

OPINION



the Astorian

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OUR VIEW

Railroads need to do better

It's been a rough couple of years for ag shippers. Truck and driver shortages, port delays in the U.S. and Asia and spotty service from railroads. The list goes on.

Except for one thing. While the supply chain has always been subject to longshore union slowdowns or other factors, the ability of railroads to provide adequate, on-time and consistent service had been suspect long before the COVID-19 pandemic or other supply chain problems happened.

This year, an American Farm Bureau analysis showed the seven Class I railroads, which handle 94% of the nation's freight, had 137,000 unfilled orders for grain cars in the first three months of this year.

This is not an isolated incident. In the first three months of last year, 93,000 orders were unfilled and other orders were 11 or more days overdue, resulting in lost contracts, flour and feed mill closures and other fallout, according to the analysis.

That's not all. The railroads' performance is so inconsistent that some customers can count on them only to be late.

"If our expectation is that they're 10 days late, but they're consistently 10 days late, we can plan," Paul Katovich, general manager of HighLine Grain Growers in Waterville, Washington, told Capital Press reporter Matthew Weaver. "If we think it's going to be 10 days late, but then it's 40 days late, that's a big problem."

Berkshire Hathaway, a rich conglomerate that owns PacifiCorp, Geico and a bushel basket of other corporations, bought BNSF Railway — then known as Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp. — in 2009 for \$44 billion. At the time, it



Getty Images

The Surface Transportation Board is requiring railroads to come up with recovery plans because of poor performance.

was Berkshire's largest acquisition, but within five years the railroad's profits had more than covered the cost of the purchase, according to a Business Insider article headlined, "Warren Buffett Made A Deal In 2009 That Was So Good You Could Say He Stole It."

Berkshire is managed by Buffett, one of the richest men on the planet. Early on, he spoke at length about investing billions of dollars in BNSF to improve it.

However, in his annual letter to Berkshire shareholders in 2018, he conceded that he and his managers had come up short.

"During the year, BNSF disappointed many of its customers," the Berkshire CEO wrote. "These shippers depend on us, and service failures can badly hurt their businesses."

Now, four years later, it's the same old story, even as BNSF continues to rack up profits as one of Berkshire's cash cows.

Last year, BNSF had net income of almost \$6 billion. To its credit, BNSF plans to spend \$3.5 billion this year on maintenance and upgrades.

But what about other railroads? Union Pacific also serves much of the West. A publicly traded company, Union Pacific reported net revenue last year of \$6.5 billion. It also spent \$7.3 billion to buy back shares from investors, according to Zacks Equity Research.

At the same time, railroads have cut their payrolls "to the barebones in order to reduce costs," according to Martin Oberman, chairman of the Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency investigating

the performance of the nation's railroads. That's 45,000 employees laid off in the past four years, or 29% of the total workforce.

While both BNSF and Union Pacific have been investing in improvements, they still fall short of providing adequate, on-time service.

The Surface Transportation Board, which oversees railroads, has a big job on its hands.

It not only has to coax well-heeled railroads to do a better job serving their customers, but it has to make up for the years in the past the board itself let service deteriorate.

At stake is the U.S. economy as a whole — and the financial well-being of every farmer, rancher and food processor in the nation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Step forward

While I am disappointed with the outcome of the Gearhart firehouse bond measure, I am encouraged by the large number of residents who voted "no," and yet expressed strong admiration and gratitude for our volunteer firemen and firewomen, and acknowledged the obvious need to replace our present 60-year-old structure.

I appeal to this specific group of residents to step forward and lead the project to achieve the replacement of our outdated facility. I agree with Teddy Roosevelt, who famously said that it is not the critic who counts, but rather, the doer of deeds.

I want to acknowledge and thank those many residents who have devoted countless hours, with the goal of meeting a critical need of our community, which scores of city leaders have been promoting since 2006. The cost of delay has been enormous.

GARY GILLAM
Gearhart

New idea

A few weeks ago, I wrote a letter regarding the big giant hole in Astoria. I proposed they fill it with wild donkeys and name it the A**hole. Then I thought we could keep the name, but fill it with statues of politicians.

Now I have a new idea. I propose we keep the name, but move the entire hole to Gearhart. Then we fill it with photos of those people who voted against the recent firehouse bond.

They all deserve some credit for screwing over their friends and neighbors. Especially their leader. It takes a special kind of person to think only of themselves, and yet when their house catches fire, or their loved ones are involved in a car crash, these same people will be praying out loud that the fire department gets there in time.

These people refuse to support their community, and yet demand and expect the services the community provides. Fire-

fighters are willing to risk their lives for you, and sometimes they die trying, and this is how you repay them?

These people are volunteers, willing to come out 24/7 just to save your butts. Pretty disgusting all the way around. You all must be very proud of yourselves.

