

What Makes a Small Town Great?

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A recent issue of *The Sunday Oregonian* tells us that retiring boomers with plenty of money, time and expertise are heading toward small town living in their golden years. That's no surprise to those of us who already know the joys of living in a small town. However, the same issue of the paper tells us that small town life is drying up in some parts of the state due to hard times with vital services like gas stations and restaurants vanishing. Most of us living here along the Oregon coast would argue that we're not drying up in any way, but we'd have to agree that things are changing. Nothing stays the same.

What kind of community are we, and what do we hope to become? What binds us together or tears us apart? I don't think we're like the small town I visited in southern Oregon a few years ago in which the unwelcome nature of almost everything was visible from the abundance of "No" signs to stares and responses I received from people on the street. Even the information center had no information!

What makes a small town great anyway? According to the latest issue of Mother Earth News in a list of "11 Great Places You've (Maybe) Never Heard Of," the components of greatness are "a cadre of dedicated citizens with creative ideas and the energy to implement them; a progressive government willing to meet them halfway; opportunities to get close to nature; arts and cultural programs to feed the soul; a desire to meet the challenge of transitioning to renewable energy." Sounds like a big order to fill, but we come pretty close in most areas. It's interesting to note that of the eleven great places, median household income ranged from \$15,000 to \$54,000 and population from 788 to 397, 000. What was consistent was what made the towns great—things like bike trails, community theater, arts centers,

local food, gorgeous scenery, a strong will to preserve the town's local focus, great climate, civic mindedness, and high-spirited do-it-yourselfers. Maybe that sounds like us?

I just returned from a trip to Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, and Olympic and North Cascades National Parks, all of which have some of the most beautiful scenery our country has to offer. While surrounded by thick stands of Coast Pine in an outdoor amphitheater in Olympic National Park, I was able to view the Ken Burns OPB film series, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea" while immersed in the very land the series describes. I was thankful for visionaries like John Muir who saw the need to preserve these most special places in the nation for all of us to enjoy. It's a responsibility we all share for the generations coming after us.

Nothing thrives without attention. In our little towns, we don't have to go overboard and put up gates to tell everyone else to stay out. We don't have to become "No" communities with an undercurrent thread of exclusivity. But we do need to plan, make thoughtful decisions, keep an open mind and heart and always think about what's best for the future. One of the things we can do now with the coming of winter is remember to shop locally. Northwest Earth Institute tells us a dollar spent at a locally owned store is usually spent 6 to 15 times before it leaves the community. From \$1, we create \$5 to \$14 in value within that community. If we spend \$1 at a national chain store, 80% leaves town immediately. Our dollars do make a difference. The more money that stays here, the better off we all are. It's a way to keep our communities vibrant and strong. Though it seems a small act, the consequences of it are just as important as the creation of a bike path, the support of an arts center or the preservation of a National Park.

We've inherited a rich history of the American West and live in one of the most beautiful regions in the United States. The choices we make today and for the future will determine how we'll be remembered as a people.
