

Wednesday, July 13, 2022

OUR VIEW

Time for solutions to water emergency

It shouldn't be this difficult. It shouldn't be a great leap — as the richest nation in the world — to expect clean drinking water.

Yet, in Morrow County — as a recent investigation by Salem's Capital Chronicle news outlet showed — clean drinking water is a bridge too far.

We've remained relatively silent editorially on the matter because we expected — once the facts of this particular case were made public — a widespread federal and state response. So far as we can tell, that's been lacking.

The crux of the matter is a simple one. As the Capital Chronicle showed in its investigative series, the Port of Morrow allowed more than 600 tons of excess nitrogen from its wastewater to be applied on farmland on top of the area's already contaminated aquifer in the last decade. At the same time, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality did little to enforce penalties on the port when it violated its wastewater permit.

The state eventually laid down a \$2.1 million fine on the port.

Recently, voters quizzed U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden on the matter during a town hall session. Wyden referred to an idea where a group of local governments, businesses and residents could come together and tackle the issue. That type of plan has worked, to some extent, for Wyden before. His efforts to create a diverse group to help solve management issues of the Owyhee Canyonlands in the southeastern part of the state was a triumph of diplomacy.

However, the water issues in Morrow County are quite different than the land-use issues tied to the canyonlands.

Clean drinking water is what separates highly advanced, digital-age societies from the 19th century. To encounter a clean drinking water issue in the U.S., in Oregon, in this day and age should be nearly unthinkable. However, here we are.

Wyden and the rest of the state's federal lawmaking delegation need to step in and prompt federal authorities to take on this issue. Clearly, the problem evolved out of the realm of a state or local response almost immediately. Once federal help is on the way and visible, then the state must review the entire case and start asking some very pointed questions to several state agencies, starting with the DEQ.

Finally, those who are in charge at the Port of Morrow need to stand up and publicly respond to what was an apparent decade-long plan to ignore state rules.

A clean drinking water issue should not be occurring in the U.S. early in the 21st century.

Scheduled vacation flights...



COLUMN

Which Johnson would govern?



STEVE FORRESTER
WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Betsy Johnson entered my office at The Astorian in 2000 as a candidate for the state House of Representatives. Decades prior, our family histories intersected when my father and Johnson's mother were colleagues on the state Board of Higher Education. They had a simpatico relationship. So I was inclined to like this legislative candidate. And I did.

Not being a pollster, I will leave it to others to speculate on the viability of Johnson's strategy for winning the three-way race she has with Democrat Tina Kotek and Republican Christine Drazan. What interests me much more is what kind of governor she would be.

Oregon has not had a governor with business ownership in their background since Victor Atiyeh, our last Republican governor, who led the state from 1979 to 1987. Atiyeh grasped the concept of being the state's CEO.

Our state government has grown considerably since the 1980s, but some of the same challenges beg for oversight. With government's growth, the state's dependence on computer systems and software platforms has grown markedly. And Oregon has lacked a governor who grasped that particular challenge and dealt with it.

Oregon's state government's computer system disasters are no secret. Refreshing my memory about those malfunctions, I consulted a man with some 30 years of watching the statehouse — Dick Hughes, our newspaper's Salem columnist. "They're awful," Hughes said.

On the one hand, computer systems have become the nervous systems of most businesses and governments. On the other hand, no candidate for state office will run on a platform of improving them. This is not sexy stuff.

Based on what Hughes tells me and what I know of Johnson, she would have the moxie to ask the tough questions of systems and software providers who are contracted to serve the divisions of state government — which are equivalent to large companies — in terms of their payroll, budget and the size of the customer base they serve.

Guns, however, are a sexy issue — a highly visible flashpoint. When Johnson told me, more than a decade ago, about the machine gun that she purchased at an auction, I was startled. In U.S. Marine Corps infantry training, I had fired the M60 machine gun. Why, I wondered, would anyone not in uniform want that killing machine?

