and called it "economic development." Under her watch, Business Oregon continued its downward slide, eliminating knowledgeable regional field staff and now offers little or no assistance outside of the Portland area. There is no ability to actually recruit or retain high wage jobs outside of Portland.

Given all of that, I would place our best hope for the creation of jobs and wage growth with the efforts of Travel Lane County and Tracktown USA. Their upcoming events in 2020 and 2021 at the new Hayward Field will put our community on the national stage, in a positive light. It's our best economic development strategy by default. We show the world what and who we are as a community. They can see us as the kind of place where people want to live, and where a businesses would want to locate. If we can do that, there is a good chance that some of the track fans who own or manage a business will make a lifestyle decision to bring and grow their jobs here.

I hope so, because in terms of economic development, it's our best shot for now, it's really all we got. Maybe it's enough. ■

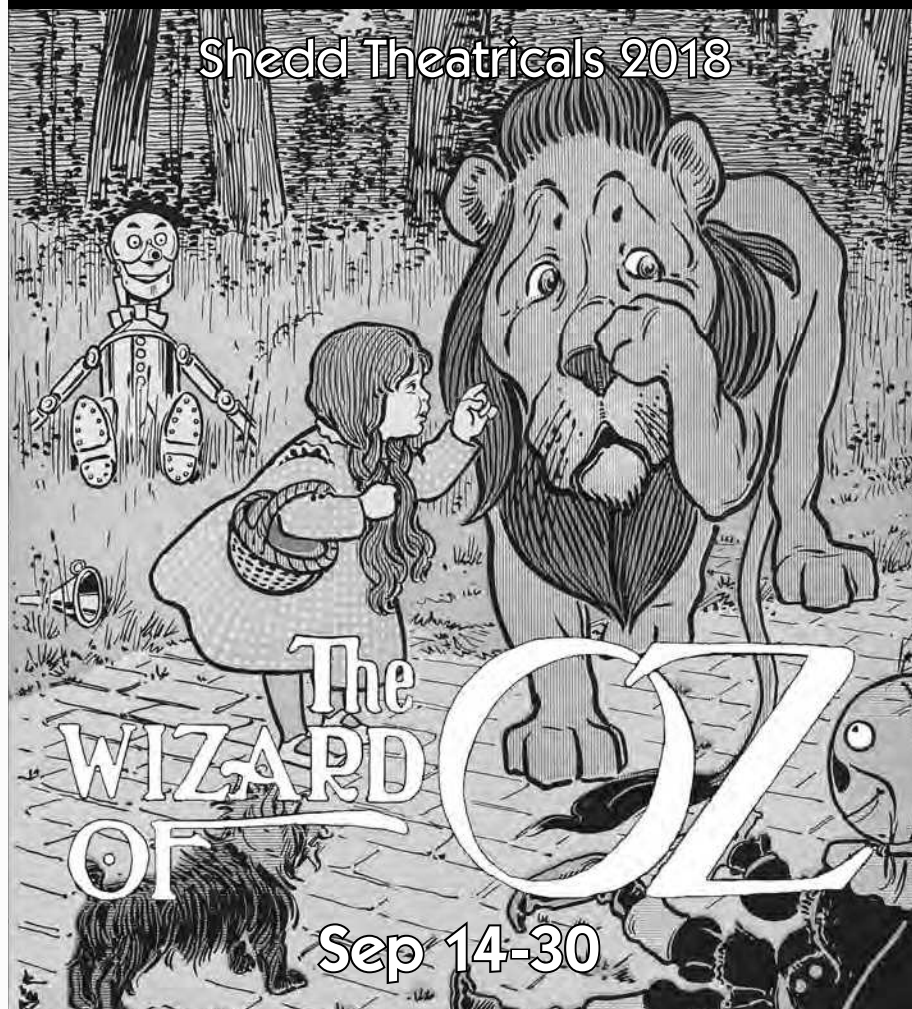
Bob Warren retired in 2012 as the regional business development officer for Business Oregon for Lane, Lincoln, Linn and Benton counties. Before that he was a senior policy advisor to Gov. Barbara Roberts and district aide and natural resource advisor for Rep. Peter DeFazio.

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| 10.3 David Bromberg Quintet | 10.26 Leo Kottke |
| 10.11-14 Jazz Kings: In The Mood | 10.27 Larry Fuller Trio |
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| 10.17 Chico Schwall Am. Roots: | 11.13 Rufus Wainwright |
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