

A SH L A N D T I D I N G S

'Progression'

By John Stromberg, December 14, 2020

On Dec. 31 I end my 12-year tenure as Mayor of Ashland. To say it has been wonderful, exciting, eye-opening, frightening and distinctly "Ashlandia" would be, well, pretty accurate.

During these years — I was elected in Barack Obama's first term, 2008 — my view of city government and its place in our community has changed dramatically. Here are some milestones:

"The Arrogance of Ignorance" — In 2006 I ran (unsuccessfully) for City Council, and during the campaign convened an informal group of respected residents with financial expertise and direct knowledge of the city's budget process. We came up with a really clever, cool idea to fundamentally change the process; I organized a campaign and ... long story short ... our proposal was adopted. Years later when I was on the Budget Committee, I greatly regretted our action because it set up the Budget Committee to preempt policy decisions that are properly the purview of the Council.

During our campaign I was totally unaware of the people and process in city government we were affecting. I must have seemed arrogant and uninformed. But now I'm more inclined to not get my back up when encountering a resident's brilliant idea from left field.

"Real Pros" — Back in the time when Mike Bianca left as Police Chief a retired Deputy Chief with a national reputation in community policing, from Fontana, took his place. Without drama or public conflict Terry Holderness rebuilt the Department into a leading example of progressive policing. (As an organization and management consultant, I could appreciate how sophisticated his effort was). When Terry retired, two of his Deputy Chiefs stepped up: Tighe O'Meara was his natural successor, with strong support from members of the force. And Warren Hensman was hired as Public Safety Director for Grants Pass.

Fast forward to 2009 and we're seeking a new Fire Chief to replace Keith Woodley, who retired. One candidate stood out. ... A Deputy Chief from Beverly Hills, John Karns, who had studied a full year of council meeting videos, stepped seamlessly into Keith's shoes and

proceeded to roll out many positive enhancements to an already respected Ashland Fire & Rescue. Then in 2016, John moved into the City Administrator spot for a full year.

These two individuals taught me that Ashland could attract and needed high caliber department heads, whom we've been able to acquire consistently since then.

"Beyond our borders" — When I took office in 2009, the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project was ready to go but had no funding — until senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley channeled \$6.5 million of its \$10.5 million budget in stimulus funding our way, and the project took off. Five years later it was a success but had burned through its initial "nut" with no prospects for completion funding. I realized I needed to do something — so I got the Council to commit \$175,000 a year to the project, and Chris Chambers and I went to Washington, DC to lobby. With help from our AFR partner The Nature Conservancy, we presented the project as a showcase for visionary ideas currently circulating in the Forest Service but not well known outside. The Undersecretary of Agriculture was curious, sent multiple visitors/emissaries to check out the project on the ground, and we achieved our goal.

Thanks to Chris's artful leveraging of the interest AFR garnered, over the years we've received \$8 million in additional and complimentary funding. And AFR has a national reputation. Chris sits on the Governor's Wildfire Council, and this past year I was an invited panelist on the National Academy of Sciences conference on the risks of smoke from wildfires and prescribed burning.

The lesson: Ashland's identity, especially as a unified community (with exceptional leadership from the Chamber of Commerce) is a marketable quality by which we can finance our sometimes-expensive quality of life values goals.

"The COVID/Almeda/Trump/BLM crises-continuum" — has radically altered our world. It's going to be lonely holidays for many families. But consider: The realization that we must resolve this nation's historical abuse of many vulnerable and minority populations; red-flag fire days mean "get ready to go," and we have to clean up sources of ignition in our towns or pay the devastating price. Our local homeless population is integral to our community, and we know how to bring them back in; innovative modules have arrived for housing displaced fire victims. Glass half empty: "Who will come to Ashland for the Festival if 50% of our population rejects the vaccines?" Half full: "How many vaccinated people will want to come to Ashland once again, for our 'vaccinated guests only' shows, meals and lodging?"

My take: our future is in our community. Political power via divisiveness is toxic. Helping each other succeed (e.g., Rogue Food Unities) is our strength. In so many ways a collaborative regional community is emerging. Truth, respect, invention is our path forward.

Sounds exciting to me — See you around town :-)

John Stromberg, Mayor, City of Ashland