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OUR VIEW

Ride the wave of couchsurfing

I have long been a host on couchsurfing.com, an online community where you share some empty space in your residence — a guest bedroom or an extra couch or a little floor space — for visitors passing through your city. It’s the direct ancestor of companies like Airbnb, Lyft and even Uber, which are upsetting the economic appletart and causing government to rethink what actually constitutes “business.” The difference with couchsurfing is that no money is exchanged. It relies solely on an economy of kindness, and sometimes the added perk of a small sweet supplied by your guest. You quickly learn that every place that matters has their own great dessert.

Years ago, a couple from Sweden joined me for a weekend in Butte, Montana, where I then lived. We hit all the best tourist spots in a non-tourist town: Cornish pasties and pork chop sandwiches for lunches, and dinners at the Pekin Noodle Parlor — possibly the oldest Chinese restaurant in America and the place where keno was invented. We had late night shots of Slivovitz at the M&M, which ultimate drunkard Jack Kerouac called the “ideal bar.”

He wrote about it in Esquire magazine in 1970: “It was Sunday night, I had hoped the saloons would stay open long enough for me to see them. They never even closed. In a great old-time saloon I had a giant beer. On the wall was a big electric signboard flashing gambling numbers ...What characters in there: old prospectors, gamblers, whores, miners, Indians, cowboys, tobacco-chewing businessmen! Groups of sullen Indians drank



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rotgut in the john. Hundreds of men played cards in an atmosphere of smoke and spittoons. It was the end of my quest for an ideal bar.”

We had an ideal time there, more than 40 years after Kerouac had swung through those saloon doors.

I stayed in touch with the Swedes, and earlier this year they emailed to say they would be once again roadtripping across the USA. Now is a good time to remind yourself how great it is to be Swedish. First, there are those great genes. Secondly, there is the fact that you get months and months of vacation each year, no matter what job you hold.

So they flew into Boston and headed west, visiting not as strangers requesting space via a website, but as old pals. They made Pendleton and got a quick tour before we headed off with friends to

the Elkhorn Mountains. We hiked and climbed and made time for dancing, shuffleboard and fried food at a roadside bar in Haines, a true slice of Americana. Too soon they were off, heading toward Crater Lake and then down to San Francisco on their way to eventual departure in Los Angeles.

From LAX they fly and drive back to their homes in Växjö — a city I know nothing about, other than they have tasty cookies.

It’s all thanks to the oft-derided Internet. For all of its ability to dehumanize communication, entrepreneurs have created communities where people from across the globe can be introduced to one another and spurred toward real connection. That has its perks.

■
Tim Trainor is the opinion page editor of the East Oregonian. His travel habits are a smörgåsbord.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Only the beginning of debate on GMO labeling in Oregon

The (Eugene) Register-Guard

After the narrow defeat of Oregon Ballot Measure 92 last year, it seemed a foregone conclusion that the initiative’s supporters would return with another proposal to require the labeling of foods containing genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

Despite a record \$20 million spent by agribusiness giants, the measure lost by 837 votes — 49.97 percent yes, 50.03 percent no. It was the closest vote on a statewide ballot measure in more than half a century.

Measure 92’s defeat came after voters in Washington state and California narrowly rejected GMO labeling measures in 2013 and 2012. With polls showing the vast majority of Americans favor the idea of GMO labeling, proponents were gearing up to return in Oregon and other states with new measures based on the premise that people should be given the information they need to make their own decisions about GMOs.

That may not happen if Congress passes a bill that would block state and local laws requiring food labels to disclose genetically engineered ingredients. The Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015 (H.R. 1599) would create a federal standard for the voluntary labeling of foods. The bill has bipartisan support and already passed the U.S. House.

The legislation could affect more than mandatory labeling. The House Agriculture Committee approved changes that would also preempt local and state governments from regulating any new technologies related to production of GMO crops. Critics say that language could preempt voter-approved bans on GMO crops and local laws that require buffers between GMO fields and non-GMO fields, as well as schools and hospitals.

Oregon’s Jackson County approved a measure banning GMO crops in 2013, a move that prompted the state Legislature to bar other counties from adopting similar bans. Supporters of H.R. 1599 deny the bill would apply to anything other than labeling.

The debate over GMOs is hardly a new one. GMOs have had a growing presence in the nation’s food supply for two decades. About 90 percent of the corn, soybeans and cotton grown in the U.S. is genetically engineered to require less water or to be less vulnerable to pests.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Medical Association, the World Health Organization and the U.S. government have all declared that the GMOs currently on the market are safe for consumption.

