

Oregon's urban-rural legislative divide (OPINION)

By Sen. Betsy Johnson

If Portland elected a City Council member who was transgender, it would probably be a national news story. And if Portland raised enough money to build a fully accessible playground to accommodate all children, the city would hail it as a national model.

Well, the city of Redmond has done both. This small town in Central Oregon quietly goes about its business. It focuses on substance — not style. In the Redmond City Council chambers my father's photo is among the former mayors. But that's not the only reason I have a special place in my heart for rural Oregon. There is so much in this diverse state that my urban-centric colleagues in the Legislature don't appreciate. They know about Oregon's natural beauty and recreational opportunities. Do they really know the people?

My husband owns a plane, and this summer I've been in the air and on the road visiting towns in Central, Eastern and Southern Oregon. It has been an antidote to the partisan animosity that marred the 2015 legislative session. I've been meeting and seeking the opinions of citizens, city councils, county commissioners, business owners, educational leaders and trustees of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. "I'm surprised you are asking us for our opinion," Bob Shippentower, a trustee of the Confederated Tribes told me. "Usually we have visitors advising us."

Later at lunch with the Confederated Umatilla Tribes' Chamber of Commerce, I listened as a defense attorney and a prosecutor discussed Oregon's new marijuana law. It's one thing for a legislative committee to meet in Salem and decide how to implement Measure 91. It's another matter for rural areas to make it work, especially when a majority of their voters rejected Measure 91. Marijuana was an issue that came up repeatedly in my visits. "How would you like to work a construction site and have someone who's loaded operating machinery next to you?" a woman asked me in La Pine.

A farmer in Madras, who was also affiliated with Central Oregon Community College, said employers are having trouble with graduates not ready to work. Too many kids come to community college in need of remedial courses. Yet the Legislature seems ready to increase everyone's minimum wage whether or not they deserve it. People in Burns, La Grande and Ontario feel that legislators have intruded in the employer-employee relationship by pushing for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. Ontario is especially hard-hit by state government intrusions into the workplace: It is located just this side of the Idaho border. If Salem increases the minimum wage in the next legislative session, Ontario employers may have to move across the state line to stay in business.

Some of my urban colleagues might shrug and say, "Let them move to Idaho." Where would that leave the employees in Malheur County, which is already the poorest in the state? Is the plan to gentrify them out of Oregon? Lower-income families in Coos Bay or Bend or LaGrande, who have been left out of the state's economic rebound, are no different than Portland residents trying to hang on. In Burns, there is concern that Salem might be more interested in protecting sage grouse habitat than in finding a new use for the now-abandoned state archives' data center. The building looks new, but its promising future as a cloud center did not materialize.

In La Grande, there are jokes that Portland environmentalists want to turn juniper shrubs, which thrive like weeds, into "old-growth juniper." When I visited Ontario, Republican state Rep. Cliff Bentz drove me around the area where there is poverty to rival anything you will see in Portland. Some urban legislators do not understand what it's like to be job-starved amid a wealth of resources that can't be touched because of state and federal regulations.

Last year, I flew several urban legislators to Malheur County to visit the diatomaceous mines outside Juntura and then flew some of my rural colleagues to Intel in Washington County. I wanted to help them better see each other's challenges. In Juntura, if the state would agree to help build a new road to the mine, the company could add another shift and 40 more jobs to the area.

The road is still unapproved, but the 2015 Legislature did approve a hotline for strippers.