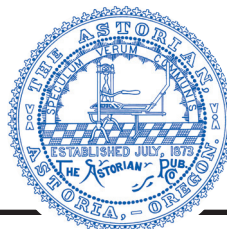


OPINION

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GUEST COLUMN

Oregon can learn from Scandinavia

Imagine a community where homeless individuals aren't living downtown, in parks and along busy streets and freeways.

That might be reality in parts of Oregon, but not in Salem, where I live, or in Portland, Eugene, Bend or many other cities.

Yet there are cities without visible homeless encampments and without panhandlers, without street-side trash and with little if any graffiti. There are cities where trust is so ingrained in the public psyche that bicycles can be left unguarded, and where outdoor cafes and public plazas have chairs with pillows for public use with nary a security



DICK HUGHES

device in sight.

It was a shock last month – a welcome one – to discover these cities are the norm in Scandinavia. It was with sadness that our drive home from Portland International Airport showed we indeed were back in the State of Homelessness.

That is why I am writing this column, the second and presumably final one related to my May trip to Northern Europe, primarily Scandinavia. It's not to say, "Look at me. I spent almost three weeks in Europe and came home with the answers to Oregon's problems."

Not at all. My look was cursory. However, one value of travel is it can shake us out of ruts and broaden our perspective.

If the Nordic countries can substantially reduce homelessness, they give hope for the rest of us. We must figure out what works best in our situations and be fully committed.

Two things stood out: 1. Finland and Norway took concrete steps and didn't let up. 2. They addressed homelessness as a housing issue, not a moral failing. That should give reassurance to public officials who doubt the housing first model and who believe homeless individuals who are drug or alcohol-dependent or mentally ill should first be "cured" before receiving housing.

I'm not suggesting Scandinavian systems could or should be transferrable to other countries, particularly the United States. But our minimal progress through



Homelessness has decreased in Finland through an emphasis on housing.

Y-Foundation

IF THE NORDIC COUNTRIES CAN SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCE HOMELESSNESS, THEY GIVE HOPE FOR THE REST OF US. WE MUST FIGURE OUT WHAT WORKS BEST IN OUR SITUATIONS AND BE FULLY COMMITTED.

the decades – despite thousands of committee meetings, umpteen bookshelves of plans we've written, and millions or billions of dollars we've spent – is a local, state and national disgrace.

This is not to disparage the boots-on-the-ground work being done in my community and elsewhere by many excellent organizations. But where is the overwhelming public leadership and political will to match Oregonians' belief that homelessness is the state's No. 1 issue?

Some ideas can be transferrable. For example, visits by Oregon legislators and corrections officials to Norwegian prisons a few years ago inspired prison reform here. The Department of Corrections has launched initiatives on employee wellness, the institution environment and rehabilitation of adults in custody.

However, Scandinavian society is unique. The countries are smaller in population than the large U.S. states. Trust in government, in the private sector and in collaborative decision-making is woven into their societal fabric. Though Scandinavians have an exceedingly high cost of living, they report a high quality of life

and rank high on the global happiness scale. In contrast, Oregonians and our fellow Americans remain distrustful of government ... and of one another, it seems.

Scandinavia and the other Nordic countries also embrace an unusual welfare system: Everyone receives services regardless of household income. To support that system, Scandinavians pay far higher taxes and have a far larger public sector workforce than in America. Citizens receive mostly free universal health care; free education from preschool through college; and generous old-age pensions. Many of the benefits enhance participation in the workforce, such as highly subsidized child care and after-school programs.

Make no mistake. This is not a paean to how wonderful Scandinavia is.

For example, the region lags the U.S. on accessibility for the mobility impaired. The absence of ramps around steps, the lack of curb cuts, and the ubiquitous cobblestone streets and paths made wheelchair use difficult.

I experienced this first hand. I'm still regaining strength from my breakthrough

COVID-19 case last fall and wound up breaking a wheelchair on Stockholm cobblestones. And at one museum, the elevator didn't work. At another, there were escalators but no elevator.

In contrast, it was good to read that Lincoln City is following other communities by providing rollout pathways and free beach wheelchairs at three beaches.

