

Creating a buzz for Greater Idaho

BY DICK MASON

The (La Grande) Observer

COVE — Grant Darrow is a man of letters.

The Cove resident has penned so many letters to newspapers over the past four decades about pressing issues that he has lost count.

One stands out, however, with the grandeur of 12,662-foot Borah Peak in Central Idaho. It is a letter clipped from The Observer and kept in a black notebook. The letter is fading slightly, unlike the movement it helped ignite. Darrow, in his 391-word piece, published in The Observer on June 29, 2015, pushed for a sea change — the moving of Idaho's border west so that it could include Eastern Oregon and other rural portions of the state.

"Imagine for a moment Idaho's western border stretching to the Pacific," Darrow wrote at the end of the letter.

Almost seven years later, many Oregonians are imagining just as he hoped they would, which means the Greater Idaho movement is gaining momentum.

"We are gaining support," Darrow said. "This is an exciting time."

Those who have taken note include The Atlantic magazine, which refers to Greater Idaho as "Modern America's Most Successful Secessionist Movement" in a story that appeared in its Dec. 23, 2021, edition.

Darrow is not surprised by the growing momentum, especially when he reflects on the



Grant Darrow, a retired chimney sweep and Cove resident, poses for a photo outside his home on Saturday, Feb. 26, 2022. Darrow has been leading local efforts in the campaign to change the Oregon-Idaho border and allow Eastern Oregon to become part of Greater Idaho.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

response his letter received in the days and weeks after it was first published. He said about 40 other rural Oregon newspapers printed the letter after he sent it to them.

"Some newspapers even called me up and requested a copy so they could run it," he said.

Today, the letter, which stated Eastern Oregon should be part of Idaho because its people are ignored by Oregon's west-side leaders, is viewed as so integral to the Greater Idaho movement that a copy is reprinted on the website of

a leading group pushing for Greater Idaho — Move Oregon's Border, whose leader is Mike McCarter, of La Pine.

Darrow credited McCarter with doing much of the heavy lifting, which has given Greater Idaho the 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.

Darrow said he is not requesting that formal discussions about Greater Idaho begin at the 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.

Local legislator makes offer on Vale newspaper

BY ANTONIO SIERRA

East Oregonian

VALE — Greg Smith's offer to buy the Malheur Enterprise came in a postscript.

An email exchange between Smith and Les Zaitz, the publisher and editor of the small weekly newspaper in Vale, over an editorial led to an offer to take the Enterprise off the market.



Smith

According to the email chain obtained by the East Oregonian, Zaitz wrote to inform Smith, the state representative for District 57 and the Malheur County economic development director, that he intended to publish an editorial critical of Smith and asked him for comment.

"I'm preparing an editorial for next week about the Malheur County Court's management of your company's contract," he wrote. "You will, in part, get a pass because you can't be blamed by taxpayers for getting what you can as easily as you can. But the issue of your truth telling is another matter. You lie. By that, I mean you declare as fact something you know to be false."

Smith responded by saying he wouldn't respond to "negative suppositions," but also added Malheur County residents were "begging" Zaitz to sell his newspaper and that it had no support.

"PS. ... if you need a buyer for the paper, I'll pay \$35,000 cash," he wrote at the end of the email. "No employees included."

Later in the chain, Zaitz told Smith he would share Smith's offer with the public.

"Let's see what the community — and the state — thinks

of your idea of buying a paper to shut it down," he said. "Thanks for the offer. We'll be in touch."

Smith followed-up by clarifying he would not shut the Enterprise down if he bought it.

"I already have staff in place that would run the paper quite well," he wrote. "I never said it would be shut down."

In a response to a request for comment, Smith provided a written statement.

"The Malheur Enterprise, a privately owned company, publicly announced it was for sale," he said.

"Gregory Smith and Company, also a privately owned company, made an offer to purchase the Malheur Enterprise. Other than being publicly 'mocked' by the seller, no reply to our offer has been received. Moreover, Gregory Smith and Company has not publicly stated its reason for purchasing the paper. It is unfortunate, some speculate to the negative."

Smith's history with the Enterprise

A two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee with The Oregonian, Zaitz, along with his family, bought the Malheur Enterprise in 2015.

Zaitz eventually took over the paper's editorial operations and worked toward growing the weekly's presence. Zaitz expanded the newsroom and started collaborations with national news organizations as the Enterprise collected new accolades and awards.

Today, Zaitz said the Enterprise is profitable and growing. As he neared his 50th year in the journalism business, Zaitz said he decided to sell the pa-



East Oregonian, File

per because he felt it was the right time to hand over the Enterprise to a new generation. "We're not going to sell to anyone that shows up with a check or a suitcase full of \$20 bills," he said. "The Malheur Enterprise is an essential source of local news and is a role model for local journalism. So its import goes beyond just reporting on Malheur County. Its import is also helping show newsrooms large and small how to do effective local journalism that generates business success."

— Les Zaitz, Malheur Enterprise publisher and editor

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When Smith made an offer to buy the Enterprise, Zaitz said he took it seriously.

Elected in 2000, Smith is the longest-serving legislator in the Oregon House of Representatives. Although

his district's lines have shifted significantly over the years, Smith always has represented a chunk of Northeastern Oregon from his home in Heppner.

But being a legislator is only a part-time position. His full-time work involves him serving a number of economic development positions throughout Oregon, both within and outside his legislative district. Some of his titles include being the project manager for the Columbia Development Authority in Boardman, the director of the Eastern Oregon University Small Business Development Center in La Grande and the

economic development director in Malheur County.

His status as an influential lawmaker who also is in charge of raising money for local projects and institutions around the state has earned him scrutiny in the media. The Willamette Week referred to Smith as the "best compensated lawmaker in Salem" while also noting his actions were "perfectly legal."

The Enterprise also has done reporting on the connections between Smith's personal business and his work in the Legislature, in addition to focusing on his work in Malheur County, publishing stories on his contracts with the county

and his handling of local economic development projects.

Zaitz declined to provide further details on the editorial that prompted the exchange with Smith before it was published, but later summarized the Enterprise's various dealings with Smith over the years.

"He complained that our reporting on him represented criminal conduct," he said. "The sheriff looked into that and essentially laughed him out of Malheur County on that allegation. He has publicly ridiculed the Enterprise and has made representations that raise questions about whether the Enterprise is paying its taxes. This is a man who has a pattern of taking aggressive actions against the newspaper that is doing no more than reporting on matters of public importance."

After Smith made his offer, Zaitz followed through on his promise and shared excerpts from the exchange on the Enterprise's Facebook page and asked readers what they thought. As of the evening of Thursday, March 10, nearly 70 people have commented on the post. Almost all the comments either opposed Smith buying the paper, expressed support for the Enterprise's current ownership or both. Many questioned Smith's motivations.

Even if Smith doesn't get involved in the Vale media business, he'll continue to be a prominent figure in Eastern Oregon for the foreseeable future. No one filed to contest Smith in either the Republican primary or the general election, all but assuring him a 12th term in Salem.

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