

Bentz: 'Democracy is not easy'

Representative discusses immigration, drought, infrastructure

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz touched on immigration, drought, the infrastructure bill and the difficulties of a democracy Thursday at the Mt. Vernon Community Center in his first town hall in Grant County since taking office.

Bentz told the audience that Democrats make it easy to get angry and upset. But, he said, the GOP has a "good chance" of taking back the House in 2022 and, instead of spending the hour talking about what they are mad about, he said he would rather talk about what they want to see should the Republicans take back the power in the House.

"We're going to be ready to act in the first week we take power," he said. "So I want to have these bills ready to go."

Drought

Bentz said the situation in the region is "grim" and that it's getting hotter, the summers are lasting longer and that anything water-related is a "big deal."

Bentz said he is on the Natural Resources Committee and is the ranking Republican of the Water, Oceans and Wildlife Subcommittee, which allows him to "speak freely" to the Democrat chair, California Congressman Jared Huffman.

Huffman, Bentz said, granted a hearing in the subcommittee on a bill that he and Northern California Congressman Doug LaMalfa brought to the subcommittee to help the ranchers and tribes in the Klamath area.

He said the bill's price tag of about \$160 million would cover just a fraction of what the community stands to lose due to the drought.

Huffman granting the hearing is a "great big deal," Bentz said.

"The Democrats don't have to listen to him (LaMalfa) or any of our ideas," Bentz said, "but they are going to, and this gives us a chance."

Additionally, Bentz said the Republicans have a good chance of taking back power in the House in the 2022 midterm elections. If the GOP were to gain the majority, Bentz would be likely to become the next chairman of the subcommittee.

'Democracy is not easy'

Diane Clingman told Bentz that there is something new almost daily where people will lose another right or freedom. She asked if he could suggest an avenue where people could actually be heard and get somewhere.

She said about Senate Bill 774, which Gov. Kate Brown signed earlier in the week suspending essential skills testing for high school graduation for the next three years, that high



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz fields a question Thursday during his first town hall in Grant County as a representative at the Mt. Vernon Community Center.

school students no longer have to "read, write or do math" to graduate.

The essential skills graduation requirement was suspended during the pandemic to assist students who had a year of distance learning. However, the bill's proponents took it beyond the pandemic.

The bill received pushback from state GOP lawmakers in both chambers of the Legislature.

"People are so angry and so upset," she said. "You don't get much done in that mode."

While he did not want to state "truisms," he said that democracy is not easy.

He told Clingman that the Bentz family trait is that he and his brothers think they are smarter and know more than everyone else. But, he said, it's not always true.

"When you get to Congress, it's filled with people like me," he said. "Everybody is sure they're right."

He said there are 435 members in the House of Representatives, and to "move the needle" takes getting over 200 other members on his side.

He told her that the "danger" for him during the town halls was avoiding getting mad because it gets him nowhere. Instead, he said the challenge is to identify common themes and identify that they are never going to get the "whole loaf," only a part of it, and that no matter what somebody is going to be upset.

"That's democracy," he said. "But the great thing for us is we have systems that work. And if they don't, we go fix them."

He said working within the systems is how they can ultimately achieve change without falling into lawlessness and anarchy, as he said has been seen in Portland.

He said he appreciated her and the other constituents who turned out for the town hall because they are interested in politics.

"Thank goodness," he said. "But it's not easy."

Immigration

Bentz showed the audience a picture of undocumented immigrants at the Texas-Mex-

ico border. He said he toured the area two weeks ago.

He said the immigrants from 80 different countries pay the Mexican Cartel around \$4,000 to take them over the border, crossing the Rio Grand River. He said, when the cartels bring a boatload of over, they bring drugs in as well.

When a heavily armed border patrol gunboat comes along, they throw the kids in the river. The agents, he said, fish the kids out of the water, and the cartels with the drugs end up getting away.

Bentz said President Joe Biden's administration is responsible for the current situation at the border. Under the previous remain-in-Mexico policy, he said, undocumented immigrants who arrived at the border and asked for asylum were given paperwork and taken back to Mexico and told to wait. It could take three years to get a hearing, he said.

The Biden administration flipped the policy, according to Bentz. Now, he said, people from Central America are told to bring their birth certificates in plastic bags and give their age when they get to the border.

Bentz said parents and those under 18 are allowed to come into the U.S., given asylum paperwork and told they will be contacted for a hearing. In the meantime, he said, they get the opportunity to work as though they have a green card and can access specific safety net programs.

Bentz said, while he believes the U.S. needs to tighten up the border, one of the biggest reasons people are illegally crossing the border is that they are in danger of being killed by the lawlessness in their respective countries.

According to Bentz, by the end of Biden's first term, he said about 4 million people would be in the U.S. waiting for an asylum hearing.

Bentz said the odds are "extraordinarily low" that they would get sent back to their respective countries.

"I hope I'm wrong, but I don't think I am," he said.

So, instead, Bentz said the "focus" becomes about how those already in the country

become productive members of society.

From a policy standpoint, Bentz said, people should be turned away to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Right now, he said that is not the case in Mexico, but people are being turned away at the Canadian border.

He said Mexico needs to tighten its southern border.

"There are so many other things that are wrong with what is currently happening," Bentz said.

Infrastructure bill

Bentz said he would be going back to Washington D.C. to cast a vote on the infrastructure bill in the House.

In a 69-30 bipartisan vote on Aug. 10, the Senate approved the \$1.1 trillion infrastructure bill to rebuild the country's roads, bridges and fund broadband initiatives.

According to Bentz, the legislation faces an uphill climb in the House as Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said she would not vote on it unless the Senate votes on a \$3.5 trillion social policy bill in the fall.

He said the Senate tried to separate the \$1.1 trillion infrastructure piece from the \$3.5 trillion portions, but Pelosi, he said, would not allow it.

He said that portions of the \$3.5 trillion piece impact the \$1.1 trillion infrastructure bill.

He said the \$1.1 trillion infrastructure bill would be "highly unlikely" to get through the House even if it was not linked to the \$3.5 trillion bill. For his part, Bentz said there are points of the infrastructure package that he likes, including the broadband initiatives and bridges.

He said, even after getting Oregon's \$5.3 billion transportation bill — for which he was one of the principal architects of in the Legislature — the state is still "criminally lax" in maintaining its bridges.



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Gary Miller, left, and another constituent talk with U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Oregon, Thursday ahead of a town hall meeting at the Mt. Vernon Community Center.

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