

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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One step forward ...

Port financials show marginal gain

After months of delay, the Port of Astoria last week released an audited financial document.

These numbers indicate the Port is marginally ahead of where it was one year ago. Edward Stratton’s Thursday article reported that yearly operating losses decreased from \$1.5 million five years ago to \$105,000 in 2013-14.

Stratton’s recapitulation of the Port’s flawed bookkeeping evokes the mess that Jim Knight discovered upon becoming executive director in October 2014. For weeks on end, Knight said he would not release the Port’s financials until it was clear that the books were clean.

Auditors listed two material weaknesses and five significant deficiencies in the Port’s financial reporting. The most substantive omission auditors discovered was failure to report liability for groundwater pollution. That amounted to a \$1.8 million decrease in the Port’s net position.

It is obvious that the Port of Astoria has been sloppily managed over the past decade. Knight deserves credit for getting down to business by delivering a set of books that can be said to be reliable.

Moving forward, the Port Commission must tend to basics. The travesty of the Astoria Riverwalk Inn should be a cautionary tale to commissioners. In choosing

Brad Smithart’s Hospitality Masters to run the motel property instead of an experienced innkeeper with visibility was a bonehead, costly mistake. Knight cleaned up the commissioners’ mess by doing a deal with Ganesh Sonpatki of the Param Hotel Group. In this arrangement, Param pays Smithart’s debt to the Port and the City of Astoria.

Long-term, the Port is sitting on the best hotel site in Astoria. Commissioners should recognize that asset, rather than demean it, as they did by handing it to an amateur.

At bottom, the cleaning up of Port’s financial mess tells us a lot about the quality of our Port commissioners over the past ten years. As they have come and gone, none apparently grasped the downward spiral of the Port’s financial documents. This makes a certain point. It is difficult in a small population county to field a commission that includes men and women with deep business experience — or more particularly, deep maritime and transportation experience.

Commissioners should recognize their limitations by paying attention to their financial advisers and executive director.

Astoria’s rebirth continues

YMCA conversion will be a catalyst for our eclectic mix

Astoria’s renaissance continues, brick by brick.

The Daily Astorian has highlighted and encouraged preservation and development during the past 20 years. The latest concept to capture the imagination is the plan to give new life to the former YMCA building.

It is fitting that in such a vibrant arts community as the North Coast the building will be converted into a creative design agency and art center. Work on the 1914 structure, at the intersection of 12th and Exchange streets, is expected to begin by the end of the year.

Entrepreneur Noel Weber, who runs a design studio in Boise, Idaho, envisions a storefront-type space that will help all kinds of artists develop the business side of their work.

The building includes 11,500 square feet, and will house a screen printing shop; mold-making and model facility; ceramics studio; wood shop; digital printing system; a letterpress; and audio/video

production space. This is the kind of infrastructure that enables growth of a new sector of our regional economy.

The announcement follows news that Astoria businessman Greg Newenhof has agreed to buy and restore the former Flavel family home at 15th Street and Franklin Avenue. After more than a quarter century of neglect, it promises to be the ultimate residential remake.

Now we look ahead with optimism to another piece of the jigsaw: the downtown Flavel commercial properties.

The appalling decay of these buildings — particularly their prominent storefronts on Commercial Street — has been a blight on our community for too long. Now long-running legal issues appear to be resolved, and they, too, are for sale.

We look forward to an innovator with a solid financial background investing money and sweat into making these important pieces of our downtown a credit to our community.

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

On Monday Jeb Bush — or I guess that’s Jeb!, since he seems to have decided to replace his family name with a punctuation mark — finally made his campaign for the White House official, and gave us a first view of his policy goals.

First, he says that if elected he would double America’s rate of economic growth to 4 percent. Second, he would make it possible for every American to lose as much weight as he or she wants, without any need for dieting or exercise.

OK, he didn’t actually make that second promise. But he might as well have. It would have been just as realistic as promising 4 percent growth, and considerably less irresponsible.

I’ll get to Jeb!onomics in a minute, but first let me tell you about a dirty little secret of economics — namely, that we don’t know very much about how to raise the long-run rate of economic growth. Economists do know how to promote recovery from temporary slumps, even if politicians usually refuse to take their advice. But once the economy is near full employment, further growth depends on raising output per worker. And while there are things that might help make that happen, the truth is that nobody knows how to conjure up rapid productivity gains.

Why, then, would Bush imagine that he is privy to secrets that have evaded everyone else?

One answer, which is actually kind of funny, is that he believes that the growth in Florida’s economy during his time as governor offers a role model for the nation as a whole. Why is that funny? Because everyone except Bush knows that, during those years, Florida was booming thanks to the mother of all housing bubbles. When the bubble burst, the state plunged into a deep slump, much worse than that in the nation as a whole. Taking the boom and the slump together, Florida’s longer-term economic performance has,

if anything, been slightly worse than the national average.

The key to Bush’s record of success, then, was good political timing: He managed to leave office before the unsustainable nature of the boom he now invokes became obvious.

But Bush’s economic promises reflect more than self-aggrandizement. They also reflect his party’s habit of boasting about its ability to deliver rapid economic growth, even though there’s no evidence at all to justify such boasts. It’s as if a bunch of relatively short men made a regular practice of swaggering around, telling everyone they see that they’re 6 feet 2 inches tall.

