

Idaho:

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momentum it now has. “I put into words what people are feeling, and Mike puts legs under it,” he said. “Even though this has been talked about for 100 years, Grant’s letter piqued the interest of a lot of people in Eastern and Southern Oregon,” McCarter said. McCarter credited Darrow’s letter with leading to the initial meetings in La Pine of what is today Move Oregon’s Border. “Grant is an integral part of this,” McCarter said.

A plea to legislators

Since the passage of Measure 31-101 Darrow has been urging the Union County Board of Commissioners to request in writing that State Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, and State Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, work to get Oregon legislators to discuss Greater Idaho.

Darrow said he is not requesting that formal discussions about Greater Idaho begin at that state capital. Darrow said it could be something as simple as the formation of a committee to try to determine why interest in Greater Idaho is growing.

“Getting people at the state level to talk about it is the next step,” he said. “We need to get more dialogue, to get everybody talking about it. We have to get it out there.”

Darrow said he has a firsthand understanding of the growing sense of frustration people in Northeastern Oregon have about the state’s urban-rural divide because he worked as a chimney sweep in Union, Wallowa and Baker counties for 44 years before retiring in September 2021.

“I would work in 12 to 15 homes a week,” he said.

The chimney sweep has detected a growing sense of disenchantment with Oregon’s government during the past decade, noting they

believe, like Darrow does, that the needs and concerns of Eastern Oregon are largely ignored by the Legislature.

“We have become nothing more than window dressing,” he said.

Darrow in his 2015 letter to the editor expressed this point even more starkly.

“It would appear to any rural resident or outside observer that most of Oregon’s urbanites view Oregon’s rural residents as nothing more than third-world inhabitants occupying their weekend and vacation playgrounds in what they advertise to the world as Oregon’s unique diversity,” he wrote.

Regulations are choking businesses

Darrow objects to things such as the way state government is imposing more and more regulations and fees that make it increasingly difficult for Oregonians to start and operate businesses in Oregon.

“It has gotten so bad that I could not afford to start a career as a chimney sweep in Oregon today,” he said, adding that every time government puts in a new regulation or fee it adds to the red tape citizens must deal with. “It gets to be absolutely crazy.”

Darrow does not know what Greater Idaho will lead to, noting that it may push to something beneficial to rural Oregon that might not involve moving Idaho’s borders west.

“It could morph into any direction,” he said.

He believes the Greater Idaho campaign could lead to a positive change in how the Legislature perceives rural residents, the creation of a new state or Greater Idaho

The Cove resident is sometimes asked by people who know how much he dislikes Oregon’s urban-rural divide, why he doesn’t move to Idaho.

“I tell them, ‘That is what I am trying to do,’” Darrow said.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Students watch as Demond Lofton, of Sumitomo Electric Lightwave, teaches the proper use of a visual fault locator during a fiber optic splicing course Thursday, March 3, 2022, that Amazon Web Service and Blue Mountain Community College offered in Hermiston.

BMCC:

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to naturally avert its gaze, trying to intentionally stare at the light was not encouraged.

“Again, don’t look into the eye of the laser,” Lofton said to laughs from the class.

In an interview, Michael Punke, vice president of public policy for Amazon Web Services, compared fiber optic splicing to a middle school project where students worked with copper wires to conduct electricity. As the world becomes increasingly reliant on the cloud to store digital data, Punke said skills such as splicing together fiber optic lines are coming into higher demand.

The reasons behind why a group of students from the Umatilla Indian Reservation wanted to take the course varied.

Colton Star said he’d

worked in sales and construction but was interested in the course as a way to explore a new career path. Mollee Minthorn had experience in programming and coding and thought fiber optic splicing could be another asset to her skill set. Vivan DeMary is semi retired and self-identified as a tribal elder but still liked the idea of picking up new skills she could bring back home to the tribes.

“I feel like this is the future,” Star said.

It was a sentiment shared by Punke, who said Amazon intends to establish itself in the community in part by offering training that could land them jobs in the tech industry.

“This is a 21st century industry,” he said. “It’s going to be a 22nd century industry. We very much hope to be long term members of the community.”

Large tech companies largely are associated with urban areas, such as the San Francisco Bay and Seattle.

But these companies have sought rural communities for their data centers, where they can find large quantities of water to keep their servers cool and local government officials willing to trade tax breaks for jobs. Google built a data center in The Dalles while Facebook and Apple targeted Prineville for their own facilities.

When Amazon Web Services established a presence in Boardman in 2010 and Umatilla in 2012, it often operated under the name of a subsidiary: Vadata Inc. When Amazon planned its expansion into Hermiston in 2019, the city council and Umatilla County Board of Commissioners agreed to abate 15 years of property taxes in exchange for a flat \$40 million.

In recent years, Amazon has shed some of its secrecy and upped its public investments.

In 2021, Amazon announced more than a half-million in donations

to community organizations across Umatilla and Morrow counties. Later that year, AWS cut the ribbon on its Think Big Space, a career technical education space at the SAGE Center in Boardman.

Nayeli Contreras, the director of Blue Mountain’s Hermiston Center, said the collaboration between Blue Mountain and Amazon has been in the works for years but the coronavirus pandemic delayed an in-person class. She said the class aligns with BMCC President Mark Browning’s goal of having the college work more with the region’s employers on job training.

Contreras said she hopes Blue Mountain will collaborate with Amazon on future classes, even if they are in areas other than fiber optic splicing. She added she’s kept a list of students who registered for the class but weren’t able to attend so she can reach out to them for future opportunities.

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