

OPINION

editor@dailyastorian.com



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OUR VIEW

Fairgrounds should be a treasure

Drive through the Western states and as you reach the outskirts of many small towns you'll pass the county fairgrounds.

Many show signs of wear and age; but some are so neatly groomed, crisply painted and clearly signed that they signal a community that exudes pride.

In Clatsop County, our fairgrounds are somewhat hidden from view south of Astoria off the winding Oregon Highway 202. You have to know where you are going to get there and the full scope of the operation isn't immediately visible from the road.

Out of sight, out of mind?

Well, perhaps, but it costs \$1.4 million a year to operate the fairgrounds. Because a chunk of that is taxpayers' money, it is essential to run it in an efficient manner.

The site is home to the weeklong Clatsop County Fair, and for years has hosted the Astoria Warrenton Crab, Seafood & Wine Festival and the Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival.

The operation is far too expensive to maintain with revenue from only three events, so a succession of managers and boards have sought to use the facility to its utmost, with concerts, monster truck rallies and circuses.

Behind-the-scenes difficulties in the fair's operations and recent loose spending practices emerged in public view during a recent report to the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners.

The budget includes significant dollars earmarked for materials and services, and it was revealed that fair managers have burned through the total, about \$438,000, in just six months.

After much back-and-forth grumbling in a public session, it was suggested that the three road miles between the fairgrounds and the county offices in downtown Astoria are a barrier to effective communication — and may have led to that "out of sight" mindset.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Thousands of people attended the 2017 Clatsop County Fair in Astoria.

With respect, in this day and age, that's baloney. Governments elsewhere and private-sector operations use technology to bridge geographical gaps far greater than three miles — and continue to do so every workday. There is no excuse for leaders at different offices of any organization to be permanently out of touch, save perhaps briefly during a rare blizzard.

The fair is a strange creature, of course. It's not a Clatsop County department. It's a separate entity and thus not supervised by the county manager. Its board consists of five volunteers appointed by the county commissioner. The level of supervision of paid

fair staff depends on the diligence of this volunteer board. And the county's awareness of any potential difficulties depends largely on its liaison, an elected commissioner, currently Lisa Clement.

Rather than point fingers, we choose to take an optimistic tone.

Fair funding is a complicated matter. Income is subject to change. And, of course, North Coast weather causes significant maintenance issues. Rental fees, hotel taxes and revenue from a voter-supported levy figure into the mix. Since serious financial problems were addressed back in 2006, voters have consistently said they are happy to support it.

Now aspects of the fair's spending

patterns are on the front burner. With the expert assistance of Monica Steele, the county's budget and finance director, they should be better addressed.

The Clatsop County Fairgrounds can be a jewel in our community if efficiently run by creative thinkers who plan well ahead, make it a priority to effectively maintain the facility and grounds, and listen to staff and patrons when ideas for improvements are suggested.

Fair Board leader Mike Autio told commissioners that he welcomed closer links between the agencies and we're delighted to encourage that. The fair needs to make headlines for the quality and variety of its activities, not for failings in its management.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Common ground is the most uncommon

Politics descended on Seaside as Republican gubernatorial primary hopeful Jeff Smith swung through to meet local party leaders. Smith, who grew up in a cattle ranch in Elgin — "a couple miles outside of La Grande" in Eastern Oregon — is one of nine Republicans seeking to unseat Gov. Kate Brown. He's making his first bid for public office.

"Barack Obama demolished Sen. McCain in Oregon," Smith said in a visit to the Seaside Signal office. "After that I started analyzing Oregon politics.

It's something I've been thinking about for about 10 years. I think I've got a thinking man's strategy to how to approach politics in Oregon."

The answer: You have to be competitive in Multnomah County, home to 1 out of every 5 registered voters in the state.

"You have to be willing to listen to people who have a different way of doing things than the people in the eastern part of the state, or many people out here, too," Smith said. "You have to look for things people really are willing to build common ground on."

Fighting special interests, ending homelessness, battling the drug epidemic, reducing government waste and skyrocketing health care costs are among those issues. "Everybody's suffering from the high costs of medical care," Smith said.

Unfortunately, he acknowledged, some issues have no common ground.

On gun control: "I don't think that's a winning issue for me," he said.

Marijuana: "I don't think there's any common ground to be had with the way marijuana laws are now."



AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

A woman cries as she bows her head in prayer during a vigil for the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.

Endangered species: "You can't find anybody in Eastern Oregon who doesn't have a strong viewpoint about wolves. And the people in Multnomah County have the completely opposite view. There's no middle ground on that."

Smith recognizes that a Republican has not held the governor's office in Oregon in three decades.

"I'm going to try to persuade people to jump on my strategy: you have to listen to people in Multnomah County," he said. "To win, you have to suck some of those people onto your platform. You have to find things people are concerned about and that we have common ground about. Guns are not one of them. Wolves are not one of them."

Divided America

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley's term does not come due for two more years. But during Senate recess, the Democrat came to Seaside in February for a town hall at the Bob Chisholm Community Center.

Like GOP gubernatorial hopeful Smith, the cost of health care is at the top of Merkley's to-do list.

But so are no-go discussion topics like rights for immigrants raised in this country known as "Dreamers," environmental protections and gun control. And while both sides may agree on cutting health care costs, it's unlikely conversation would lead to similar paths to accomplish that.

As Merkley spoke, members of the crowd held up signs that read "AGREE"

or "DISAGREE."

In the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shooting of 17 children at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, frustration boiled over.

When a proposal to ban assault weapons came up, the audience showed near-unanimous agreement. "Please do more," begged one audience member.

Opposition to EPA chief Scott Pruitt's environmental deregulation policy and a plea for immigrants also united the senator and constituents.

Despite the consensus within the community center, the elephant in the room was definitely outside the room.

"I do hear tremendous organizing energy around the country from people who say we're way off track right now," Merkley said. "I really want to see a majority of the House and Senate to stop bad policy and to start the path moving forward."

There is a yin and yang in American politics, Merkley said. "If Trump is the yin, I'm hoping there's a whole lot of 'yang' coming."

The path ahead
Parade? No parade? Wall? No wall? Kneel? Not to kneel?

We're going to have to confront some of those "unbridgeable" topics before we find resolution.

Sometimes it feels like a Civil War has already begun. Not just Democrat versus GOP or Eastern Oregon pitted against Multnomah County, but right here, in the Safeway parking lot where the Prius with the "Black Lives Matter" bumper sticker sits parked next to a pickup truck with the Confederate flag displayed in the back of the cab.

The question now: Who is going to blink first?

R.J. Marx is *The Daily Astorian's* South County reporter and editor of the *Seaside Signal* and *Cannon Beach Gazette*.