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Long live the festivals

Astoria Regatta is revived. Will the Music Festival survive?

The passing of another edition of the Clatsop County Fair is a reminder of the vitality of our rural agricultural culture. Last week our photographer Joshua Bessex evoked the sights, smells and sounds of the fair. It is a delight to discover a new generation of boys and girls who are raising animals through the 4-H program. The fair is also a window on the home grown culinary and fiber arts.

If the fair has passed, the Astoria Regatta cannot be far behind. The signature event — the Grand Land Parade — is Saturday. Not that long ago, the Regatta was on hard times, as its leadership waned. The Astoria chef Peter Roscoe took the lead in reviving the festival's leadership. This year Kevin Leahy has a major hand in running things.

We take the operations of our festivals for granted until they hit a rock. After some years of maintaining the festival's direction, the absence of Lektro President Eric Paulson caused an earthquake. That's when Roscoe arrived. It is not unusual for a festival as old as Regatta — over 100 years — to have a break in smooth sailing. The Pendleton Round-Up, 105 years old, had its lean leadership years.

Now we are witnessing a similar, but more tentative transition in a much younger fete, the Astoria Music Festival. That topic was alive in last week's Friday Exchange section.

Whether or not the conductor Keith Clark has another festival in him — without funded professional management — the festival is approaching a post-Clark era, whether he and his supporters will admit or plan for that. The longer it is postponed, the more likely that the music festival will become the responsibility of another organization.

These festivals — Scandinavian, music, county fair and Regatta — feed our regional economy. They also make our culture richer.

Long may they live.

Traffic fatalities deserve action

Deadly highways shouldn't come as surprise

We as a local society manage to rationalize or gloss over the individual traffic fatalities that occur with alarming frequency in Clatsop County. So our story last week finding 77 such deaths here between 2004 and 2014 is exceptionally attention-grabbing. This is a horrifying statistic that deserves action.

The deadliness of our highways — particularly U.S. Highway 101 and U.S. Highway 30 — shouldn't come as a surprise. Just a few years ago, a similar analysis of the decade that ended Dec. 31, 2009 found a similarly disturbing death toll. Over at least the past 15 years, the density per mile of fatal accidents between Astoria and Rainier on Highway 30 resembles that on the Interstate 5, which has far heavier traffic. Highway 26 is almost as bad, as is Highway 101.

One of the pragmatic uses of such information is to identify particularly dangerous intersections or other highway hazards. Last year, crash statistics led the Oregon Department of Transportation to name a 7-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 101 from Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center to Surf Pines Lane as a priority safety improvement project. Getting the work done depends on funding.

The majority of fatal accidents in Clatsop County aren't caused by faulty roads, but by drivers traveling too fast for conditions and straddling or crossing the centerline, according to crash data. This comes as no surprise to anyone here. It is common to observe motorists traveling 70 mph or more in 55 mph zones, particularly on Highways 30 and 26. Add to this the fact that there are many curves and it's easy to see why vehicles sometimes stray from their own lanes. Weekenders in a hurry to get here and residents in a hurry to get to Portland appointments take dangerous chances every day of the year.

It is a mystery why the statistics reported last week do not make any reference to alcohol and drug impairment as a factor. Crashes reported in *The Daily Astorian* certainly sometimes indicate such problems.

Getting into the heart of the matter from a public policy standpoint, one of the greatest single contributors to these deaths is lack of adequate law enforcement. This isn't necessarily a criticism of local Oregon State Police, who presumably do the best they can with the resources at hand. But speeding and other forms of dangerous driving are not getting enough attention, perhaps for want of sufficient funding.

Cross the bridge into Pacific County, Wash., and try traveling to South Bend or Longview going 70 mph. Speed enforcement is far more intense. People up to and including Bill Gates have been ticketed. Whatever Washington state is doing, it is more effective than Oregon in averting highway fatalities. Looking at 2013, in Washington there was one fatal for every 16,000 residents, while in Oregon it was one per 12,500. (Both were safer than the nationwide rate of about one fatal per 9,700 residents.)

These aren't meaningless data points, but human beings who came to sudden, violent ends. They were fathers, mothers, daughters and sons. They leave rending gaps in survivors' lives.