A few other things that struck me about Northern Europe:

- Patriotism, participation in national holidays and reverence for history were evident throughout the culture.
- Scandinavian students are required to learn English in school and often must take a third language.
- Movement among countries is normal. Our Stockholm minibus driver was from Estonia. Our Copenhagen driver was a Brit who lives in Denmark with his Danish wife and their family. They also have a vacation home in Spain.
- Public university in Poland is free to students who earn high enough scores in high school. Students whose scores are too low can pay to attend private universities.
- Norway, Denmark and Sweden are democracies with monarchies. People apparently like having royalty, although their government runs on a parliamentary system.

• Scandinavia is becoming more religiously diverse, including an increasing number of Muslim residents. The population as whole is turning more secular, like the Pacific Northwest.

• Norway has a love-hate relationship with the fossil fuel industry. North Sea oil drilling has saved the economy and the national treasury. Yet a majority of new passenger vehicles sold are electric and are heavily promoted by the government. Fuel prices are so high that many commuters rely on bicycles. Everywhere we went, pedestrians were alerted to watch out for bicyclists.

• Drivers seemed less aggressive than in the U.S.; a recent report by Insurify said Oregon motorists rank sixth nationally for rude driving. Meanwhile, Oregon is ranked as our nation's second-most bicycle-friendly state, trailing only Massachusetts in the League of American Bicyclists' annual report.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A call to fathers

I wonder how the grieving fathers in Uvalde, Texas, would have reacted if, a few days after the shooting, their local newspaper ran an ad for the same style assault weapon that killed their children? Certainly there would have been outrage, angry calls to the newspaper, maybe some subscription cancellations.

Though far from Texas, how should the fathers of Astoria react to our local newspaper running such an ad? Shortly after the Uvalde tragedy, the front page of an advertising insert in The Astorian featured a Sig Sauer M400 Tread, described online as a very affordable, "starter AR-15."

The fathers of Astoria should not become complacent just because Astoria's schoolchildren have not yet been targeted. With the number of AR-15s in the country, it's certain that there are quite a few in our county. There are also plenty of mental health disorders. The combination is lethal, and shouldn't be downplayed. It can happen here.

What are you fathers to make of a community newspaper's putting advertising dollars ahead of helping reduce the proliferation of assault weapons? Advertising AR-15-style weapons increases the sale of the weapons, which increases the chances of your kid being killed in school. They can blame the corporate advertising department, or a deranged individual, but newspapers that advertise AR-15-style weapons share a portion of the shooter's culpability.

ROGER DORBAND
Astoria

Swimmingly

David and Goliath makes for a great story ... as a fable. So, David, the Port of Astoria, trying to extract \$300 per passing ship, gets embroiled in a predictable lawsuit with Goliath, some of the most powerful shipping companies in the world.

In the real world realm of endless litigation, our David has nowher near enough rocks to ever cast to slay Goliath. Also, they alienated all the companion upriver ports that opposed this stretch of the imagination from the outset.

Who are the lawyers who are promoting this red herring? How much is their fee? How much money also must be

reimbursed?

If you ask the Port Commission, they'll say everything is going swimmingly. I guess it is ... if you live in a fairy tale world.

CHRIS CONNAWAY
BILL HUNSINGER
Astoria

Transparent

As a Seaside resident, I am concerned that a new planning director and convention center director were hired without a professional candidate search; the process lacked transparency, as well. A professional candidate search is important not only to assure qualified persons are hired, but also to avoid cronyism and political patronage.

The City Council recently conducted a professional candidate search in replacing the city manager. There is no reason why the city manager or assistant city manager could not have used the same, or similar, transparent process to conduct a professional candidate search for positions as important as planning director and convention center director.

It is also puzzling why the outgoing city manager filled these positions so quickly, rather than leave it to his successor, who has already been named to conduct a proper professional search. Taxpayers fund these positions, and the process to fill them should be transparent and professional.

