

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

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Astoria enjoys innovation boost

Generating electricity at Bear Creek Dam helps water users

The dedication of a new hydroelectric system at Bear Creek Dam Monday is testimony to the ingenuity at Astoria City Hall.

The new system, as reported by Derrick DePledge last Thursday, will generate electricity off water flow that has been an element of the city's water system for decades. The monetary benefit of this electricity is equivalent to the cost of operating the city's water treatment facility plus undetermined revenue from Pacific Power for "running the meter backward."

All of that will save water ratepayers money. And the new technology was planned and installed with grant money

Former City Manager Paul Benoit and the prior City Council laid the ground work for this innovation. City Manager Brett Estes and Public Works Director Ken Cook carried it to completion.

Benoit also examined the potential for generating electricity off a wind farm near Wickiup Ridge, in the watershed. Moving the electricity

to the power grid proved to be prohibitively expensive.

In a similar leap forward, the (2011-2012) renovation of City Hall brought that early 20th century building into 21st century technology energy savings. The renewed building is more accessible to the public than its predecessor.

It is fashionable to assert that city government doesn't know what it's doing. That sentiment was represented in the November election. But the record indicates otherwise. The gains at Bear Creek Dam happened because of smart city management systematically planning over a sustained period.

And now there are more opportunities if the city will seize them. The prospective renovation of the Astoria Public Library or the construction of a new library is one of them. It demands the same spirit of innovation and it offers similar gains in energy efficiency.

Making conservation palatable in rural areas

Land trusts match environmentalism with respect for private property rights

Twenty-five years ago when conflicts over Pacific Northwest logging were at a fever pitch, a few groups and individuals began earnestly seeking less controversial ways to conserve environmentally valuable land. Lower-intensity controversies continue, but from the perspective of passing years, it's possible to see and celebrate some true successes for organizations like Columbia Land Trust.

Columbia Land Trust Director Glenn Lamb recently addressed the Columbia Forum, a community group in Astoria that hosts experts and newsmakers who speak about regional issues. Columbia Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy of Washington and the North Coast Land Conservancy are among the foremost leaders of conservation efforts in the Columbia-Pacific area. They follow a broadly similar strategy of avoiding confrontation, instead acquiring property rights through purchase, bequest and other free-market mechanisms.

For its part, Vancouver-based Columbia Land Trust has so far protected something like 47 square miles of interesting forestland, critical wetland habitat and other natural assets that perform an array of functions valuable both to humans and wildlife.

Land trusts allow owners to craft solutions that work for themselves and their families, with flexibility to sell development or logging rights while retaining underlying title for residential and other uses.

Lamb noted that in Washington, 50 percent of forestland is owned by families, each holding on average between 500 and 1,000 acres. Oregon also has a rich tradition of small forest ownership, and both states still have many family farms that play key roles in preserving open spaces, water and air quality, along with fish and wildlife habitat. Often, owners have the deepest possible feelings of love for and connection with these lands. Some kind of conveyance to a

land trust provides an assurance that these values will always be cherished, while still providing personal income or tax benefits.

One of the Columbia Land Trusts best local victories was on the Long Beach (Wash.) Peninsula, where the Glenn family's Cranguyma Farms received help preserving 3.5 miles of untouched forests that would have otherwise had to be divided among siblings. With help from \$1 million in donations from a woman in Florida and another \$900,000 from Portland Trail Blazers owner Paul Allen, the land trust was able to buy and preserve the land — an amazing area of primeval woods and marshes.

Elsewhere in Pacific County, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) managed to assemble ownership to the entire small Ellsworth Creek watershed above the Naselle River estuary. Ellsworth continues to be a noteworthy experiment in marrying long-term conservation goals with small-town community values.

All is not always rosy in terms of relations between conservancy groups and local citizens. TNC's rather tone-deaf early-1990s forays in Pacific County were greeted with wild and unfounded rumors that its aim was to turn the Willapa Hills into a giant preserve and kick out all traditional economic uses. In Wahkiakum County, Columbia Land Trust has run into much friction with some neighbors of its effort to restore tidal wetlands in formerly diked pastures along Grays River. Late Chinook Tribal Chairman Ray Gardner and others have been concerned about the issue of public access to land trust property around the Wallacut River and the Knappton shoreline.