If these deaths were from banditry, heroin overdoses or gunshot wounds, it would be an infamous scandal warranting a massive investigation. The senseless loss of innocent people on our roads deserves an equally strong response.

America's un-Greek tragedies

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

On Friday the government of Puerto Rico announced that it was about to miss a bond payment. It claimed that for technical legal reasons this wouldn't be a default, but that's a distinction without a difference.

So is Puerto Rico America's Greece? No, it isn't, and it's important to understand why.

Puerto Rico's fiscal crisis is basically the byproduct of a severe economic downturn. The commonwealth's government was slow to adjust to the worsening fundamentals, papering over the problem with borrowing. And now it has hit the wall.

What went wrong? There was a time when the island did quite well as a manufacturing center, boosted in part by a special federal tax break. But that tax break expired in 2006, and in any case changes in the world economy have worked against Puerto Rico.

These days manufacturing favors either very-low-wage nations, or locations close to markets that can take advantage of short logistic chains to respond quickly to changing conditions. But Puerto Rico's wages aren't low by global standards. And its island location puts it at a disadvantage compared not just with the U.S. mainland but with places like the north of Mexico, from which goods can be quickly shipped by truck.

The situation is, unfortunately, exacerbated by the Jones Act, which requires that goods traveling between Puerto Rico and the mainland use U.S. ships, raising transportation costs even further.

Paul Krugman

Puerto Rico, then, is in the wrong place at the wrong time. But here's the thing: while the island's economy has declined sharply, its population, while hurting, hasn't suffered anything like the catastrophes we see in Europe. Look, for example, at consumption per capita, which has fallen 30 percent in Greece but has actually continued to rise in Puerto Rico. Why have the human consequences of economic troubles been muted?

The main answer is that Puerto Rico is part of the U.S. fiscal union. When its economy faltered, its payments to Washington fell, but its receipts from Washington — Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and more — actually rose. So Puerto Rico automatically received aid on a scale beyond anything conceivable in Europe.

Compared with Europe, America benefits hugely from having an integrated national budget — but it's not integrated enough to deal with really big regional shocks.

Is Puerto Rico's status as part of the U.S. all good? A recent report commissioned by the commonwealth's government argues that its economy is hurt by sharing the U.S. minimum wage, which raises costs, and also by federal benefits that encourage adults to drop out of the workforce. In principle these complaints could be right. In particular, even economists who support a higher U.S. minimum wage, myself included, generally agree that it could be a problem if set too high relative to productivity — and Puerto Rican productivity is far below mainland levels.

But the evidence that minimum wages or social benefits are really a problem is, as one careful if older study put it, "surprisingly fragile." Notably, Puerto Rico's low rate of labor force participation probably has more to do with outmigration than with welfare: When job opportunities dry up, young, able-bodied workers move elsewhere, while the least employable stay in place. You see the same phenomenon in Appalachia, where the disappearance of coal-mining jobs has induced many workers to leave, while the remaining population makes heavy use of the social safety net.

And how terrible is that, really? The safety net is there to protect people, not places. If a regional economy is left stranded by the shifting tides of globalization, well, that's going to happen now and then. What's important is that workers be able to find opportunities somewhere, and that those unable for whatever reason to take advantage of these opportunities be protected from extreme hardship.

There is, of course, the problem of maintaining public services for those who remain. Compared with Europe, America benefits hugely from having an integrated national budget — but it's not integrated enough to deal with really big regional shocks. And Puerto Rico faces some risk of a death spiral in which the emigration of working-age residents undermines the tax base for those who are left, and deteriorating public services then lead to even more emigration.

What this tells us, in turn, is that even for a part of the United States, too much austerity can be self-defeating. It would, in particular, be a terrible idea to give the hedge funds that have scooped up much of Puerto Rico's debt what they want — basically to destroy the island's education system in the name of fiscal responsibility.

Overall, however, the Puerto Rican story is one of bad times that fall well short of utter disaster. And the saving grace in this situation is big government — a federal system that provides a crucial safety net for American citizens in times of need, wherever they happen to live.

