

The Spirit of Ashland: Artistry of Leadership in City Government (Parts 1&2 of 3, Published August & September, 2021)

A Three-Part Interview Series by **Jordan Pease** and Three-Term Ashland Mayor **John Stromberg** - August 2021 Issue of **Locals Guide Magazine**- Ashland, Oregon



Photo by Graham Lewis

Great community leadership is born from an artistry in combining disparate talents and crafting them with vision, wisdom, dedication, and hard work. In this three-part interview series, former Ashland mayor **John Stromberg** talks about the quality of leadership that is required to make a city great. John talks about his philosophy and his experiences in city government following his twelve years leading the City Council, helping make Ashland such a quality place to live.

John and his wife **Jane Stromberg** have lived in Oregon for 35 years, and John served three terms as Ashland's Mayor, 2008-2020, plus four years on the Planning Commission, and two years as Commission Chair. Prior to moving to Ashland from Eugene in 2000, he worked in the private sector for twenty years as an organization and management consultant. His major emphases were on enabling groups to work together more effectively, facilitating organizational change, and training workers to do highly complex jobs. He has a Ph.D. in Business Administration and a Masters in Statistics from **UC Berkeley**, and a Bachelor's degree in Physics from **Caltech**. He was recruited by the Economics Dept. of the **RAND Corporation**, where he did his dissertation on the "Internal Mechanisms of the Defense Budget Process".

Thank you for doing this with me, John. What are three of your favorite things in the world? Looking back at my life I would have to say, number one is cars. My first dream at age three was about our family car. And at age 13, my parents let me buy a 1930 Packard for \$15. Also, I love French vanilla ice cream. And the music of the 60s and 70s. Add teamwork; doing it or witnessing it in action. Lastly, genuine magic, such as we have in Ashland.

Oh, one other thing I like is bumper stickers. When our kids were in private school, I put two on the bumper of our Chevy Malibu wagon: "Great beer bellies are made, not born" and "This car protected by Rambo." My favorite for Ashland is, "Don't believe everything you think." And for the Council, "Be worthy of our City workforce."

Please describe the *artistry* of your work, in taking leadership in our community and conducting city business? First, educate yourself to what the City actually does. Second, accept the workload that goes with the job, day in and day out. Third, build relationships of honesty and trust with everyone. Fourth, recognize that Ashland has a 'brand' that can be used to our advantage, for example as a demonstration site for innovation. Fifth, recognize that quality of life is our strength because everyone who lives here wants to be here.

When I was eleven my parents bought their first car after WWII. It was a baby blue Hudson Hornet sedan with Twin H-Power and a Step-Down design. The most interesting thing about it

(to me) was the salesman. Polite, no push, just talked to us. My whole family wondered; how did he do that? Manage to sell the car?

I realize now that was my first experience of art in social relationships. Sometimes in Council meetings I would wait for a pause, since pauses can be more 'substantive' than additional content. Helping the Council make up its collective mind was an important part of the Mayor's job. I also had to learn to accept losing a vote and then to support the Council's ultimate position. That's also the art of letting things happen.



Photo by Graham Lewis

What is your idea of the true responsibility of leadership? I think the leadership of the City consists of the Mayor, The City Council, and the senior staff. The City Manager, Attorney, Department Heads, acting together. Together, they must discern the direction in which the City needs to be heading and communicate it to the community, the staff, and our partners in the region of the Rogue Valley.

The Mayor's position is unusual in that she/he has almost no power that is not conditioned by the Council, but has entry to almost anyone who is involved with the City and its business. In that

capacity, he/she can do important relationship-building that helps the collective of the City government live up to its capabilities.

How do you give voice to those who most need it? At certain times, for example, shortly after **George Floyd** was killed, I wrote a public statement and also signed on to President Obama's Pledge - "8 Can't Wait" the day it came out I also spoke with APD **Chief Tighe O'Meara** to make that we were already working on the "8 Can't Wait" actions, which the **Ashland Police Department** under his leadership has completed.

Jane and I and **Pam Marsh** attended one of the first workshops in the Rogue Valley on micro-aggressions and implicit bias. Also, earlier I attended the remarkable event, "Unpacking Racism" at the **Ashland Armory**, which really deepened my understanding of prejudice against all groups experiencing discrimination both past and present: racial, LGBTQ+, women, and others. And I convened an informal small group of community leaders on the issues from the City, with HR Director and **Councilor Dennis Slattery**, **Southern Oregon University**, **Oregon Shakespeare Festival**, and **La Clinica** to establish relationships in anticipation of crises that might arise, so that we had someone to talk to informally about the difficulties and complexities that might come up.

