

Alone, but not lonely

Dear Annie: I read your column in the local paper, and I've noticed that folks always write in to say that they are older and alone or in a new town — "How do I make friends," etc. So, I wonder if there are other people out there like my brother and me.

We are both in our mid- to late-50s. Our parents were quite the social couple. Dad was always the one who wore a lampshade on his head, the life of the party. However, my brother and I are the opposite. Don't get me wrong, we have childhood, lifelong friends and we are always there when things get going. But I, personally, have not made a "new" friend in probably 25 years, and I couldn't care less. My brother is the same way.

So many people are fakes, phonies, liars, etc., that neither of us have any interest in cultivating a new go-to person in our lives. I think it involves too much work and frankly, don't want to be bothered. I have a full-time job and commute 50 miles round-trip daily. When I come home, I want my time to myself.

I do attend church weekly and do love going out and shopping, but I prefer to do it alone. I always strike up conversations with strangers, but don't tell me your name; I'll forget it five seconds later. I am not intimidated by the general public and even ran for political office once. But I have zero interest in becoming friendly enough with people to want to socialize in any way with them, and my brother is the same way. We both are married, with children on their own. Are we odd, selfish, lazy or so laid back that we get ourselves and aren't into being impressed by anyone? I'm sure one day, when I am older, I will regret this, but for now, I...

— *Love Being Lonely*

Dear Love Being Lonely: You might enjoy being alone more than most, but you're not lonely. You have close family and friends and are content with your social life. You're doing fine, and I say if it ain't broke, don't fix it. A few deep personal connections are worth more than a hundred shallow ones. You don't have to be the lampshade-wearing type to lead a bright life.

Dear Annie: I've noticed a new customer service trend. When I'm checking out at the grocery store or doing banking, etc., the person behind the counter will ask me, "Are you doing anything fun today?" Or, "What are you doing this afternoon?"

Having been trained by my parents to be friendly and polite, I have actually told these complete strangers what are my plans.

Now I go running for the self-checkout aisle because I don't want to feel rude. I'd like to know if anyone else is as put out as I am about being asked personal questions. I mean, maybe I'm going to my child's funeral, or having chemotherapy, or not going somewhere at all because I'm struggling with depression.

I've chosen dead silence rather than a response. But I would be curious to know if others are experiencing this and how they feel about it. — *Put Out at the Checkout*

Dear Put Out at the Checkout: For anyone enduring such hardships as the ones you cited, the go-to question, "How are you," could be equally upsetting or inane. I don't think we ought to give up on chit-chatting with one another altogether because of that. That said, should someone seem to not want to engage in small talk, we should try to pick up those cues and respect their space.

DEAR ANNIE



ANNIE LANE
Creators
Syndicate Inc.

Amazon reaps tax breaks with Eastern Oregon data centers

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

Amazon's ever-expanding footprint in Seattle — and the polarizing growing pains that accompany it — contrasts what's currently happening in Eastern Oregon.

There, Amazon's cloud computing division recently won approval for another data center, along with a hefty tax break. It's the seventh Amazon data complex to be built in the area. There are four operations at various stages of construction or completion in Umatilla County, and three others in neighboring Morrow County.

The web commerce giant is expanding briskly on the Columbia Plateau while deliberately keeping a low profile. But its accountants undoubtedly have been busy calculating tax incentives, along with sufficient community contributions to maintain good relations.

The Hermiston City Council and the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners held separate votes last week, at which they unanimously gave Amazon a total exemption from property taxes for 15 years for a new data center campus on the south side of Hermiston. In exchange, the company agreed to pay community service fees for fire protection, schools, local government and other special taxing districts, albeit at a much lower rate.

Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said it is hard to estimate the net value of the tax break.

"I've run the numbers 37,000 different times and I think the economic principles tell me that we're giving away exactly zero," he told the county commissioners Wednesday.

"In my estimation if we decline them, we won't get anything from them, because they will go someplace else," said County Commission Chair George Murdock, continuing the line of reasoning.

A few skeptical taxpayers came before the city and



This Amazon data center site outside Boardman is one of seven operating or planned complexes in Eastern Oregon.

county boards last week to wonder out loud why a giant, profitable corporation can avoid paying property taxes while everyone else pays up. Amazon Web Services did not reply to multiple requests for comment.

The Hermiston data center tax break passed with a minimum of fuss compared to last year's drama around the country involving states and localities competing for the Amazon HQ2 prize. Google, Apple and Facebook have taken advantage of the same Oregon tax incentives that Amazon is using for gigantic data centers the other tech companies have built in The Dalles and Prineville.

