

1st Oregon Rural Congress Meeting a Success!

On August 21 & 22, 2008 the first meeting of the Oregon Rural Congress took place next to the mighty Columbia River in Cascade Locks, Oregon. About 220 respected leaders from all corners of Oregon made their way to Cascade Locks to brainstorm about the future. People from all the sub-regions of Rural Oregon (including the rural and populated areas in the Willamette Valley) expressed solidarity and a strong desire to work together across regional and political lines and to be proactive. These are people who are passionate, energized and dedicated to changing the political climate dynamic.

They took on four specific areas, Natural Resources, Economic Development, Health Care-Delivery & Services and Telecommunications

The Crisis in Rural Oregon: Structural Changes Sought

How did this remarkable meeting happen? There is a lot of rural angst out there to tap into because there are a great number of threats to Rural Oregon. One motivating factor is the Congressional deadlock on county timber payments. There is a very real dilemma. Without federal timber payments, many Oregon counties are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The main problem centers on large federal land holdings, in many cases there isn't enough private taxable land within a county to run a local government. In most cases, even substantial increases in property taxes won't come close to making up the shortfall.

Timber Resources as a Natural Resource Example

What frustrates and drives people crazy is that there is little disagreement that the forests desperately need to be thinned and managed. The irony is; if Oregon was back working at cleaning up and productively managing our forests, counties would not need federal payments. The counties would, again, start sharing revenue from timber harvests and rural residents could become productive, proud, working members of their communities.

Most people are not advocating for a return to historic timber harvest levels and practices. What is being proposed is a form of structure-based management, which would create diverse, fire, disease and pest resistant forest environments with strong riparian protections; a management plan that would, as a result, contribute to the social and economic well-being of the communities that swim in the seas of federal ownership.

Alas, the stalemate and legal wrangling drags on. Every day fuel loads in forests mount; they are becoming tinderboxes. Rural Oregonians hold their breath, because they know what happens when these forests burn; the landscape turns into a moonscape of sterilized soils with the accompanying enormous volumes of carbon released into the atmosphere. The potential of rural economic recovery takes another nose dive.

Economic Development Challenges and Telecommunication Gaps

In addition, there's been a dramatic decline in the amount of federal and state financial assets to help underwrite and partner on economic development. Crumbling infrastructure and the added costs that longer travel distance and fewer telecommunication advancements provide an uneven playing field for rural business. The Oregon Legislature has starved the rural areas; removing the opportunities for rural economic efforts by slowly bleeding to death and finally de-funding rural regional strategy capabilities. On the federal side, the last decade has seen sharp reductions

in the amount of financial support for economic development in rural areas. The lack of timber management or timber payments and the withdrawal of these economic development dollars really constitute a one-two punch to local governments. Functioning local governments are a foundation of American society. If the local governments in Rural Oregon implode, that really damages the prospects and the entire state feels the impact.

Health Care -Delivery and Services

Rural access to healthcare, healthcare workers, training, adequate public and mental health services are particularly acute in rural areas. Rapidly rising healthcare costs in communities who have lost their economic underpinnings provide a staggering dilemma. The lack of financial and human capacity to deal with decreased state shared funds and increased regulatory paperwork provides increasingly fewer needed services to rural residents.

Please...Not Another Gripe Session!

Leading up to the meeting the planning committee members explained to people that we didn't want to stage a gripe fest, where the same old complaints are aired and then nothing seems to get done about them. This was not going to be a preach to the choir session, rather, it was going to be a serious strategy session, seek a set of agreements to go forward together, to set something in motion, This was not just a publicity stunt, set into motion subcommittees to follow through on writing up white papers, and, in some cases, when the situation called for it, additional study.

The name Oregon Rural Congress was coined to express the fact that for many people in Rural Oregon, the existing institutions of government were, in effect, failing us. Many years ago a pact was made between rural counties and the federal government that they would share revenues from federal forest lands with rural counties in lieu of being charged with taxes.

A Rainy Day in Cascade Locks

The original plan was to have breakout groups on the first day of the two day event. But, the weather, a rare, rainy day in August in the Columbia River Gorge, kept us in the main building. So, even though we had 200 plus people in the room, we would have this dialogue as a single group. The moderators of the meeting Hood County Commissioner Barbara Briggs, Harney County Judge Steve Grasty and Union County Commissioner Colleen MacLeod, explained that we would try to work through four issue areas (health and human services, natural resources, economic development, telecommunications) asking people to describe a problem, but, also offer a proposed solution. In the end, 350 of these were offered during the course of the two day meeting. A number of the solutions ended up being an agreement to set up a study group or work group or task force to develop some remedies.

The inclement weather was according to the majority of the participants, a blessing in disguise. It kept the group together. That way, people got to hear directly about their specific issues and proposed solutions, but the ideas and solutions regarding all of the issues, rather than listen to brief summarizations from break out groups. People were very respectful; speeches were kept to a minimum. It seemed to work.

The Second Day

Friday brought out for discussion, some of more frequently submitted issues raised on Thursday and the breakdown of how issues get addressed in the form of action. Sign up sheets for specific issues were circulated and plans started forming for the potential of another congress soon to expand the outreach and to address some addition issues that need the same sort of statewide rural attention, such as transportation and rural funding.

It was a monumental beginning. There are already concrete discussions about a second Congress before the Oregon Legislative session with a lot of interest being expressed by those who missed the first, and certainly not last coming together to save those who chose to live and work in and love the rural 80% of Oregon.

Onno Husing

Oregon Coastal Zone Management

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