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OUR VIEW

The year of gradual growth



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) A man works on one of the duplexes in the complex off of Southwest 30th Street on Aug. 20, 2018, in Pendleton. 2) The Harkenrider Center ribbon cutting on Sept. 7, 2018. 3) Wyatt Browne, 12, of Boardman watches as Ellie Sak, 10, of Boardman takes a measurement on a piece of wood July 25, 2018, during the Port of Morrow Camp in Boardman. 4) Blake Shelton, right, performs at the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest on July 14, 2018.

EO file photos

Much happened in Eastern Oregon in 2018, but one thing was lacking — a consensus, No. 1 news event of the year.

That’s not always a bad thing. Some years are marked by trouble or tragedy, the closing of a major employer, a natural disaster or a terrible loss of life. We lost loved ones to be sure, and saw too many taken before their time through accidents and crime. Such is life in any given year in any given town, and we don’t mean to diminish any of those.

But in an area as diverse and spread out as ours, it is difficult to put one’s finger on the singular event or trend that captured a majority of our attention in 2018.

We should count it as a blessing

that Pendleton, Hermiston and Morrow County can by and large chalk up 2018 as a positive year of growth and productivity, and the stories of the year as selected by the *East Oregonian* staff point to that.

We won’t rehash the Top 10 stories — you can read them for yourself in today’s edition. But some stories that didn’t quite rise to the top will nonetheless resonate for years to come.

It was a midterm election year, but after record campaigning (and campaign fundraising) we saw little change in office. We did hear new ideas that put old ones to the test, including a vigorous challenge to U.S. Rep. Greg Walden by Jamie McLeod-Skinner. But just as we found the 2nd Congressional District

wasn’t quite ready to embrace a new voice, the state of Oregon wasn’t prepared to usher out establishment Gov. Kate Brown and try Republican upstart Knute Buehler.

Locally, we saw steady, gradual change, with highlights marking the development. Hermiston’s downtown continued to morph with the opening of the Harkenrider Center and the Festival Street. The new Maxwell farmers market turned every Thursday summer evening into an event, and the city’s takeover of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center began a shift that will play out in the coming years.

The Pendleton Whisky Music Fest, already a hit in its first two years, reached new heights with dual acts Pitbull and Blake Shelton, and

Pendleton continued to draw visitors from all corners of the world seeking an authentic Western experience. New housing continued to go up, setting a foundation for further economic development.

We have the good fortune of being removed by a few degrees from national politics. While it is fascinating (and sometimes horrifying) to watch the unfolding drama in Washington D.C. during these tumultuous times, its impact often doesn’t reach our daily lives. That allows us to focus on the reasons we’ve chosen to live in these parts — the tight-knit communities, the wide-open spaces and the room to build and make things better. We’re glad to report none of that changed in 2018.

OTHER VIEWS

U.S. must do better with migrants fleeing persecution

The Washington Post

In testimony to Congress on Thursday, Dec. 20, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen spoke at length, and repeatedly, about the threats to which Central American migrants are subjected when they traverse Mexico on their way to seeking asylum in the United States. That was directly after she announced that asylum seekers who do reach the United States will now be returned immediately to Mexico, where they will await their scheduled court appearances — a process that currently takes more than three years.

Ms. Nielsen failed to explain why the migrants, whom she described as constantly beset by rapists, traffickers and other predators in Mexico, would fare better if forcibly returned to Mexico than they were while in transit there.

That’s the dangerous paradox, and the hypocrisy, at the heart of the Trump administration’s apparently unilateral move to compel Mexico to serve as a waiting room for tens of thousands of asylum seekers, most of whom now come from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Facing vicious criminal gangs and scant economic opportunity, they flee those countries in search of better lives in the United States.

It is true that the surge in family groups seeking asylum has overwhelmed the U.S. system, including shelters bursting at the seams and immigration courts where the backlog is approaching 1 million cases. The administration is correct to be concerned by what President Trump calls “catch-and-release” — the practice of permitting asylum seekers to remain in the country, often for years, while awaiting court hearings that many migrants

will skip. That is a form of dysfunction, and one that may encourage Central Americans to attempt the dangerous journey.

The question is which form of deterrence is workable, humane and legal. Family separation, which the administration tried to disastrous effect last spring, failed on all three counts. A more recent gambit, slow-walking processing at legal border points of entry, has had little or no deterrent effect. For now, courts have blocked the administration’s attempts to narrow the criteria for asylum claims; and, on Friday, Dec. 21, the Supreme Court quashed the administration’s attempt to require that asylum seekers cross only at official border points of entry.

It’s unclear whether the new “remain in Mexico” policy will dissuade migrants from making the northward trek, if U.S.

courts even allow it to stand. (Forcing asylum seekers to wait in a third country may not be legal.) It also remains to be seen whether Washington’s new stance results in unintended consequences — for instance, a surge in illegal entry by migrants who may despair at the prospect, and perils, of drawn-out waits in Mexico.

What is clear is that the United States is not absolved of responsibility for migrants legitimately seeking asylum simply because they are compelled to wait elsewhere. If asylum seekers are preyed on, exploited and harmed after having been returned to Mexico, U.S. officials will not be able to shrug off their moral responsibility. The United States is bound by law and international obligations to welcome and vet migrants fleeing persecution, and to grant asylum to those who meet specific criteria. That obligation cannot be abrogated by an announcement.

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