

## **City Club of Portland Bulletin 11-4-05**

***“Ready to Talk, Ready to Listen:***

***Rural Oregon Offers Models for Participatory Citizenship”***

### **CITY CLUB PALEO LANDS TOUR Oct 15-16 2005**

*City Club's Executive Director [Wendy Radmacher-Willis](#) writes ...*

Countless words have been written about what is now almost reflexively known as the "urban-rural divide." Last year, The Oregonian published a piece called "The Nine States of Oregon." Portland-area legislators and their counterparts from the rest of the state can not come to agreement on the most important policy questions facing the state. So, with the notion of a division between rural and urban Oregonians looming over our most important public discussions, City Club decided to get out of the city and visit Gilliam and Wheeler Counties.

One weekend last month, 21 Club members and guests visited the communities of Condon, Fossil and Spray in the John Day Basin. City Club member Richard Ross curated an amazingly varied experience that included a tour of the fossil beds in Wheeler County, a driving tour of the Basin, and several community conversations among civic leaders of Gilliam and Wheeler Counties and City Club members. At each of these meetings, everyone came ready to talk — and ready to listen.

After hearing about the work of the citizens of Condon in the areas of community redevelopment, value-added agriculture and wind power, Gilliam County Judge Laura Pryor stood up and admonished: "Your organization is the only one in the state of Oregon that can start a meaningful citizen dialogue." After a passionate description of the issues her community faces, she concluded: "Please do not ignore this. Because if you ignore this issue, you are ignoring all of us."

Judge Pryor is right. There are lessons to be learned from each other. Of course, there are the obvious ones — the ones we hoped to teach ourselves — personal conversations create human connections that will carry forward to the next policy discussion. But, the citizens of Fossil and Condon and Spray also

taught us some important lessons about how we think about fostering and strengthening civic engagement in our own community.

On the final day of the trip, our group was warmly welcomed to a community coffee with the residents of Spray, a town of 150 people in Wheeler County. We heard about health care and transportation, economic development and public works. Paul Young, the Superintendent of Schools, identified the key to Spray's survival: "In this community, everyone is interdependent." In response, a City Club member asked what percentage of the population volunteers in community activities to make it all work. The room erupted in laughter. Galen Fisher, a farmer and board member of the health care clinic, responded: "Of 150, 150."

Over and over, we heard similar themes. "No one is a specialist here." The superintendent of Condon Public Schools is also the principal and head basketball coach. The District Attorney of Gilliam County led an effort to raise over \$1 million to restore a turn-of-the-century hotel that had fallen into disrepair. A wheat farmer's wife runs the downtown boutique that caters to tourists and is president of the Chamber of Commerce.

I do not want to succumb to romanticism about small-town life, but the depth — and maybe more importantly, breadth — of commitment to public life was striking. Everyone we met was conversant in the challenges faced by their communities and what efforts might be made to address them.

At City Club, we often talk about the threats to civic engagement — job demands of multi-career families, commuting time, television — but I wonder if we should add specialization to the list. We have become accustomed to identifying ourselves, and everyone else, very precisely — labor lawyer, podiatrist, ethnomusicologist. We have extended that notion of specialization to citizenship. Individuals identify themselves as "community activists" or "professional volunteers." We have created a kind of civic class, in which those who are often already over-committed are asked to carry the full burden of public life. There are those that have either anointed themselves or been anointed by us to hold the public space — to run the parent-teacher association, to testify at city council,

to serve on city committees. As a result, the public arena becomes more and more narrow, and most people don't participate at all.

I came back from the John Day Basin grateful to our hosts, to Richard Ross and to the City Club members who approached the trip with curiosity, graciousness and open-heartedness. But I also came back inspired and humbled. There are places in Oregon where the Jeffersonian notion of participatory citizenship works to revitalize a downtown, to install a sewer system, to attract industry. So, I carry Judge Pryor's admonition with me. This is a dialogue we can not ignore.