Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Oregon legislators take to the stage Friday, June 17, 2022, at the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston.

Organizer boasts success at summit in Hermiston

Legislators praise bipartisanship

BY ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

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-Athena, 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.

Levy

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

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.

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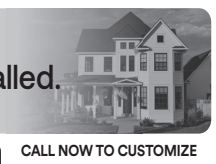

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