Soon after being first elected, I visited the City of Eugene's staff person associated with homelessness, who connected me with the **Salvation Army** (the City's main partner in providing services to Eugene homeless individuals), and met with the founders of **Safe Spots**, **Cahoots**, and a nationally known facility/program for people previously incarcerated, to help them reintegrate into society. A couple of years later, when **Jackie and Jim Bachman** had just come to Ashland, we went back to Eugene with them to follow up on our first visit. Now Jackie

is on the Board of **Options for Helping Residents of Ashland (OHRA)** and Jim is on the Budget Committee. And, of course, I was Mayor when the Council first funded what is now the **Ashland Resource Center** and we expanded the 20-degree shelter into the extreme weather shelter program.

There are other social service programs in which the City participates or runs, like the **Senior Center**, winter and senior utility subsidies, Etc. And the recently disbanded 'small grants' programs. And, of course, our climate change efforts that have included the 10x20 Ordinance, the Climate and Energy Action Plan, wildfire prevention, forestry, smoke regulation, Etc.

As Mayor, I found it most relevant for me to get to know individuals involved with emerging issues that were not yet part of the City's "essential services" but were very important in terms of the community's values, in order to help their concerns and ideas to find their way into the Council's decision-making process.

Also, I interviewed every person I appointed to every commission during the 12 years I was in office, except for the Climate Energy Action Committee, and to every ad hoc committee except the Budget Cost-Control Ad Hoc Committee Chaired by **Councilor Dennis Slattery**, who made the primary selection subject to my ascent. When I assumed the Mayor's position, and had a responsibility to help the Council understand what citizens and staff were trying to communicate to them, would frequently do a pre-session meeting in my office with the citizens or staff, which usually started out with my question, "What are you trying to say, in simple terms?" And then figure out how to minimize jargon, and/or more clearly communicate complex ideas.

You have many years of experience in leadership, what's your approach to dealing with the difficult situations that arise? To the extent I have an approach it's this: 1) Take the *urgency* of the situation and make it my urgency as well. 2) Attempt to articulate the specific concerns of the aggrieved party or group - and then ask to be corrected. Persist until they confirm I understand exactly what's wrong and why they are they are so upset. 3) Only when they confirm I get the problem from their point of view, ask what it will take to make things right and be prepared for a lengthy process to follow.

We are living in times when so many mistakes, faults, crimes etc. of our society must be remedied before we can move forward to fulfill the great promises and possibilities of democracy. Discrimination of every kind and the harm that is born out of it - all the way to genocide - is on the table. Equally, abuse of the environment and our fellow creatures on the planet.

The playwright, **Christopher Fry**, wrote, "*Thank God our time is now when wrong comes up to meet us everywhere never to leave us till we take, the greatest stride of the soul man ever took. Affairs are now soul size; the enterprise is exploration unto God. Where are you making for? It takes so many thousand years to wake. But will you wake for pity's sake?*" Now, how do we do that...?

The Spirit of Ashland: Artistry of Leadership in City Government (Part 2 of 3)

A Three-Part Interview Series by **Jordan Pease** and Three-Term Ashland Mayor **John Stromberg** - September 2021 Issue of **Locals Guide Magazine**- Ashland, Oregon



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Great community leadership is born from an artistry in combining disparate talents and crafting them with vision, wisdom, dedication, and hard work. Here in part two of this three-part interview series, former Ashland mayor **John Stromberg** talks about his involvement with specific issues and his methods to address them following his twelve years leading the City Council, helping make Ashland such a quality place to live.

John and his wife **Jane Stromberg** have lived in Oregon for 35 years. John served three terms as Ashland's Mayor, 2008-2020, plus four years on the Planning Commission, and two years as Commission Chair. Prior to moving to Ashland from Eugene in 2000, he worked in the private sector for twenty years as an organization and management consultant. His major emphases were on enabling groups to work together more effectively, facilitating organizational change, and training workers to do highly complex jobs. He has a Ph.D. in Business Administration and a Masters in Statistics from **UC Berkeley**, and a Bachelor's degree in Physics from **Caltech**. He was recruited by the Economics Dept. of the **RAND Corporation**, where he did his dissertation on the "Internal Mechanisms of the Defense Budget Process".

Thank you for giving your time again here, John. Please share your perspective on the 5G cell tower controversy? [Approaching that contentious issue] is another good example of how I would manage conflict during my time in office in general. Whereby I would take as much time as necessary to be sure everyone felt completely, accurately represented. Often this would change the tension by everyone feeling understood. From that point I might try to move toward building more points upon which everyone could agree, essentially engaging the entire group in working together on their issue instead of trying to attack, out-argue, or overwhelm the opposition.

Sometimes someone would make a creative proposal, or a heartfelt compassionate understanding of someone else's feelings. Or a suggestion for a next step, taking a break, or researching factual issues under dispute, etc. There might be a breakthrough that led to a resolution, or taking a next step in genuinely working together, or deciding to have recourse to a fact-finder. Or, simply deciding to take a break and only *then* coming back together if everyone was willing to try to get further with the issue.