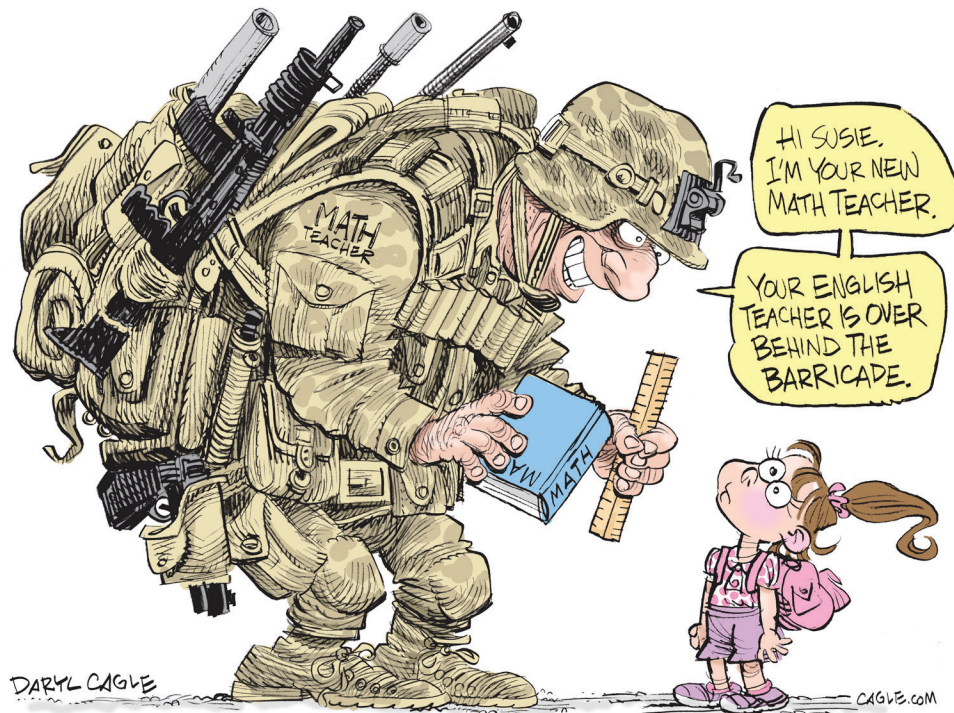
LAURA ALLEN
Seaside

Important observations

The June 4 writer's notebook, "Astoria's historic buildings are our high card," celebrated historic structures.

As one of the "bevy of residential restorations" in Astoria's renaissance, I have important observations after four years of work at the circa 1915 Forsstrom House. We have rescued the structure by constructing its third foundation to take it safely into the next century. It is a true labor of love, and we adore this beautiful old house.

I would like to share the concerns of many owners of Astoria's historic structures. The city, specifically the planning and engineering departments, do



not encourage or assist owners in saving properties. We have experienced repeated obstructions, complexity, confusion and fees on our projects, over and above what is reasonable, from a city that is known for its historic structures.

I find that I cannot recommend Astoria as a locale to work on historic homes. In addition to difficulties we and our contractors have experienced, it is known that some contractors will not work in Astoria due to the city's difficult reputation. This makes progress problematic and costly, due to additional time, waste and legal fees.

With an election approaching, it is essential to query new candidates on their plans as to making the building permit application process less dysfunctional, and the development codes more transparent. It needs to be a part of the election conversation to continue and encourage preservation of our historic structures.

We can bring these questions to candidate forums and facilitate positive changes.

LAURI SERAFIN
Astoria

I fear

Recent letters to the editor have strongly criticized former state Sen. Betsy Johnson for her position on gun control. I am in favor of any laws that

make it more difficult to obtain a firearm. I have no objection with more restrictions to obtain a firearm, if qualified people can ultimately purchase one after they have complied with all background checks or other restrictions required.

However, I object to government ever passing any law that restricts me from continuing to possess an AR-15, which I own, and am fully qualified to use because of my past military service.

The current Democratic Party leadership fell short of being able to pack the Supreme Court, eliminate the filibuster and make other major changes in the U.S. Senate by changing the historic rules of that group. This was an attempt at a ruthless, unprecedented power grab. Democracy is never safe from fanatical political minorities forcing their will on all.

The filibuster exists to protect the minorities when very small majorities wish to jam their political desires down everyone else's throat. Dictatorships come into place because dishonest people misrepresent their intentions, bend the rules to their desire and then rule ruthlessly.

I fear all levels of my government more than anything else, and I will never give up my right to defend myself (even against the government). My weapons never leave my home, but I will use them to protect myself, and my interests, for the future.

SCOTT WIDDICOMBE
Warrenton