

If moral indignation and malcontent is pleasurable, as author Barbara Holland asserts, then Josephine County Commissioners ended the year blissfully albeit with little self-reflection. Because of that, their 2023 meetings should be preceded by this disclaimer: The following may induce social anxiety attacks in those who believe elected officials should refrain from frumious grumbling and reality-bending performative outrage.

Throughout 2022 Commissioners made it clear they were unhappy living in a country where voters decided to buck Fox News and reject a twice-impeached President and in a state dominated by a political party they compare to Communists. They moaned about Gov. Kate Brown's mask mandate during the pandemic, they groaned about COVID vaccine mandates, they agitated about gun safety laws and cried about money coming in to help offset pandemic business and government losses even though it was shoring up the Sheriff's Department, funding a path to better broadband in the county and getting a lot of work done on county facilities.

2022 began with Commissioner Darin Fowler lamenting county voters. "Everyone in our community decided 10 or 12 years ago that they don't want to be a fully funded county and we're not. They never supported the Sheriff's patrol, they only did it when we did the jail and juvenile justice levy and although I think you've done a great job Sheriff (Dave Daniel) of bringing patrol to the maximum point that you can, that's still not what the people asked for."

Fowler's diatribe was a self-fulfilling prophesy. A sales tax scheme Commissioners believed they could sell to Josephine County voters by saying tourists would help pay for patrol deputies was rejected by an embarrassing margin. Commissioners might as well have asked voters to pay for heated chairs in their offices and daily massages.

Notable 2022 events also included an attempted recall of Commissioners Dan DeYoung and Herman Baertschiger for their demonstrated lack of concern for public safety. Since Fowler would be up for re-election in 2022 recallers decided to let the voters kick him out. Recall petition-signers really resented the way Commissioners seemed to value indoor dining more than senior citizen's lives, who thought only sissies wore masks and who praised vaccine conspiracy theorists while showing contempt for medical professionals trying to tell them how to save lives. Recallers said Josephine County Commissioners were willing to sacrifice lives so they and their supporters could exercise their "freedom of choice," which was ironic considering they all disavowed freedom of choice when it came to abortion.

The recall also cited another public safety issue as a reason to, as DeYoung put it "flush the toilet and start over again." Commissioners were refusing to apply standards for fire companies in a large portion of the county without a fire district, potentially allowing a kid with a water tank in the back of his truck to set up a fire company and charge a monthly fee for protection.

One way the recall was successful is that it gave Commissioners an excuse for delaying action on the tricky question of how to keep the Sheriff's Department from going broke. Another way it worked was to get Commissioner Darin Fowler thinking about spending more time with his family.

Commission Chair Herman Baertschiger said this about discussing Sheriff's funding, "we would've started this conversation two months ago on this issue except we were getting recalled and when you're getting recalled you can't have any kind of controversy so that recall cost us two months!"

Also in 2022 Commissioners gave away a 245-acre county park worth \$1.2 million, stirred up a hornet's nest of rural property-rights advocates when trying to beef up county code enforcement to discourage illegal cannabis grows, fell for a mine company's promise of "vast revenues for the county" if only they would help with pesky environmental regulations, leased county land near the fairgrounds to a casino developer before they made sure his casino would be legal in Oregon, asked Josephine County voters if they'd like to be annexed to Idaho on the May ballot, approved the transformation of Whitehorse Park from a quiet, tree-filled riverside campground into an RV park, took out a \$300,000 loan from the Road Department to keep the Sheriff's Department afloat, to be paid back with interest in three years then failed to get permanent funding for the Sheriff's Department after putting a seasonal sales tax scheme on the ballot. In addition, after claiming none of them knew a thing about psilocybin or "magic mushrooms," they decided to leave the question of allowing the hallucinogenic substance for medical use only in the county up to voters, who decided Sheriff Daniel had enough to do without having to worry about another mind-alternating substance that surely would give nefarious characters ideas.

On a positive note, Commissioners did appoint a committee to help them allocate their share of ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds. Recommendations helped them divide the \$16.9 million for much-needed airport, courthouse, fairgrounds, industrial park and recreational parks improvements. When another \$5 million of ARPA money appeared, conveniently just after voters rejected the sales tax measure, it was sent directly to the Sheriff's Department to keep it afloat. All during the ARPA allocation process, however, Commissioners did not express any gratitude, only ridicule for "free" money and predicting the federal government's financial collapse because of the money provided to help businesses, cities and counties make up for losses during the pandemic. And again, demonstrating they couldn't accept any kind of assistance with grace, Commissioners reluctantly approved two electric buses for the county's transit system from the state, but only after the Transportation Director patiently explained why electric buses were more cost effective than diesels, especially with escalating fuel prices. He also told them these were the only kind of buses the state would give them for free. Nevertheless, Commissioners didn't hide their contempt for the government's attempt to get them to "go green" and seemed to buy into the conspiracy theory that accuses Democrats of working to eliminate cars so people will have to abandon living in the country and move to the cities.