So, in the case of the 5-G towers; the FCC regulations prohibited the consideration by local entities, of any health effects from the system, which is based on saturation coverage of the community via many small antennas all over town. A citizen group had formed that was outraged by the restriction and wanted to present scientific studies that showed negative health effects. Whenever they talked about

the issue to individual City Councilors, that outrage tended to dominate the conversation. Plus, they presumed that all the negative scientific studies were correct if a qualified scientist said they were.

The City Council wisely decided to devote a separate study session to the issue, which gave me time to help the group make its presentation and I spent many meetings with this, helping to shape what they would say and how it would be structured so that the Council, and the public, would feel they were getting objective information even if the Council's hands were tied; so far as the City's power to regulate the system. My main goal was to make a case for an interested, intelligent person who had no previous knowledge of the technology. They diligently organized their presentation, divided it up into manageable chunks, presented by different members of the group, and were able to bring in a technically knowledgeable attorney to draw their argument together at the end.

The City Council appreciated the efforts at organizing and presenting their material and also hearing from the expert, but they still felt they couldn't take any action without getting into a legal struggle that the City Attorney said would be expensive and doomed to fail.

[It's also worthy to note that] during our preparation, I found a professor at the **University of California School of Public Health**, who had organized a large amount of current research on the negative effects of 5G. But I didn't feel I could bring his information into the presentation without taking it over. I hoped the Council would ask for follow up, but they felt they couldn't devote more time to an issue when then couldn't take meaningful action. I refrained from contesting their decision. The group's leader ran for the Council in the next election but didn't win.

In what ways have you seen the advent of social media affect politics at the local level, distinct from the national level? In 1987, I was working on several projects for a large corporate client and the internet and World Wide Web were just emerging as significant means of communications. Remember that the World Wide Web was first designed as a way for scientists, especially physicists, from many nations and cultures to share and discuss scientific discoveries. All of a sudden, the world had taken a huge step forward in its ability to communicate; not only across cultures, but across groups with different levels of power. The political implications were quickly apparent; how populist and 'revolutionary' groups could more effectively challenge the status quo.

Initially, I thought, this is going to be hard on autocratic regimes, which I think was true. But recent developments around the world demonstrate that the same technology, now much refined, can be used to attack political regimes. Not only is the ability to reach virtually everyone now possible, but propaganda is possible at the local level. By 'propaganda' I simply mean something loosely tethered to truth, repeated over and over as if it were true. For example, these days a lot of complex messaging is going on, with life and death implications, about vaccination and personal freedom. My point is that the political world at every scale, with minimal technology, had changed forever. And this has included our community of Ashland.

Around 2016, when I was just getting involved in governmental affairs, the main way to catch the attention of the community was to write an op-ed to the **Ashland Daily Tidings** newspaper, or to appear at a City Council meeting and hope one's message would be reported by the Tidings. At the same time, the Tidings started allowing the posting anonymous messages on various online bulletin

boards. This opened the door for propaganda in a different form: attacks on character, intentions, expertise, etc., that might or might not be true, and would not be attributable to a particular individual person. There were no fact checkers until much later, and news sources of all kinds eventually attempted to protect against abuse by implementing 'acceptable use standards' and online moderators.

My answer to your question is: what's happening nationally is going on in the Ashland environment as well, with possibly different issues, values, and intentions; but a lot of equivalent impact on our community. Interestingly, intentional online communities have been formed recently to promote healthy, socially just communities.

Coming from a career as a problem solver in the private sector before you became mayor in 2008, what are the best short-term and long-term approaches in city government? I don't see myself as a problem solver, because problems are often illusive issues. What I try to do is help organizations - in this case city government seen as a municipal services coop - function more effectively for *all* of the community as a whole.

From this position a lot of things follow: First, take care of the workforce, so they feel recognized, valued and supported. Also try to create a working environment that embodies the key values of the community. In our case, that's basically the full spectrum of progressive liberal values including tolerance for members with different values. Plus, for Ashland; all the aforementioned wrapped up in high quality of life, anchored at one end by the national cultural treasure of the **Shakespeare Festival**, at another end by our extraordinary natural environment and by the rich 'diversity' of the individuals who have chosen to come here over the years. In the 16 years I have been involved as a city official, I have seen an exceptional movement towards instability, but also the need and opportunity to reinvent ourselves.

CONTINUED IN PART THREE, COMING OCTOBER 2021.

NOTE: In the final part of this interview next month, John details his extensive work since 2008 on wildfire control policy and forest undergrowth management.

READ ONLINE: ashland.oregon.localsguide.com

Jordan Pease is a 20-year resident of Ashland and Founder/Director of **Rogue Valley Metaphysical Library and Media Exchange**. www.RVML.org