



Group talks of rural prosperity for rural Oregon

180 gather at Cascade Locks on budget cuts, revenue loss and local control

Friday, August 22, 2008

MATTHEW PREUSCH

The Oregonian Staff

CASCADE LOCKS -- Rural Oregonians from the coast to across the Cascades are meeting for the first time to try to forge a common agenda.

The inaugural Oregon Rural Congress that wraps up this morning in Cascade Locks is largely an airing of perceived obstacles to rural prosperity, from the systemic to the miniscule, and suggestions of how they might be cleared.

Conceived by the Eastern Oregon Rural Alliance, the congress comes during a rough year for rural Oregon. Budget cuts closed the state Office of Rural Policy, the Oregon congressional delegation has been unable to win renewal of a county payment program crucial to many budgets, and a new state ethics law led to widespread resignations on local boards and commissions.

"The last session was not kind to rural," said one of the organizers, Union County Commissioner Colleen MacLeod.

More than 180 people -- legislators, local leaders, consultants and others -- signed up for the two-day conference. Attendance in the community hall on Cascade Locks' waterfront was such that extra chairs had to be pulled out and participants sat shoulder to shoulder.

Rain forced organizers to cancel outdoor breakout sessions in favor of one big meeting indoors, a "gathering of the clan," as one speaker called it.

Speakers stood in front of a backdrop of homemade quilts, and then the microphone was passed around the room. Issues included natural resources, telecommunications, economic development and health care, among others.

"This really is to get people focused on the issues that we share and then boil them down to a narrow agenda," said Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, whose district covers much of eastern Oregon.

Today participants will try to prioritize their ideas and build them into a report they can give to state and federal officials.

More broadly, many speakers touched on amending state laws to fit the diverse areas of Oregon and transferring land and natural resource decision-making to local governments.

"We are educated, we are bright. And we are able to land shiny side up if people don't keep flipping us over," said MacLeod.

One of the biggest applause lines of the day came when property-rights activist Rita Swyers of Hood River called for the repeal of Measure 49 and full implementation of Measure 37.

The meeting was nonpartisan, although any speaker's credibility seemed to come in inverse proportion to the population of their hometown. And there was one reference to the "tyranny of the urban majority."

At least one representative of that majority was on hand to foster some rural-urban understanding.

"There are a lot of issues we don't have in common, but there are also a lot of issues that we do," said Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman. "That's why I'm here."

Although long and thick with specific policy discussions, such as a discussion of training requirements for volunteer firefighters or wireless versus fiber optic infrastructure, the day had moments of emotion and humor.

At one point a speaker mentioned that she did not know what the state Land Conservation and Development Commission was. LCDC is reviled by some rural Oregonians for enforcing state laws limiting development on farm and forestland. The speaker then added that she lived in downtown Portland.

"No wonder you don't know what LCDC is," quipped MacLeod.

Matthew Preusch: 541-382-2006; preusch@bendbroadband.com

©2008 Oregonian