

Realtors to conservatives living in liberal areas: Try Idaho

BY NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS
Associated Press

SANDPOINT, Idaho — Linda Navarre moved to Sandpoint, Idaho, from Cleveland in 1978, when the town consisted of people in the timber industry and hippies “and they all got along.”

Now she barely recognizes the small resort community near the Canadian border that is quickly growing as people disenchanted with big city life move there. Many are conservatives fed up with liberal politics in blue states.

“The division gets wider and wider,” Navarre said, adding many of the new arrivals are changing the civility of the community. “My concern is there are so many people who are not nice.”

Sandpoint is a four-season resort town built along the shores of scenic Lake Pend Oreille. It had 7,300 residents in the 2010 Census, but grew 21% in the decade to about 8,900 in the 2020 Census. In addition to the natural beauty, “people come here because it’s a red state,” said longtime resident Gail Cameron, 67.

To capitalize on that trend, a growing number of real estate companies are advertis-



Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

A pedestrian walks past a mural in downtown Sandpoint, Idaho. Real estate companies are pitching areas of Idaho as attractive to conservatives fed up with places like Seattle. The mayor here in Sandpoint isn't sold on the idea, nor are others.

ing themselves to people on the right, saying they can take them out of liberal bastions like Seattle and San Francisco and find them homes in places like rural Idaho.

Sandpoint-based Flee The City is a consortium of four businesses which specialize in selling property to conservatives in northern Idaho and western Montana. The company calls itself “a real estate firm for the vigilant.”

Flee The City has partnered with a company that provides “sustainable homes designed

with integrated ballistic and defensive capabilities.”

Todd Savage, whose Black Rifle Real Estate firm is part of Flee The City, said in a brief email exchange that his business is booming, thanks to “insane” left wing politics.

One of the bigger players among right-leaning real estate companies is Conservative Move, based in a suburb of Dallas. Founder and chief executive Paul Chabot said blue states have only themselves to blame for driving out conservatives.

“People are tired of out-of-control crime and forced masking,” Chabot said.

Idaho has been the fastest growing state in the nation for five years running, growing 2.9% in 2021, mostly from in-migration.

But the influx of people to places like Idaho has made it harder for some long-time residents. People struggle to find housing in Sandpoint, with many houses sold the same day they are listed, after bidding wars, Cameron said.

Many of those homes are converted into vacation rentals, which tightens the market for people who live in the area, Cameron said.

Carolyn Knaack, associate director of the Lake Pend Oreille Waterkeeper conservation group, has lived in town for a year.

She said the confluence of the coronavirus pandemic and politics “has created a divisive-refused to get vaxxed.”

“I’ve been applauded and belittled for wearing a mask,” she said. “I have friends who refused to get vaxxed.”

Savage was asked if it was desirable for people to segregate themselves by political ideology.

“I don’t agree with the term

‘segregate,’” he wrote. “Folks simply ‘vote with their feet’ relating to issues such as crime, taxes, homeschooling, gun laws, mask and vaccine mandates, Orwellian laws and out of control tyranny in the sanctuary states.”

Not everyone is a fan of what Savage and conservative realtors are doing in Sandpoint and elsewhere.

Mayor Shelby Rognstad, a Democrat, worries real estate firms that serve only conservatives “pushes Idaho more and more into a playground for extremism.”

“It doesn’t bode well for our sense of community here,” said Rognstad, who is mounting a campaign for governor. “It’s a challenge to civility.”

Barbara Russell, who lives in nearby Bonners Ferry, Idaho, expressed similar concerns.

Bonners Ferry feels like it’s been overrun with white nationalists, said Russell, who owns a dance studio in the town of 2,600 residents.

“What they are doing is preparing for war,” Russell said of new arrivals, who often carry guns when in town.

“New people are moving in and they go to City Council meetings and tell people who grew up here to go back

to California,” Russell said. “They are selling fear is what they are doing.”

The National Association of Realtors does not keep records detailing if any of its members market themselves by political ideology, spokesman Quintin Simmons said. And not all real estate agents are members of the Realtors. So it’s tough to determine if the trend of targeting conservative customers is widespread.

The Western States Center, a human rights group based in Portland, is keeping an eye on right-leaning real estate firms, said member Kate Bitz.

“It’s just the latest of several waves of politically motivated relocation to the inland Northwest,” Bitz said.

Indeed, in past decades a variety of extremist groups, most prominently the Aryan Nations, sought to create a white homeland in northern Idaho because of the region’s small number of minorities.

“People in the United States relocate all the time,” Bitz said. “What concerns us is when white nationalists and anti-democracy actors relocate to the region with the aim of organizing, recruiting and seizing control of local institutions.”