But on balance, few would now question that land trusts and conservancies manage to put money where their mouths are when it comes to protecting rural assets. As Lamb remarked in Astoria last month, "The answer lies in supporting the entire fabric of life that surrounds us every day."

GUEST COLUMN

The Gearhart recall decision

By DIANNE WIDDOP

Ballots will be mailed to Gearhart voters on March 6 regarding the question of whether I should be recalled from office.

The ballot will contain a statement from the petitioners, and one from me.

The petitioner's statement makes some ominous sounding allegations including one that states "October 29, 2014, a conversation between Mayor Widdop and a citizen was recorded on a hidden device during 'Coffee with the Mayor' without the citizen's knowledge or authorization. Mayor Widdop then attempted to distribute this recording, contrary to Fourth Amendment privacy rights, contrary to city council rules and against Oregon law."

Joy Sigler elaborated on this charge at the Dec. 5 council meeting, saying "Our community does not need any interpretation for an act of an elected official to secretly record a citizen during coffee with the mayor. Nor do we need any further investigation when we learn that an elected official attempted to then distribute the recording that was secretly obtained. This community values transparency. Illegal or not we know that any secret recording is not consistent with any code of conduct elected or otherwise ... A complete report of this incident was reported to the Clatsop County District Attorney's office."

Before deciding on the significance of this charge, a few additional facts may be helpful. The "citizen" in question was then City Councilor Joy Sigler. She asked to record the conversation and I did not object. I did not record the conversation nor cause it to be recorded. Roughly a minute into her rant, the city administrator, who was also present, turned on his cell phone in the belief that it was in the city's interest to have its own record.

While I was given a copy of the city's recording and told the remaining council members of its existence, I did not attempt to distribute the recording to anyone. I was informed

later that both the city attorney and the Clatsop County district attorney had determined that the city's recording was perfectly legal and could be distributed to anyone.

At the time I had wondered why a second recording seemed so threatening to Sigler, especially given the fact that all council proceedings are recorded. I believe I received the answer when she posted her recording on the Restore Trust Gearhart website. Her recording runs roughly five minutes. The city's recording runs almost 13 minutes.

I agree with Sigler completely on one point — our community values and deserves transparency in the conduct of the public business. To me, transparency involves several concepts. At a very basic level, it means that the public has access to accurate information in as simple a manner as possible.

Over the last two years, I have worked to increase the amount of information available on the city website, including the complete information packet council members receive for meetings. We have also set up a blog that allows anyone to receive announcements and information automatically by email. There is more to do in both areas, but we have started the process.

Transparency also involves access to public officials. I am at City Hall every Wednesday morning. Anyone can come in to ask a question, voice an opinion, or just chat about things in the city. Not everyone is satisfied with an answer, but they have had the opportunity to be heard.

At a higher level, transparency means that the public can see the process by which the council, Planning Commission, or city administration reaches a decision on individual cases and can have confidence that decisions are as consistent as possible with laws, ordinances, or other established policies. There may be situations where it may be a good idea to change the law. If so, the solution is to follow the process to change the



Dianne Widdop

law, but don't just ignore the law.

At the highest level, transparency involves the debate of public issues. It involves both the council or planning commission and the public giving their opinion. It involves making arguments that seek to increase clarity rather than confusion. It involves focusing on facts rather than personalities. It involves not only officials showing respect to the public, but also the public showing respect for elected officials, especially at the local level where all elected and appointed officials are unpaid volunteers.

The use of rumors, innuendos, and vague unsubstantiated claims of "retribution" is a grave threat to transparency. The recall petitioners have made claims that I have turned Gearhart into a place where people need to be in fear of something or someone, but don't really say what to fear, other than that I have single-handedly undermined the Constitution in Gearhart.

As anyone who has attended City Council meetings over the past 10 months can attest, constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech is thriving in Gearhart. The First Amendment says that people can say pretty much anything they want to say, and those attending have certainly exercised that right.