In 2022 Baertschiger traded the statehouse for the courthouse where he could be a big fish in a shark tank instead of a guppy in a goldfish pond. He was immediately selected as Chair after complaining about the existing Oath of Office, which swore all state officeholders to uphold Oregon's Constitution. It was changed to say, "to the best of their ability." That gives them a bit of flexibility when they run up against laws imposed on them by those bunch of "Communists" in the statehouse, such as gun-safety measures and fire prevention bills.

One of Baertschiger's first big moves was to convince people the Sportsman Park shooting range in Merlin was a big liability for the county and should be disposed of before someone got shot out there. The place has been a shooting range for about 50 years and no one had ever been shot out there but Baertschiger decided that wasn't out of the realm of possibility, which would trigger a huge lawsuit poor little cash-strapped Josephine County couldn't handle. The county's insurance carrier had also just found out the county operated a shooting range so Commissioners were afraid their rates would go up. No one was sure just how the county's shooting range escaped the notice of their insurance carrier so long.

There was considerable public pushback on the idea of just giving a county park away and a roomful of people showed up to protest at the Commissioners first public hearing on the matter. Meanwhile, the Parks Director inconveniently pointed out that a federal grant had been used to develop that park and there are rules about giving away taxpayers' investments. Baertschiger's idea faltered until, from the depths of Ann Basker Hall, came a rumor that the park was about to be overrun by homeless people looking for public land to overtake. It didn't matter that most homeless people tend to avoid camping on gun ranges. The homeless camping rumor brought dozens of people to a public hearing on the matter to say the park would be better off in private hands so the homeless could be chased off without court challenge. Commissioners took that as overwhelming support for the giveaway and duly voted to hand the park over to the Josephine County Sportsman Association, the private non-profit that had been running the shooting range since it opened. The Parks Director decided to move on from a county that didn't honor rules regarding the use of taxpayers' money for grants.

Josephine County is dominated by property owners who don't believe the government has any business snooping around their three sections of extension cords leading down the converted chicken house where Grandma lives. For this reason, illegal marijuana growers found the county to be an ideal place to set up business. When Commissioners finally noticed these illegal grows were driving Sheriff Daniel crazy, they decided to beef up the county's code enforcement in order to discourage the kind of hastily assembled hoop houses used for illegal grows. This drove the property owners crazy, which led to the Chicken House Rebellion.

Just two Commissioners passed the new code enforcement provisions into law after Baertschiger got word of the Rebellion and didn't want to get fried by certain of his supporters. The fine feathered rebels were led by a perpetually mad scientist living in a lab down some hollow outside Cave Junction. The furtive and reclusive Art Robinson had earlier ended up with Baertschiger's state senate seat after a Republican game of musical chairs in 2021. Robinson's Rebels managed to get the new codes on the 2022 May ballot where they were voted down by people who were convinced power-hungry enforcers would travel throughout the county with binoculars looking for extension cords trailing out their windows. Commissioners said that wouldn't be the case, but the property rights advocates were having none of their promises.

Eventually the mining guy who pestered Commissioners for months to pressure federal elected officials into scrapping environmental regulations stopped showing up at their meetings. He most likely discovered county commissioners' power to influence federal regulations didn't stretch beyond writing letters full of self-righteous indignation to representatives, which didn't endear

them to said representatives. It's also possible Commissioners learned his promises of "vast riches" were overblown.

Travis Boersma, who actually has "vast riches" derived from his Dutch Bros coffee kiosks, was Commissioners' hero and resident billionaire buddy who also promised to bring employment and revenue to Josephine County through his dream of making Grants Pass Downs into a major horse-racing center. Problem number one was - horse-racing alone doesn't pay the bills so Boersma leased county land next to the YMCA for \$22,000 a month where he built a beautiful facility to house a restaurant, bar and horse race betting machines to help pay for the real horses. The betting machines would be updated versions of the ones used at a horse racing track that had closed. Problem number two was - no one made sure the updated betting machines were still legal in Oregon. Tribes in the state have exclusive rights to run casinos so Boersma ran into all kinds of roadblocks and eventually had to accept a determination that his horse betting machines would constitute gambling. His "racino" remains closed. Commissioners have hinted they are trying to work something out for Boersma but all they've managed to do so far is temporarily reduce his monthly lease payments to one lump sum of \$25,000 between April and December of 2022. Boersma also purchased the Fort Vannoy land earlier from Grants Pass for horse training. What will become of that remains a mystery.