Idaho COVID-19 disaster declaration ends in April

BY REBECCA BOONE
Associated Press

BOISE — Idaho Gov. Brad Little says he will lift the state’s public health emergency disaster declaration on April 15, just over two years since it was put in place because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Little made the announcement Tuesday, March 8, saying it came after weeks of thoughtful deliberation with stakeholders.

“We’re hopeful the recent decrease in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths means we are on a downward trend with the pandemic,” Little said in a statement. “The April 15 timeframe provides an important bridge for hospitals and other healthcare providers to plan for the transition.”

The rate of new coronavirus cases has dropped significantly in Idaho over the past two weeks, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. Still, one out of every 219 residents tested positive for COVID-19 in the past week, making the state second in the country for new cases per capita. Coronavirus-related hospitalizations have also dropped dramatically statewide.

Emergency declarations serve as a legal foundation that allows government officials to streamline the response to disasters. Such declarations can make the state eligible for increased federal and state funding, allow red tape and regulations to be lifted for a more nimble disaster response, and create the framework for emergency orders to be issued for things like social distancing, business closures and mask mandates.

Some other states have also lifted COVID-19-related emergency declarations in recent weeks, though many are still in place across the U.S. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced last month that her state’s emer-

gency declaration would be lifted on April 1. Washington state’s disaster declaration remains in place, though Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said the state’s indoor mask mandate would lift the same day as Oregon’s March 12.

Little first issued a “proactive emergency declaration” for the pandemic on March 13, 2020, noting that the coronavirus had been detected in neighboring states and accurately predicting that Idaho cases would soon be identified.

A little over a week later, with a major coronavirus outbreak underway in Blaine County, Little increased the urgency of the state’s response by signing an “extreme emergency declaration.” That declaration was accompanied by a stay-home order requiring residents to isolate at home when possible, limiting gathering sizes and temporarily closing some businesses like hair salons, bars and convention centers.

Those steps were lifted and replaced with lighter restrictions over the next several weeks and months. Little never issued mask orders, though some local government entities did. He touted his lack of statewide mandates when announcing that the emergency declaration would be lifted.

“I kept Idaho open, banned vaccine mandates, never issued mandates for vaccines or masks, and successfully challenged Biden’s overreaching vaccine mandates in court,” Little said.

Some Idaho lawmakers have pushed legislation that would end the disaster declaration without the governor’s sign-off. The Idaho House voted on Monday in favor of a resolution ending the disaster declaration. If the resolution passes the Senate, it could end the declaration before April 15.

Governor declares drought state of emergency in Klamath County

KLAMATH FALLS (AP) — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a state of emergency in Klamath County as southern Oregon remains in an ongoing drought that shows no sign of letting up.

The Monday, March 7, declaration directs state agencies, including the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon Water Resources Department and the Water Resources Commission, to provide assistance to water users in the region and to seek federal resources to help residents and wildlife, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

Snowpack in the Klamath Basin sat at 60% of normal as of Monday, which prompted the declaration.

“It is already clear from snowpack and streamflow numbers: this will be another difficult year,” Brown said on Twitter. “I am committed to dedicating state resources to help.”

Central and southern Oregon are entering a third consecutive year of drought, according to Larry O’Neill, a climatologist at Oregon State University.

Klamath County has been particularly hard hit. Some residents have seen

wells run dry as groundwater recedes. Contentious fights have also occurred over how to allocate the water in Upper Klamath Lake, which is needed by farmers, ranchers and two species of endangered fish that are cultural mainstays of Indigenous people in the region.

The county also was home to one of the largest wildfires in Oregon history last year. Climate scientists have long said that drought and heightened wildfire risk will become more frequent and more severe as climate change continues to push global temperatures up.

Republican Party chair quits, cites party ‘wickedness’

SALEM (AP) — The chair of the Oregon Republican Party is stepping down.

Oregon Public Broadcasting reports state Sen. Dallas Heard told the party in a letter he will leave Friday, March 11, due to “communist psychological warfare tactics” he believes are being used to “destroy anyone of true character.”

Heard, who was kicked out of the Oregon state Senate during the recently concluded legislative session for refusing to wear a mask, will

keep his legislative seat.

He had been absent from the Capitol for most of the session. Heard has also made it a practice to vote against bills, even those he agreed with, to protest the Capitol being closed to the public during the pandemic.

Heard’s letter encouraged his party colleagues to “guard” their “hearts against the wickedness” that exists within the Republican Party.

His letter did not name any names but mentioned

someone within the party deploying tactics that have harmed his physical and spiritual health. He wrote that he can no longer “survive exposure to the toxicity that can

be found in this community.”

Party Vice Chairman Herman Baertschiger told the News Review he would step in the role of acting chair until Heard is replaced.

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