

EASTERN OREGON ECONOMIC SUMMIT

‘One side can’t do it on its own’

Legislators praise bipartisanism

By **ERICK PETERSON**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Unity became a common theme at the 2022 Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

Participants, especially speakers, mentioned the value of togetherness and praised past examples of people joining forces.

The summit was Thursday and Friday, June 16 and 17, in Hermiston.

“I’m happy,” Rep. Bobby Levy of Echo said when it was her turn to speak.

This moment came during the state legislator panel on June 17. While the event promoted the panel as a wrap-up of the legislative session, lawmakers discussed little policy. Instead, 11 state senators and representatives spoke of something else on their mind: the importance of friendly relationships in government.

Levy is the president of the Eastern Oregon Women’s Coalition, which organized the summit. The panel was a mix of Republicans and Democrats. Levy, a Republican, declared she was glad to be working with, and spending time with, all her colleagues on the panel.

Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, joked that Levy “made it impossible not to show up.” Others laughed, and this is how the panel discussion went.

Levy, Dembrow, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, Sen. Jama Kayse, D-Portland, Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton, Rep. David Gomberg, D-Otis, Sen. Janeen Sollman, D-Hillsboro, Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, and Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, all were on the panel — up on stage, at the same time.

“One side can’t do it on its own,” said Kayse, chair of the Senate Committee on Housing and Development. Kayse said we must come together to solve our shared problems.

Others agreed, with Dembrow stating we must see one another as people, beyond the bumper stickers on our vehicles.



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

Local officials and business owners gather Friday morning, June 17, 2022, at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

Senate Republicans during the 2019 Legislature skipped floor sessions in protest of House Bill 3427, the big tax on businesses that helped fund K-12 education. Later that same session, 11 Republican senators — including Hansell — walked out to deny a quorum and protest a sweeping Democratic proposal to address climate change.

Findley said opposing people were not enemies, and Frederick expressed the sentiment that there are no “good guys” and “bad guys” in the Legislature. Instead, there are people with varying opinions, who all want to improve the lives of Oregonians.

“People want to do the best they can,” he said.

Gomberg echoed this statement, as he said members have differences in party, experience, geography and more, but they have an “affection” for one another.

Legislators, including Hayward and Findley, made a point of saying they have a duty to represent the entire state, not just their own particular district. Also, part of their job includes reaching out to people outside their districts, learning what they can from them and then returning home to tell their neighbors.

According to Dembrow, legislators must educate their constituents on the “bigger picture.”

This education, according to the Portland Democrat, includes telling the people of his district about Hermiston.

Other panelists shared similar feelings, adding distant communities, places and people have a lot

more in common than often thought. Sollman said she relates to people in Eastern Oregon because she, too, comes from a farming area. Frederick also shared his farming background.

Hayward said education goes the other way, too. She said Portland is not as bad as the media says. This was something she could tell audiences in Eastern Oregon.

They pointed out that many decisions aren’t contentious. Republicans and Democrats actually find common ground on most issues, according to panel members. They are able to push forward on issues like improving sewer systems and resolving many water issues, without partisan complaints, Gomberg and Helm said.

Gomberg added, though, that there is a change happening in state government. Much turnover is taking place, he said. This means many friendships are lost, too. And legislators must work hard to create new relationships; those connections help to advance legislation.

Speaking at the end, Smith expressed confidence in the ability of new legislators to work with one another.

Smith praised the intelligence and integrity of the three major candidates for governor — Democrat Tina Kotek, unaffiliated Betsy Johnson and Republican Christine Drazan — and said he would be able to work with any of them.

Levy said she would be happy to invite legislators back for the next summit.

Looking for the path ahead

Sen. Jeff Merkley sees federal role in solving local issues

By **ERICK PETERSON**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Sen. Jeff Merkley on Friday, June 17, advocated for using the federal government to find solutions to local problems in the wake of the pandemic.

“It’s been a tough two years,” he told the crowd after he stepped onstage during the second day of the 2022 Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

Sen. Ron Wyden and U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz also participated, but they streamed in via video.

Merkley spoke of the difficulty of the pandemic years, the pains of lockdowns and the struggles of school children who suffered isolation. He also mentioned the recent flooding in Echo, which he was planning to visit later in the day, as well as supply chain problems, inflation and global warming.

Still, he maintained, there were solutions to our problems. Rising gas prices, for example could be addressed by reducing “our addiction to oil.” By opening more ports, we can fix supply chain woes. And earmarking government funds for various government projects also can help.

Merkley said we are planning for a brighter future.

The Eastern Oregon Women’s Coalition organized the event June 16 and 17 in Hermiston. The general session was June 17 at Hermiston High School and open to the public.

Following his speech, Merkley retired to a classroom at the school, where he met with individuals and talked more.

“Economic development is on everybody’s minds, as well as the immediate economic issues of gas prices, food prices and drug prices,” he said.

He called it “shocking” that

housing and gas prices have risen quickly. Drugs, too, are expensive, he said, which worries people. He said he is fighting in Congress for solutions, including for a windfall profits tax.

“I hope we’ll be in a better place in a year,” he said.

Merkley also said he was aware of issues in Umatilla and Morrow counties. He said he helped secure a \$500,000 community-initiated project grant for Echo for water infrastructure and was visiting the town later June 17 to see flooding damage.

“What I’m anticipating is that they’re going to need a lot of repair work that will involve the Corps of Engineers,” he said. “I’ll be looking to their guidance, but if they are seeking to apply, Sen. Wyden and I, and I’m sure Cliff Bentz, will advocate to get help from the Corps of Engineers and hopefully funding to improve their protection from the next big rain impact.”

Merkley also discussed groundwater pollution in Morrow County.

“It’s a very big deal,” he said. “Nitrate pollution has a lot of health implications.”

Merkley said he was planning to meet with Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty, who has been getting surveys of wells in his county and has been discovering dangerous levels of nitrates in well water.

Merkley called this a problem that has been known for decades. It is only now, he said, that local officials are taking it seriously.

“I’m looking forward to seeing how I can help them out,” he said.

And he left a message for the people of Eastern Oregon.

“Our future depends on our investment in infrastructure and our investment in education,” he said. “In the meantime, though, we have a lot of problems from the droughts, from the fires, from the conditions in our forests, and I’m going to be working with local communities on tackling those problems from every direction I can.”

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