Let's move the big giant hole to Gearhart and give these folks the credit they deserve. Everybody wins here. Astoria gets rid of the hole, the "no" voters get some recognition and the rest of the community knows whom they can count on.

DAVE BERGQUIST
Astoria

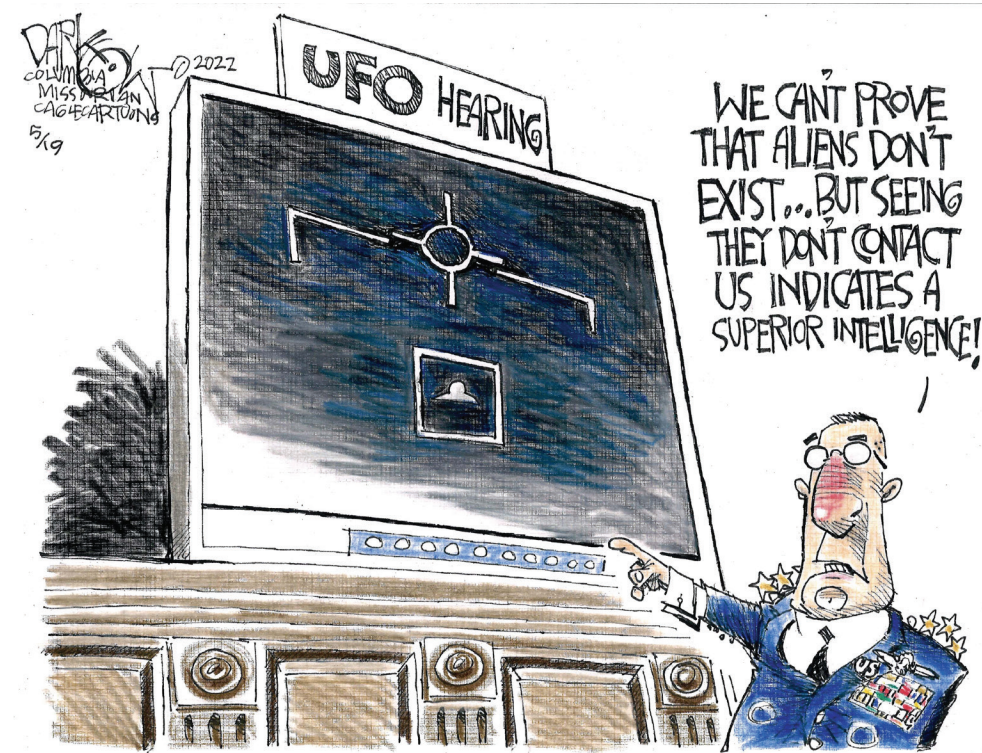
A civilizing influence

As a participant in a recent local authors lecture series at the Warrenton Community Library, I had the pleasure of getting to know the facility, its director, Kelly Knudsen, and some of the library friends board members. I was very impressed with the facility, and Kelly's strong commitment to serving the people of Warrenton.

Kelly and the friends board are currently devising innovative programming, such as the authors series, in order to encourage more adults to familiarize themselves with the library, and begin visiting more often. The presence of a food bank drop-off site in front of the building attests to the library staff's dedication to feeding the body as well as the mind.

Libraries nationally, particularly those in small rural communities, have been under siege. Securing funding to remain open, pay for adequate staff, and modernize to include computer access, has been a big challenge in the digital age. The Warrenton Community Library is no exception.

To those who think that libraries aren't relevant any more, I say nothing could be further from the truth. Libraries have always been at the core of a healthy, coherent community. Their quiet atmosphere provides a safe place where all are equal, and all are welcome; a place to slow down, relax and open your mind to new ideas. Libraries are a civilizing influence in



a world growing evermore chaotic. Their success is indicative of a community that cares. Please support your local library.

ROGER DORBAND
Astoria

highway.
FERNANDO ARELLANO SOTO
Astoria

How can we expect?

How can we expect our younger generation to succeed? With the rise of housing prices, how can we expect younger people to be able to afford living on their own?

Many young people here are attending Clatsop Community College to further their education in order to have a successful future in the field they choose. While in college, the amount of time these kids can work is limited, and many cannot afford to be paying thousands on an apartment with such low income, while also trying to pay for their education.

I believe if we cannot make more cheaper housing and living options, then we will have less people attending our local college, and living in this area in general.

TAYLIN REGIER
Astoria

Dangerous

Old Highway 30 needs to be fixed. I first moved to Oregon five years ago, and to this day, I still remember the first time driving down that highway, having to constantly sway away from potholes, and taking on all the larger ones that could not be avoided.

I will not lie — after a while, I did become more accustomed to driving on this highway, but for those who are just passing through for their first time, it can be dangerous combined with the heavy rain and snow we get. It can, more often than not, result in a car accident.

So I repeat again, something has to be done to help fix Old Highway 30, or more and more accidents will occur, causing more crosses to be put up along our