The tech giants are taking advantage of tax incentive programs created by the Oregon Legislature decades ago, long before data centers were a thing. The most popular are the Enterprise Zone incentives, which offer a property tax exemption during construction and then for up to 15 years more, if certain conditions for minimum investment, rural job creation and wage levels are met. Another property tax-lowering alternative used in a few cases by Amazon is called the Strategic Investment Program, which also can last as long as 15 years.

Umatilla County assessment and taxation department director Paul Chalmers said the initial data center developments received shorter tax exemptions than the more

recent ones. He said Amazon is starting to pay regular property tax in phases as its oldest data centers in the area come onto the tax rolls. "Old" is a relative term though, as the flurry of data center development in Umatilla and Morrow counties dates back less than 10 years.

Chalmers said northeastern Oregon is drawing server farms for a number of reasons led by inexpensive power rates, water availability and a favorable climate during much of the year for cooling the hard-working computer servers.

Critics at left-leaning policy watchdog groups argue the attractive qualities of central and Eastern Oregon should make it unnecessary to offer a subsidy, or as big of a subsidy, to data center operators like Amazon.

"These tax breaks tend to be a waste of money," said Juan Carlos Ordóñez, communications director for the Oregon Center for Public Policy. "They rob local government of necessary resources."

The executive director of the group Tax Fairness Oregon, Jody Wiser, said the Legislature should revisit the rules for the tax breaks being used for data centers.

"There should be a maximum amount per job created," Wiser told public radio. "We're giving away more than we need to."

A single data center doesn't need many techni-

cians to operate, but there are now so many data centers in northeastern Oregon that the state and local governments estimate direct employment of several hundred workers who are paid well above the average wage for those rural counties.

"This is the best possible economic development opportunity a city like Hermiston in Eastern Oregon could get," Morgan told public radio in an interview. "They're low impact on services, but relatively high on revenue generation."

Four years ago, Blue Mountain Community College started a data center technician training and certificate program to meet the rising demand for workers. The training program in Boardman has been filled to capacity every year since. Last year, Amazon gave money for scholarships to students in the nine-month program.

As part of the tax incentive agreement for the new data center complex in Hermiston, Amazon committed to a minimum investment of \$200 million. If it turns out like the other power-hungry data center complexes nearby, the new complex will be a series of windowless, gray warehouse-like buildings packed with computer servers and memory banks. The most notable feature to a passerby likely is the unusual amount of fans, heat exchangers and water tanks for cooling.

Halloween: Pumpkin patches carry on tradition



An evening at a pumpkin patch.

Continued from Page B1

In the seventh century, Pope Gregory III changed All Martyrs Day to All Saints Day and moved it to Nov. 1. The night before was dubbed "All Hallows Eve," among other names. The Irish, among other Gaelic speaking people, kept the holiday alive and brought it to America during the last half of the 19th century. The tradition gradually became known as Halloween.

Fast forward a few centuries, and we have suburban lawn displays that cost thousands, households that turn off the lights only after they've tossed their 200th candy bar into a sack and retail sales that are surpassed only by Christmas in its buying fervor.

A costumed affair

The idea of costumes is to appear as someone you're not, or as someone you really are. In a word, fantasy. Though Halloween in America has been geared toward children, costumers say adults form the largest costume user group today. In the mid-70s, comic books culture took off as people embraced the fantastic. Movies and online gaming have multiplied the effects, and a whole subculture has emerged. Popular Halloween costumes emulate culture icons like superheroes and Disney characters. Spiderman, Captain Marvel, the Lion King and Star Wars characters are still among the top contenders, but Fortnite, League of Legends and World of Warcraft characters are showing gains. Classic children's costumes include witches, princesses, pirates and dinosaurs.

The holiday's roots

Since most Americans no longer live on a farm, traditional activities like bonfires, apple cider tasting and hayrides are now enjoyed by trips to the pumpkin patch. I visited two such places early in October to investigate, and though the farms themselves could not be more different, they shared the same festive spirit.

The pumpkin patch at R&B Pleasant Hill Farms north of Kelso, Washington, exemplifies the old-fashioned feeling you find at that kind of small, family owned operation. It features an array of pumpkins of all types and sizes, a huge pond with wild Canadian geese and hayrides. This farm is family friendly and has an easy, country air.

When I arrived at the corn maze at Bella Organic Farms on Sauvie Island on a Friday afternoon, there were about 500 cars in the parking field. In the two hours I stayed, the flow of traffic never stopped; this is a big operation. There are two multi-acre corn mazes, hayrides, a cow train, a wine and beer garden, a grass field with thousands of pumpkins to choose from, food concession stands and at nightfall, a giant bonfire. The effect is reminiscent of a big county fair.

Halloween is still a big deal for most Americans. We like to hold on to our fears and our fantasies. Currently, I'm afraid all this pumpkin talk has left me fantasizing about is a big piece of pumpkin pie.

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Washington.