

A New Year's Resolution for Oregon: A mobile, living billboard

by Chuck Sheketoff

Like many others right about now, I'm drawing up my list of New Year's resolutions. As usual, it is a long list of ways that I can be a better person. But this time I'm not thinking only of myself. At top of the list I'm placing a resolution that will help Oregon, and I ask others to join me in this pledge.

The resolution? To acknowledge daily the important role that public structures play in my life and to educate my community about how they foster happiness, opportunity and success for all Oregonians.

We've all seen the "Your highway taxes at work" signs alongside highway improvement projects. But how often have you seen those signs on private contractors' trucks or heard the owners of construction or aggregate companies acknowledge the important role that government dollars play in their businesses?

We've seen the "United Way Agency" logo on the letterhead of non-profits that provide social services. But when was the last time you saw "Your tax dollars at work" signs on the doors of hospitals, doctors' offices, or clinics that provide services paid for with Medicaid dollars?

Years ago the director of the state human services agency called on each of the hundreds of private entities that together receive millions of public dollars to provide social services to become "a mobile, living billboard" that makes the connection between services provided by the private sector and public financing of these activities.

It's time for all of us to take him up on that challenge and become mobile, living billboards. It's time to educate our families, friends, neighbors and community about how public structures strengthen our state and promote opportunity.

The erosion of public knowledge about and support for the role of government in our lives is setting

Oregon on a dangerous course. Veteran Oregon pollster and public opinion researcher Adam Davis calls it part of a "perfect storm" that's brewing. The ignorance and distrust are already taking a toll.

Our hands are tied when it comes to raising revenues fairly in order to support public structures. "Supermajority" and "double-majority" provisions cede power to the minority and impede progress. Responsible legislative efforts to save for the inevitable future when the economy turns sour fall victim to simplistic slogans such as "it's our money." That claim, taken to its logical conclusion, would mean that no taxes would ever be paid and ignores the plain fact that even the staunchest libertarian relies on government daily to succeed.

The most vulnerable in society suffer when Oregonians fail to recognize the importance of government. Children who are victims of abuse and neglect don't get the quality of foster care they deserve. Too many low- and middle-income Oregonians go without health care. Promising young people are shut out of college because of rising costs. The list goes on.

And it's not just the vulnerable who suffer. The business community needs well-educated and well-trained employees, a court system that's fair and efficient, effective transportation and public safety systems, and government contracts to perform tasks that assist the state in meeting the needs of Oregonians.

All Oregonians need a vibrant public sector. Government protects individuals and businesses against misfortune and works with business and civic groups to solve society's problems. Well-maintained public structures are necessary for achieving broadly based prosperity and opportunity.

So this New Year, resolve to become a living, mobile billboard by educating fellow Oregonians about how our tax dollars support public structures that improve our lives.

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