Our sex-obsessed Congress

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

To appreciate the dumbing down of American politics, consider this: Conservative Republicans, indignant about abortion, are trying to destroy a government program that helps prevent 345,000 abortions a year.

Inevitably in politics there are good ideas and bad ideas. But occasionally there are also moronic ideas - such as the House Republican proposal to kill America's main family planning program, Title X.

The upshot would be more pregnancies, more abortions, more AIDS, more sexually transmitted infections and more women dying of cervical and breast cancer. Ending the program would impoverish young mothers and impede the formation of stable two-parent families that conservatives rightly argue help overcome poverty.

It's baffling that House Republicans are trying to eliminate a 45-year-old bipartisan initiative that is one of the country's anti-poverty successes — and also perhaps America's most successful anti-abortion initiative.

Title X began in a Republican administration, that of Richard Nixon. Today, 4,100 clinics supported by Title X provide family planning and also often test for HIV, cure sexually transmitted infections and screen for cervical and breast cancer.

Family planning investments also offer hedge fund-like returns, for a condom or IUD can avert more than $12,000 in average Medicaid spending on a childbirth.

I visited a Title X clinic in Baltimore. Republican members of the House, this is what you're trying to destroy:

A tall 16-year-old girl, nicknamed China (she doesn't know why; she's not Chinese), is being treated for gonorrhea and chlamydia.

"The last time you had sex, did you use a condom?" asks Courtney Pate, a nurse practitioner. China shakes her head.

Nicholas Kristof

Pate hands her a bag of condoms and warns her that if she doesn't use one every time, she risks serious health problems, "like not being able to have a baby when you want to." Pate also grills her on whether she has told her sexual partners about the infections and whether they are getting treated.

When Pate steps out for a moment, I ask China if her boyfriend will accept condoms. China looks doubtful and says, "Maybe." Pate overhears and comes roaring back. "If he doesn't wear a condom, he doesn't get any sex," Pate declares. "These are the rules: No condoms, no sex."

China tells me she doesn't have any other way of getting birth control or treatment for sexually transmitted diseases. Without this clinic, she says, she might well be pregnant and be spreading infections.

As China leaves, Pate cautions her again: "Somebody says, 'Let's have sex without a condom,' you say, 'No, I don't want any needles in my butt! I don't want to see that crazy lady in the clinic again!"

I also met Doretta, who after a pelvic exam at the clinic received a diagnosis of possible cervical cancer. The good news is that it was found early and was treated, and she is expected to be fine.

Title X isn't directly related to the furor over video footage showing Planned Parenthood staff members speaking cavalierly about fetal tissues; the Republican effort to eliminate Title X goes back much earlier. To those offended by the Planned Parenthood videos, if you're infuriated by abortion, you should be channeling more money to Title X, not less.

Since 1980, inflation-adjusted spending on Title X family planning has fallen by two-thirds. Now the House proposes eliminating it altogether, while the Senate proposes a 10 percent cut.

This in a country where half of all pregnancies are unintended, where 30 percent of American teenage girls become pregnant by age 19.

The Guttmacher Institute, which studies reproductive health, calculates that Title X family planning centers prevent about 1 million unintended pregnancies a year, of which 345,000 would have ended in abortion. It says that every year Title X clinics avert some 53,000 cases of chlamydia and 8,800 cases of gonorrhea, and save the lives of 1,100 women who would otherwise die of cervical cancer.

In other words, Title X prevents an abortion about once every 90 seconds.

Family planning investments also offer hedge fund-like returns, for a condom or IUD can avert more than $12,000 in average Medicaid spending on a childbirth. Guttmacher calculates that every $1 invested in public family planning services saves $7 in public expenditures. This is a program that saves money as well as lives.

Opponents of Title X preen and moralize, even as their behavior has dreadfully immoral consequences. Conservatives emphasize that poverty is often linked to personal irresponsibility. Are youths like China irresponsible when they have sex without a condom? Sure they are! They're kids. What's harder to understand is the irresponsibility of Republican House members.

My question to them: Do you really want to increase the odds that kids like China will get pregnant, will spread disease, will become impoverished single mothers, will get mired in a cycle of poverty, will get abortions — or will die of breast or cervical cancer — and do you really think this is moral behavior to be proud of?