When Johnson and I had this conversation, a national community of public health physicians was gathering numbers on the scale of gun woundings, deaths and suicides. They argued that America should recognize this as a public health issue. A calamity. An epidemic.

An example of this public health perspective was "The Medical Costs of Gunshot Injuries in the United States," published in the

Journal of the American Medical Association. Its conclusions were: "Gunshot injury costs represent a substantial burden to the medical care system. Nearly half this cost is borne by the US taxpayers," (Aug. 4, 1999).

David Hemenway, of the Harvard School of Public Health, was a leading explorer of the intersection of firearm woundings and deaths and public health. "Private Guns, Public Health" was his 2004 book. The virtue of Hemenway's work and other public health physicians is that it moved the gun issue away from politics and emotion into the world of medicine, healing and prevention. In an attempt to have a fruitful dialogue with Johnson, I gave her one of Hemenway's papers. At that point, this very articulate woman said nothing in response.

I was sorry to hear Johnson's response to the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, but it was the Betsy I listened to some 20 years ago.

I know that her independent campaign for governor demands that she cultivate a hard-line stance for the single-issue voter — to cut into the Republican electorate. That's fine for short-term thinking. But it is not leadership for what has become a mortal concern.

Put simply, Johnson is on the wrong side of history. And if Oregon has another Umpqua Community College shooting (2015), Clackamas Town Center incident (2012) or Thurston High School shooting (Kip Kinkel, 1998), most Oregonians will want much more than a clichéd response from their governor.

■ Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of *The Astorian*, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Jim Doherty needs to be part of a solution, not just a finger pointer

I've read the recent articles on the Port of Morrow being fined by Oregon Department of Environmental Quality for over application of nitrogen. I've also read Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty's spin on blaming the high nitrates in the area solely on the Port of Morrow. Attached from one of those articles is a pie chart where the DEQ estimates where the nitrates come from.

The Port of Morrow along with food processing in Umatilla County accounts for 4.6%. The Port of Morrow handles the discharge water from food processors in Morrow County. This is the only group that is regulated by DEQ, and they are only a small portion of a bigger problem. Jim Doherty is a cattleman, and if I add the 8.1% from pastures with the confined animal feeding operations of 12.9%, I get 22% attributed to Jim Doherty's industry. Onsite, which is septic tanks and drain fields, is 3.9%. Jim has been targeting an area in rural Boardman

that is known to have high nitrate levels for decades. This is also an older development that would not meet today's standards. It is 1-acre lots with individual septic systems and shared wells. What are the chances that they may have failed septic systems that are contributing to their own problem?

The high nitrate issue has been around for decades. I can remember my friend Carol Michaels decades ago when she worked for Oregon State University Extension Service encouraging people in the area to check their wells for nitrates, and passing out literature at public events, such as the Irrigon Watermelon Festival and Morrow County Fair. State law that has been around for decades requires a test of the domestic well in any real estate transaction and the results be given to the buyer. This is not a new problem.

Jim was quoted as saying that before he and Commissioner Melissa Lindsay were elected, that the relationship between the Port of Morrow and county government was like the tail wagging the dog. During my 12-

year tenure as a county commissioner we had quarterly meetings with the Port of Morrow, city of Boardman and Morrow County. We met in the same room and tried to work on mutual problems for the public good. We didn't always agree on the solutions, but were always civil to each other. Not the screaming and yelling and finger-pointing that Commissioner Jim Doherty likes to do. The emergency meeting that was called to declare the emergency barely met the public notice requirements. None of the regional partners, including the cities of Boardman and Irrigon, were notified. One can only wonder if that was done to exclude the public from participating. There was no reason for the fear-mongering that has taken place. There was no reason to cast a shadow of doubt on city water, which is continually tested. Jim Doherty needs to be part of a solution and not just a finger pointer. If he wants to point the finger at the problem, he only needs to look in the mirror.

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