When dozens of people learned dozens of trees in Whitehouse Park would be sacrificed to make way for full-hookup RV spaces, they gathered at public hearings on the matter to protest the desecration of an almost sacred spot. Commissioners plowed the project through, however, with dollar signs in their eyes. A grant to develop the RV park would make possible an additional source of revenue for the county so they approved the project in spite of the protests and complaints that large RVs directed by GPS to the park down the already congested G Street in town and out the narrow, winding Upper River Road could be hazardous. As luck would have it, however, a mix of construction delays, inflation and other problems caused the grant to expire. The new Parks/Fairgrounds Director has reapplied for the grant so the project hasn't totally gone away.

After Baertschiger brought in proponents of moving the Idaho border to take in all the conservative counties in Oregon, Commissioners put an advisory question asking voters if they liked that idea on the ballot. The idea was rejected by a slim but noisy majority of Josephine County voters who said "Hell no!"

Grumpy after the recall effort, Commissioners decided the Grants Pass Daily Courier was to blame for all their woes and never missed an opportunity to whine about the local newspaper. They also created unnecessary tension between themselves and the City of Grants Pass after rumors circulated Mayor Sarah Bristol might run for Commissioner. And they didn't hold back their aversion to Democrats in state and federal elected positions, to constituents who disagreed with them like Bill Hunker and anyone else who didn't give them cupcakes after praising them from the podium.

Commissioners were also unhappy about sharing the county with Grants Pass which elected a female Mayor rumored to be a progressive and a couple of councilors without bonified

conservative credentials. At joint meetings Commissioners couldn't contain their disparagement, especially when the Mayor told them their sales tax idea would never pass and they'd better come up with an alternative plan for funding public safety. Baertschiger accused Mayor Sarah Bristol of looking at life "through a liberal lens" to which she replied, "You're convinced I'm a liberal but I'm not the one asking for a new tax." This prompted Baertschiger to wave his pen at her like some kind of cavalry sabre and declare she was being "political."

Mayor Bristol didn't get quite the treatment Bill Hunker got though. When he stepped up to the podium to comment on the county's historical incompetence regarding Sheriff's financing, his comments got Fowler's goat, who by then had announced he wasn't going to run again.

"It's easy to come in here every few weeks and tell us how things should be and are in your own mind. But I say you get off your wrinkled retirement ass and get on a committee," said Fowler, whose quote made the front page of the Courier the next day.

Baertschiger, responding to Hunker, just blamed all the county's woes on Wyden and Merkley, his favorite boogeymen. Commissioner Dan DeYoung tried to make himself invisible.

Commissioners complaints about the Grants Pass Daily Courier only grew throughout the year. They decided because the Courier snitched on them occasionally when they did something dumb it was a "liberal rag." Then they escalated their attacks on the paper about the time an editorial came out saying all three sitting Commissioners had "displayed an aversion to facts over the last two years, insulting the intelligence of this county with continuing episodes of rumor-mongering, conspiracy theories and flat-out falsehoods, many of which have been well-documented in this newspaper." Snide remarks about the paper and courthouse beat reporter Shaun Hall peppered nearly every Commissioner meeting after that, with Commissioners accusing Courier staff of making up reports about them even though every comment they make is recorded and available on the county's website. Commissioners' Courier bashing finally prompted one of their constituents to say, "When someone takes public office they do it with the understanding when they say or do something foolish it's going to end up front page news."

Commissioners took issue with that, accusing her of "not thinking clearly" and feigning "shock, shock" that she might think what the Courier printed was actually true. Baertschiger, who happens to have a friend starting a conservative news website called "The Eagle" said the Courier "fact-checks us but they don't fact check themselves so I will continue going on and voicing my opinions on the Courier without interruption!"

Although Commissioners grouched endlessly in 2022 about the newspaper, as is fashionable in conservative circles, they did not provide any evidence that reporters at the Courier had the ability to make up anything as absurd as their own reality. The Courier doesn't pay novelist rates so its reporters come from fact-based training, unlike Commissioners, one of which appears weekly on conservative talk radio where reality is bent to serve his view of how things ought to be.

The coming year promises to be an extension of 2022 as Commissioner-elect John West takes his seat in January. West's campaign revealed little difference between him and Baertschiger in

manner and ideology. Commissioner DeYoung will have to decide whether it's his responsibility to stand up for his Josephine County constituents or just ride the roller coaster until his term ends in 2024.