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To be more specific, the next time you encounter some conservative going on about growth, you might want to bring up the following list of names and numbers: Bill Clinton, 3.7; Ronald Reagan, 3.4; Barack Obama, 2.1; George H.W. Bush, 2.0; George W. Bush, 1.6. Yes, that’s the last five presidents — and the average rate of growth of the U.S. economy during their time in office (so far, in Obama’s case). Obviously, the raw numbers don’t tell the whole story, but surely there’s nothing in that



Paul Krugman

list to suggest that conservatives possess some kind of miracle cure for economic sluggishness. And, as many have pointed out, if Jeb! knows the secret to 4 percent growth, why didn’t he tell his father and brother?

Or consider the experience of Kansas, where Gov. Sam Brownback pushed through radical tax cuts that were supposed to drive rapid economic growth. “We’ll see how it works. We’ll have a real live experiment,” he declared. And the results of the experiment are now in: The promised boom never arrived, big deficits did, and, despite savage cuts to schools and other public services, Kansas eventually had to raise taxes again (with the pain concentrated on lower-income residents).

Why, then, all the boasting about growth? The short answer, surely, is that it’s mainly about finding ways to sell tax cuts for the wealthy. Such cuts are unpopular in and of themselves, and even more so if, like the Kansas tax cuts for businesses and the affluent, they must be paid for with higher taxes on working families and/or cuts in popular government programs. Yet low taxes on the rich are an overriding policy priority on the right — and promises of growth miracles let conservatives claim that everyone will benefit from trickle-down, and maybe even that tax cuts will pay for themselves.

There is, of course, a term for basing a national program on this kind of self-serving (and plutocrat-serving) wishful thinking. Way back in 1980, George H.W. Bush, running against Reagan for the presidential nomination, famously called it “voodoo economic policy.” And while Reaganolatry is now obligatory in the Republican Party, the truth is that he was right.

So what does it say about the state of the party that Bush’s son — often portrayed as the moderate, reasonable member of the family — has chosen to make himself a high priest of voodoo economics? Nothing good.

Hearts broken open

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

In a recent column, I asked readers if they had discovered a purpose in life and, if so, how they had discovered it. A few thousand wrote essays. I was struck by how elemental life is. Most people found their purpose either through raising children or confronting illness or death.

Scott Addington writes, “As is often the case, my purpose became clearly evident after I had stopped looking for it. On October 11, 1995, my daughter was born. Beginning with that moment, there has never been the slightest doubt regarding the purpose and source of meaning in my life. Being a father is the most meaningful and rewarding pursuit a man could ever hope to experience.”

Not only in parenting, but also in teaching. The essays from teachers ring with special clarity and force. Many of them see clearly how their day-to-day activities are in line with their ultimate end. This has its downside after people leave teaching.

Carolyn from Michigan writes, “Before class, I sometimes would sit in the chair of a student who was having a lot of trouble and pray that I might be a blessing to him that day. Yes, for 37 years I was a teacher, the last 25 as a high school special education teacher. That was my purpose; that was my calling.

“But now I am retired, and I am adrift. What is my purpose now? I struggle with it every day. When

I was teaching, I would bound out of bed at 6:15 every morning. Now I wake early, but stay under the covers, filled with a world’s worth of anxiety. It might have been better had I died while trying to teach students with learning disabilities the basics of geometry.”

Quite frequently purpose emerges from loss. Greg Sunter from Brisbane, Australia, writes: “Four years ago, my wife of 21 years passed away as the result of a brain tumor. Her passage from diagnosis to death was less than six months. As shocking as that time was, almost as shocking was the sense of personal growth and awakened understanding that has come from the experience for me through reflection and inner work — to a point that I feel almost guilty about how significant my own growth has been as a result of my wife’s death.

“In his book ‘A Hidden Wholeness,’ Parker Palmer writes about the two ways in which our hearts can be broken: the first imagining the heart as shattered and scattered; the second imagining the heart broken open into new capacity, holding more of both our own and the world’s suffering and joy, despair and hope. The image of the heart broken open has become the driving force of my life in the years since my wife’s death. It has become the purpose to my life.”

Some people’s lives organize around a certain role or calling. “My moniker could be ‘formidable advocate,’” writes Georgian Lussier. After her brother suffered a brain injury, she learned to help people work through the maze of the health care system. Now she helps older women find work.



David Brooks

But, for many people, the purpose of life is simply to live it fully. Many people don’t necessarily see their lives as pointing toward God or as defined by some mission statement. They seek to drink in life at full volume, to experience and help others richly.

Jae Brown was driving after smoking weed and drinking when he was pulled over. He confessed everything to the cop, who saw that Brown was in college and whispered, “Don’t let your friends get you in trouble you can’t get yourself out of;” and let him go. “My purpose in life,” Brown writes, “is to mentor, provide that whisper in someone’s ear that changes their life.”

The great struggle in essay after essay is to remain emotionally vital and intellectually alive.

Zachary Krowitz, 21, read the essays written in response to the column and concluded that “this desire for something that is surely true is present in all of us, and reflects an attempt to know what we really want. ... Unfortunately, based both on the essays written in response to your column and common experience, such meaning is often lost as one travels through life, emotions become duller and less clear.”

Alayne Crossman, 42, is able to keep her emotion flowing at full pitch. “Without the love of my family I wouldn’t be who I am today. It means I cry during ‘Frozen,’ every single time. It means I cry when I listen to Van Morrison’s ‘Ancient Highway.’ I am ridiculously sentimental because I choose to remain open to this vast, messy thing we call life.”

For many people, the purpose of life is to have more life. That may not have defined people’s purpose in past eras, when it might have had more to do with the next life, or obedience to a creed. But many today seek to live with hearts wide open.

Where to write

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