But such assurances haven’t stopped many consumers from wanting to know what they’re eating, and they have every right to demand greater transparency by the food industry about what’s in their food, whether it’s hormones or antibiotics or trans fats — or GMOs.

Critics question the validity of safety studies conducted on GMOs. They are also cautious about what directions genetic engineers will take in the future, as new and more exotic genes are inserted into foods to increase growth rates, enhance disease and drought resistance, boost nutritional content, add flavor and provide other characteristics.

Sixty-four countries already require GMO information on food labels, and Congress should not bar states and communities from doing the same.

The Senate should reject H.R. 1599. And if they pass this bill, President Obama should veto it and make good on his pledge on the campaign trail in 2007 when he promised “We’ll let folks know whether their food has been genetically modified.”



OTHER VIEWS

Zombies against Medicare

Medicare turns 50 this week, and it has been a very good half-century. Before the program went into effect, Ronald Reagan warned that it would destroy American freedom; it didn’t, as far as anyone can tell. What it did do was provide a huge improvement in financial security for seniors and their families, and in many cases it has literally been a lifesaver as well.

But the right has never abandoned its dream of killing the program. So it’s really no surprise that Jeb Bush recently declared that while he wants to let those already on Medicare keep their benefits, “We need to figure out a way to phase out this program for others.”

What is somewhat surprising, however, is the argument he chose to use, which might have sounded plausible five years ago, but now looks completely out of touch. In this, as in other spheres, Bush often seems like a Rip Van Winkle who slept through everything that has happened since he left the governor’s office — after all, he’s still boasting about Florida’s housing-bubble boom.

Actually, before I get to Bush’s argument, I guess I need to acknowledge that a Bush spokesman claims that the candidate wasn’t actually calling for an end to Medicare, he was just talking about things like raising the age of eligibility. There are two things to say about this claim. First, it’s clearly false: in context, Bush was obviously talking about converting Medicare into a voucher system, along the lines proposed by Paul Ryan.

And second, while raising the Medicare age has long been a favorite idea of Washington’s Very Serious People, a couple of years ago the Congressional Budget Office did a careful study and discovered that it would hardly save any money. That is, at this point raising the Medicare age is a zombie idea, which should have been killed by analysis and evidence, but is still out there eating some people’s brains.

But then, Bush’s real argument, as opposed to his campaign’s lame attempt at a rewrite, is just a bigger zombie.

The real reason conservatives want to do away with Medicare has always been political: It’s the very idea of the government providing a universal safety net that they hate, and they hate it even more when such programs are successful. But when they make their case to the public they usually shy away from making their real case, and have even, incredibly, sometimes posed as the program’s defenders against liberals and their death panels.

What Medicare’s would-be killers usually

argue, instead, is that the program as we know it is unaffordable — that we must destroy the system in order to save it, that, as Bush put it, we must “move to a new system that allows (seniors) to have something — because they’re not going to have anything.” And the new system they usually advocate is, as I said, vouchers that can be applied to the purchase of private insurance.

The underlying premise here is that Medicare as we know it is incapable of controlling costs, that only the only way to keep health care affordable going forward is to rely on the magic of privatization.

Now, this was always a dubious claim. It’s true that for most of Medicare’s history its spending has grown faster than the economy as a whole — but this is true of health spending in general. In fact, Medicare costs per beneficiary have consistently grown more slowly than private insurance premiums, suggesting that Medicare is, if anything, better than private insurers at cost control. Furthermore, other wealthy countries with government-provided health insurance spend much less than we do, again suggesting that Medicare-type programs can indeed control costs.

Still, conservatives scoffed at the cost-control measures included in the Affordable Care Act, insisting that nothing short of privatization would work.

And then a funny thing happened: the act’s passage was immediately followed by an unprecedented pause in Medicare cost growth. Indeed, Medicare spending keeps coming in ever further below expectations, to an extent that has revolutionized our views about the sustainability of the program and of government spending as a whole.

Right now is, in other words, a very odd time to be going on about the impossibility of preserving Medicare, a program whose finances will be strained by an aging population but no longer look disastrous. One can only guess that Bush is unaware of all this, that he’s living inside the conservative information bubble, whose impervious shield blocks all positive news about health reform.

Meanwhile, what the rest of us need to know is that Medicare at 50 still looks very good. It needs to keep working on costs, it will need some additional resources, but it looks eminently sustainable. The only real threat it faces is that of attack by right-wing zombies.

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Paul Krugman joined The New York Times in 1999 as a columnist on the Op-Ed Page and continues as professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University.



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