



My view of community in Ashland has changed

by John Stromberg, Monday, June 29th 2020

David Wick had a question: How has your view of community changed with the disruption of COVID-19? How has your life changed, and how do you see our moving forward from the major impact the coronavirus has had on all of our lives?

His question has stymied me multiple times as I tried to write my answer. In the meantime, our president continues his relentless march toward dictatorship; and George Floyd is killed by police in Minneapolis.

My view of community — for Ashland — has changed from “maintaining and evolving the quality-of-life bubble that is, or was, the Shakespeare Era” to “creating stability in turbulent times, via the quality of our relationships and the gift of our natural setting, the Rogue Valley.”

Could this formula — place-based community centric — be similar in kind to that of the people in covered wagons trekking the Oregon Trail? Or of my mother’s family as they migrated from Tuscany to an ice cream parlor in Chicago, then a grocery store in Oakland?

Building stable relationships involves tolerating a certain tension, whether in families or in communities such as the one in whose municipal services co-op we are all members.

The beauty and magic of Ashland’s setting is a harmonizing influence for sure. Shakespeare has drawn many complex individuals here — what would Ashland be now if Angus Bomer had built a gambling casino? And there have been many Ashlands along the way, whose legacy we’ve inherited, including the person who specified in the original deed to our house a provision that it never be sold to a person of color or a Native American.

Amidst turbulence and change much can be lost, but isn't there also the chance to create a truly better nation ("to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility")?

I believe the living genius of Democracy is entrusted to the hands of those of us in towns Ashland's size. Small enough for face-to-face relationships that span our social spectrum; large enough to rationally manage our municipal services co-op.

I foresee us heading toward a regionally focused future, with less exotic, metropolitan influence that has gradually settled over our town as the festival became more polished and sophisticated and excess disposable income in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Los Angeles grew, taking Ashland more upscale than is healthy for a resilient community.

The Rogue Valley has great "fundamentals" for a regionally based "municipality," defined by its natural geography, with its cities morphing into legally distinct but interrelated neighborhoods of urbanism scattered in nature — as contrasted with pockets of nature spotted in green belts and parks in a concrete metropolis.

We can create a sustainable lifestyle that doesn't travel as far or as often, consuming fossil fuels at obscene rates, but travels for meaning rather than diversion when diversion is at our doorsteps.

Our visitors can be younger, more Oregonians and Pacific Northwesterners, more outdoor focused — and let them rediscover a reborn Shakespeare Festival and an abundance of other opportunities.

Let them come for the different flavors of Gold Hill and Central Point, Shady Cove and Medford — and Grants Pass, with all our "neighborhood cities" a critical mass that is also the gateway to Southern Oregon.

There is a pathway through this chaos. But we have to be true to each other; respecting our interdependence; be not just truth-tellers but foreswearing the seduction of propaganda and exploitation of digital media. As we spend more time outside; as we help each other ("neighbors helping neighbors") instead of seeking more for ourselves as we grow more of our own food — we become stronger and more resilient.

We can take on the tasks of healing "the two original sins of America," the enslaving of people from Sub-Sahara Africa and the genocide and theft of lands of our First Nations.

This and healing the environment that sustains us can be unifying goals as we fulfill the promise of this extraordinary place in which we are so fortunate to live.

John Stromberg, mayor of Ashland, is completing 16 years of public service in the city of Ashland.