A recent commentary in *The Daily Astorian* described recent meetings as "nearly unbearable" ("The dark side of Gearhart," Jan. 23) As the main target of most of the speech, I can certainly agree. There is a difference, however, between the right to say something and whether listeners should take it seriously. This is the key to the recall issue that voters will decide. Do their accusations sound plausible? Do they have any relation to one's perception of life in Gearhart?

I hope you will take some time to ask questions if you have any, and then make an informed decision.

Dianne Widdop is the mayor of Gearhart and faces a recall election March 26.

Wal-Mart's visible hand in wages

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

In February, Wal-Mart, America's largest employer, announced that it will raise wages for half a million workers.

For many of those workers the gains will be small, but the announcement is nonetheless a very big deal, for two reasons. First, there will be spillovers: Wal-Mart is so big that its action will probably lead to raises for millions of workers employed by other companies. Second, and arguably far more important, is what Wal-Mart's move tells us — namely, that low wages are a political choice, and we can and should choose differently.

Some background: Conservatives — with the backing, I have to admit, of many economists — normally argue that the market for labor is like the market for anything else. The law of supply and demand, they say, determines the level of wages, and the invisible hand of the market will punish anyone who tries to defy this law.

Specifically, this view implies that any attempt to push up wages will either fail or have bad consequences. Setting a minimum wage, it's claimed, will reduce employment and create a labor surplus, the same way attempts to put floors under the prices of agricultural commodities used to lead to butter mountains, wine lakes and so on. Pressuring employers to pay more, or encouraging workers to organize into unions, will have the same effect.

But labor economists have long questioned this view. Soylent Green — I mean, the labor force — is people. And because workers are peo-

ple, wages are not, in fact, like the price of butter, and how much workers are paid depends as much on social forces and political power as it does on simple supply and demand.

What's the evidence? First, there is what actually happens when minimum wages are increased. Many states set minimum wages above the federal level, and we can look at what happens when a state raises its minimum while neighboring states do not. Does the wage-hiking state lose a large number of jobs? No — the overwhelming conclusion from studying these natural experiments is that moderate increases in the minimum wage have little or no negative effect on employment.

Then there's history. It turns out that the middle-class society we used to have didn't evolve as a result of impersonal market forces — it was created by political action, and in a brief period of time. America was still a very unequal society in 1940, but by 1950 it had been transformed by a dramatic reduction in income disparities, which the economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo labeled the Great Compression. How did that happen?

Part of the answer is direct government intervention, especially during World War II, when government wage-setting authority was used to narrow gaps between the best paid and the worst paid. Part of it, surely, was a sharp increase in unionization.

Part of it was the full-employment economy of the war years, which created very strong demand for workers and empowered them to seek higher pay.

The important thing, however, is that the Great Compression didn't go



Paul Krugman

away as soon as the war was over. Instead, full employment and pro-worker politics changed pay norms, and a strong middle class endured for more than a generation. Oh, and the decades after the war were also marked by unprecedented economic growth.

Which brings me back to Wal-Mart.

The retailer's wage hike seems to reflect the same forces that led to the Great Compression, albeit in a much weaker form. Wal-Mart is under political pressure over wages so low that a substantial number of employees are on food stamps and Medicaid. Meanwhile, workers are gaining clout thanks to an improving labor market, reflected in increasing willingness to quit bad jobs.

What's interesting, however, is that these pressures don't seem all that severe, at least so far — yet Wal-Mart is ready to raise wages anyway. And its justification for the move echoes what critics of its low-wage policy have been saying for years: Paying workers better will lead to reduced turnover, better morale and higher productivity.

What this means, in turn, is that engineering a significant pay raise for tens of millions of Americans would almost surely be much easier than conventional wisdom suggests. Raise minimum wages by a substantial amount; make it easier for workers to organize, increasing their bargaining power; direct monetary and fiscal policy toward full employment, as opposed to keeping the economy depressed out of fear that we'll suddenly turn into Weimar Germany. It's not a hard list to implement — and if we did these things we could make major strides back toward the kind of society most of us want to live in.

The point is that extreme inequality and the falling fortunes of America's workers are a choice, not a destiny imposed by the gods of the market. And we can change that choice if we want to.

Where to write

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