

Oregon: A “Wicked” Problem

By Brian Gard

Everybody knows that the boat is leaking.

—Leonard Cohen

I was born in Eugene and raised in Albany and Portland. I went to Cleveland High School and Willamette University. I started a company in Portland in 1979 and since then have been involved in children’s charities, arts and environmental organizations and business groups as well as public issues, both professionally and personally. Along with many others, each in their own way and to a greater or lesser degree, I have helped make Oregon what it is today. I am one of the ones to blame.

There is much that is right in Oregon. But there is too much that is wrong. Why are we saddled with persistent problems that do not go away and become worse every year? How do we reconcile the Oregon that was first with the bottle bill – and so much more – with the Oregon that wanted the longest school year in the country in 1990 and now has the shortest? The Oregon of our imagination does not have one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation and does not lead the nation in the percentage of its citizens and children who go to bed hungry. The real Oregon, the one we have all helped build, does.

In research that Davis Hibbits & McCaig has carried out for clients of our firm over the past year, there has been a sea-change in the answer to the question, “Is Oregon on the right track or the wrong track?” Since 1994, a majority of Oregonians have thought we were on the right track. Now a majority believe we are on the wrong track. This is more than statistically significant: it is a significant sign of deep frustration, a recognition that somehow Oregon is on its way from being a great state to becoming a mediocre one.

There has been failure on a grand scale, not just to prepare for the future but to maintain the present. It doesn’t matter where you look: our roads and bridges, our schools and universities, our support for children and adults in need, our support for cultural organizations. In many areas of importance to our state, we are in disarray, unable to fund the basics that are needed today, much less the investment that is needed for tomorrow.

Often, we are unable to even talk about possible solutions, much less carry them out. For example, during one of the recent special sessions at the Legislature, an increase in taxes on beer and wine in Oregon was proposed. It makes sense to at least consider it – Oregon has one of the lowest beer and wine taxes in the nation, and the proposal would have exempted Oregon wineries and breweries. There was not even a serious discussion because of the influence of a single lobbyist. I don’t think that’s what my political science professor at Willamette meant by “checks and balances.”

Meanwhile, while children go hungry in Oregon, there seems to be no shortage of people trying to generate excitement and money to build ice rinks, baseball stadiums or cover freeways with parks.

And we keep looking for magic bullets. Typically the magic bullet is a new tax structure, which is code for raising more money from taxpayers, preferably through a sales tax. Right now, several business organizations are proposing to begin conversations about how to solve Oregon’s problems. The end game is already written down in one memo – a ballot measure in November 2003 to, guess what, change the tax structure. I support the intent; I honor the good will of the people involved and will vote for it. But I don’t think it will work, because too little money – or, if your politics are different than mine, too much money – isn’t the real problem. The problem will be getting a majority of Oregonians to vote for it.

Too much distrust among people has accumulated over the last twenty years. The values we used to share as Oregonians are now values we argue about. We need to resolve these more fundamental issues before we will be able to move forward in any way other than fits and starts.

The differences and distrust between men and women of the counter-culture and men and women of business are easy to see as they walk the same city streets. But it is not much different than the distrust between Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature. Between teachers’ unions and school boards. Between the proponents of cars and the proponents of light rail. Or between rural ranchers and urban office workers. There is a wickedly complex matrix of distrust that thrives in Oregon.

An obvious sign of such deep distrust is the number of initiatives that Oregon voters have had to deal with recently. Too many initiatives are the creatures of those who distrust their opponents, who don’t want to talk with them, find common ground, perhaps consensus or, god forbid, compromise. Extremist measures have occasionally passed, such as Measure 5 in 1990. As a matter of sad routine, millions that could be spent feeding the hungry in Oregon, or, if you prefer, building an ice rink in Pioneer Square, have been spent on consultants like me and the media to defeat them.

Recently, much has been made of the fact that there are only six initiatives on the ballot this November. It simply may mean that this way of deciding issues is also failing, in the same way as community and legislative processes are failing. Fewer initiatives may actually signal a worsening situation, an inability to resolve issues in any forum.

It’s not as if Oregon’s situation can’t be understood in intellectual terms. It’s not a mystery. For example, in a compelling article, “Shifting Public Values for Forest Management: Making Sense of Wicked Problems” (1997) by Bruce Shindler and Lori A. Cramer of Oregon State University, the authors distinguish between “messes” and “wicked problems.” Messes are very complex problems that get resolved because the people involved share a set of values. A mess becomes a wicked problem when values are not shared. The authors quote Rittel and Webber from “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” (1973):

Under such circumstances, and in the absence of overriding social theory or overriding social ethic, there is no determining which group is right and which should have its ends served.

Sounds like Oregon to me. I think the leaders and citizens of Oregon have been worn down and, to a certain extent, defeated by the number of “wicked problems” that we have been unable to resolve because we no longer share a set of common values.

Of course, it’s easier to describe a lack of trust and shared values than it is to propose ways to trust and share values. I don’t have any magic bullets.

But we can all start by not blaming somebody else and share in the responsibility for the decline of our state.

We can stop using the quality of life in our state as a mantra that pretends Oregon is somehow a better place to live than some other place. It’s not. Especially now. And this civic arrogance keeps us from focusing on legitimate problems and has become a ritual excuse and defense for any number of things. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of values can be summarized, somewhat simplistically, by saying that it is difficult to enjoy Beethoven on an empty stomach. It’s just as difficult to enjoy our beautiful state and all it offers if you don’t have a job.

We can stop the silly justification of new policies or programs by saying that it is another example of Oregon being first in the nation. I would think our fascination with being first is getting a little old now that we are “first” in hunger, unemployment and the shortest school year.

We need to stop living in the Oregon of the imagination and come face-to-face with the real Oregon of our time and making. Most of our politicians seem determined to live in the past. To hear them talk, you would think they were all Tom McCall, Mark Hatfield or Neil Goldschmidt. What makes those leaders special is that they didn’t dwell on the past: instead, they built new coalitions and achieved fresh consensus.

We should stop searching for one comprehensive legislative or ballot box fix. Instead, we should focus on rebuilding trust and finding values we can agree upon and share. At the same time, we should start picking off problems one at a time. We need a string of successes in order to rebuild confidence and consensus in this state.

We ought to reevaluate our priorities. I’m not comfortable supporting things like the Pioneer Place ice rink when there are so many children hungry and homeless in Oregon. Why even think about bringing a baseball team to Portland when our schools are a shambles? And clearly we don’t have enough light rail, buses or roads; so the park over the freeway can wait for a generation or two.

And, finally, let’s not wait for a leader to move us forward. That is as much a shirking of civic responsibility as blaming the other guy for the state’s problems. There are huge divides in Oregon today: between rural and urban, between government and citizens, between proponents and opponents on every major issue. Absent our explicit willingness to ease these divisions through shared trust and values, no leader will be able to lead – and potential leaders won’t want to try. Each one of us needs to care less about what matters to us and care more about what matters to others.

It seems like every issue, large and small, has a committee of supporters, who care about that issue to the exclusion of all others. Oregon needs such a committee, just for itself. A committee made up of all its citizens. Citizens who trust one another and can find a few values to share as they build a new Oregon. Start with your neighbor and let’s see what happens. ☺

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