

PARTISAN from page 1A

More importantly, those groups also began to polish their online presence, using multiple social media pages as partisan propaganda platforms, specifically deleting or denying posts or comments with contrary information while simultaneously promoting information about opponents that could be negatively perceived by others. In addition, email blasts and social media posts were used to manipulate the potential outcomes of city votes through online surveys or direct letters to elected officials.

These tactics have been especially effective because the reality is that most people in the Siuslaw region don't engage with or participate in their local governments — and by extension, most are unaware of the level of partisan maneuvering that has been taking place.

"We've got 8,800 residents, and I bet you 7,000 of them are just out there trying to keep their kids in school and pay their rent," one City of Florence elected official said during a 2019 Florence City Council meeting. "They don't care about public art, they don't care about housing, other than the fact that they don't have one to live in. They don't have a vision for the future. They're just getting by day to day."

At that particular council meeting in 2019, which was a daytime work session, only one person from the general public attended. While some may point out that many government meetings are held during the day and are therefore difficult to attend, evening meetings are rarely any different. Unless there is something controversial, the seats are nearly empty. When they are filled, they are generally by partisan groups who have coordinated their attendance. The same can be said about most local public meetings of government and nonprofits in the region. And the current limitations due to COVID-19 seem to have culminated in even less individual public participation.

By 2020, methods of manipulating public opinion on either side of the political spectrum had been honed as each group worked to stoke a culture war within the Siuslaw region. During the pandemic, both sides have amplified issues surrounding masks and the shutdown, breaking complex arguments into simple soundbites that mock each other's side in the debate.

The process of receiving and relaying information through social media pres-

ents its own unique problems. Take *Siuslaw News'* recent article, "Youth Spur On The Movement," which described one of the first of the George Floyd protests in Florence. On the *Siuslaw News* Facebook page alone, there were 105 comments, 147 reactions and 3,294 people reached.

Some of the comments included:

"Damn this town is so full of a bunch of self-righteous whites;" "I called you a racist because you are missing the point of defunding the police;" "A bunch of bigots in here;" and "I'm leaving this town after reading some of these comments."

But how many people who commented actually clicked the link to read the article?

Twenty-nine. Many local partisan leaders know about this trend and use it to their advantage in sowing some of the division we are now experiencing with our community.

In March, *Siuslaw News* published a story about a right-of-way ordinance being proposed to the City of Florence. On its surface, the proposal was presented as a safety measure for pedestrians; in reality, it was a partisan attempt to block homeless individuals from accepting handouts from cars. A Facebook page was created for the movement in Florence, which was modeled after a similar page in Eugene that stoked fears surrounding the homeless population. In that case, the tactics of the Eugene group led to death threats and businesses being vandalized.

To avoid the same thing from happening here, *Siuslaw News* reported on the issue in a story titled "City Council to Review Petition for Right-of-Way-Change." When posting the article online, we chose a stock photo of a homeless man, tan-skinned and disheveled, reaching for money.

The post was immediately shared on a locally-based partisan site.

"This is who we want to be the issue," one of the page organizers wrote under the photo.

Instead of opening up a discussion on homelessness, we inadvertently fueled a partisan talking point simply due to the image that ran with the story — which became a partisan meme.

The article reached almost 4,000 Facebook users, and received hundreds of comments and reactions.

How many people actually clicked on the article to read it?

Eighty-eight.

By simply reading through Facebook comments or scanning a headline, there is a tendency by many on social media to believe they're informed about an issue.

City staff see this all the time, as law enforcement

... Ironically, though the solutions officials have presented for these issues are largely the same — with more in common than not — the few differences they do possess have either been politicized or exaggerated through personal differences stoked by partisanship. ...

and staff members at city hall are constantly battling online rumors that can put public safety at risk.

However, attempting to dispel social media rumor can be a two-edged sword, with city staff at risk of inserting themselves into partisan arguments. As a result, they've been accused of a variety of offenses, from running a "deep state" in order to undermine conservative elected officials, to putting lives in danger with their response to the pandemic.

(*Siuslaw News* could find no evidence that either of those accusations is true.)

These tactics have had direct influence on matters such as the city's Styrofoam ban and how city committee members are selected. For the city's elected officials in particular, partisan groups have helped foster already deep divisions over affordable housing, how to attract jobs and what the overall vision of the city is.

Ironically, though the solutions officials have presented for these issues are largely the same — with more in common than not — the few differences they do possess have either been politicized or exaggerated through personal differences stoked by partisanship.

This has been seen through public infighting between elected officials as council members engage in back-and-forth retaliation against each other — both directly and indirectly — through political surrogates. Letters to the Editor in the *Siuslaw News*, as well as online smear campaigns against officials and their supporters, have been among the tactics used by some partisan actors.

In truth, city committees have been stacked with partisans from either side over the years, many of whom had no background in city government or in the field which the committee is focused on. In some cases, elected officials have been pushed out by opposing political perspectives while, other times, groups have simply taken advantage of the community's long-standing general disinterest and unwillingness to volunteer

in local government in order to claim seats on committees and boards.

Siuslaw News has discovered instances where, to ensure partisans were allowed on specific committees, other nonpartisan volunteers — often with

actual backgrounds in the subject that the committees were created to address — were blocked or moved to other committees. This has led to turmoil in some committees. For others, it has meant facing the insertion of political interests into the work that committees perform.

These actions have gradually spilled out into the community, along with political tactics that are no longer relegated to yard signs and Letters to the Editor. *Siuslaw News* obtained evidence of how some supporters of these groups have financially threatened area nonprofits and businesses through a variety of ways, from calls to boycott fundraising events to outright denying funding unless politically motivated demands were made. Individuals have also been targeted, some of whom have had little to do with local politics until being attacked through social media. In some extreme instances, group members have attempted to get employees fired from their jobs, including through coordinated public smear campaigns.

The end effect has been a collective muting of the overall conversation — leaving only agenda-driven groups providing the "voice" in the discussion.

The effects of these tactics have at times impacted this very investigation. While many individuals are able to speak off-the-record, they refuse to get involved beyond that — or go on the record — out of fear of retaliation.

Siuslaw News has also received its fair share of criticism, and some of it rightly so. However, over the last three years, we have begun experiencing something well beyond criticism.

Since 2017, members of the newsroom have received personal threats of violence — written, verbal and through anonymous voicemails. Some have even involved threats of physical harm to family members and friends, or of being targeted through social media.

It continues to this day. All of this has made re-

porting on the issues of political divide difficult, creating a steep learning curve and some mistakes in how we have approached our reporting. Between 2017 and 2018, the news staff here at the *Siuslaw News* was relatively new and unfamiliar with the new tactics being deployed by partisan groups on each side of the divide. Our own reporting at times worsened the divide by not asking the kinds of questions that could have led to the revelations we have only now come to understand.

"We can do that right now"

In the weeks and months ahead, we will share with you those revelations in order to identify the challenges posed by the widening partisan divide within

our community. It's only by understanding how we got here and what we face as a community can we hope to identify the solutions needed to bridge the divide and return to what former *Siuslaw News* editor Robert Serra once described as, "A process that helped us prepare for the current issues by reassuring us that community debate is healthy."

Next week, partisanship is off the table as we focus on what the Florence City Council is dealing with in terms of housing, jobs and the overall vision of the city. It begins in 2019, when Councilor Joshua Greene asked Mayor Joe Henry what he thought the vision of the city should be, and when they could spend time discussing what that vision could be.

"We can do that right now," Henry replied.

For more than an hour, the majority of the city council talked.

And listened.

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