

EDITOR'S NOTES

On Homelessness, Your Opinion Doesn't Make You Cruel or Naive

BY ERIC SCHWARTZ



It's too easy to dumb down the debate over homelessness. Many find it difficult to resist the urge to call those who support additional services for these individuals naive. They point to larger metropolitan areas — such as Seattle — where homelessness has produced massive camps, mounds of garbage and a crisis that has strained safety nets to the point of breaking.

On the other side of the divide are those who find it cruel and inhumane to deprive those without homes items and services necessary to survive. Imagine if it was your friend or family member, they say. Consider what you would do if you became homeless and didn't have access to any means of getting back on your feet.

At the risk of splitting myself in half by straddling the fence on this issue, I'll say this — both perspectives carry important truths

based in reality.

In my experience, the widespread and unfettered offering of resources does tend to attract those individuals who are unwilling to pursue a better life for themselves. That, combined with rampant addiction, is what in my opinion has led to the crisis in Seattle.

For instance, I find the idea of opening "safe places" to inject heroin repugnant and wrong. It makes it easier for addicts to wallow in their addictions without any of the societal mechanisms — laws, for instance — that can act to correct their life's course. Likewise, allowing RVs and tents to take over public spaces such as parks and streets does nothing but encourage the explosion of such activity by those not interested in changing their circumstances.

But putting all homeless people into the same category is wrong.

I've met mothers fleeing abusive husbands forced to live in their vehicles. I've talked to teenagers from broken homes who felt they had no other option than to set out on their own. Once, in Portland, I spoke to a teenage girl

who said she was on the streets because her stepfather molested her and her mother didn't believe her. Still more people are suffering from complex mental health issues that defy easy treatment and result in them wandering the streets.

Where's the balance when it comes to differentiating between those who need help and those who are not interested in improving their lives?

That's for each individual, organization and local government to decide, and that's precisely why I believe the Yelm City Council was wise to create its Homelessness Task Force.

The group's most recent meeting — detailed on the front page of this week's edition of the NVN — was packed to the gills, mostly by residents who oppose an expansion of services for those facing homelessness.

While not all attendees opposed more services, those who did certainly didn't mince their words in addressing members of the task force, which will deliver recommendations to the city council in December.

"Make this place uncomfort-

able for them and keep them out," one speaker said.

"I'm a Christian, but I don't want those people living next to me," another citizen told the council.

One speaker even called those who are homeless "savages."

While the discourse was more aggressive than I'd prefer, these are residents who are entitled to their opinions. Many are property owners fearful that their own land, or perhaps neighboring property, will become the location of the region's next tent camp, devastating property values and negatively affecting Yelm as a whole.

The tone of the meeting was driven in part by misinformation. Some had falsely claimed in emails and on social media that the city council was considering declaring Yelm as a "sanctuary city" for the homeless.

They couldn't have been more wrong. The council is right to examine the issue before it arrives at its doorstep in emergency fashion, and dedicating \$2,500 — which hasn't been spent — to the effort is a worthy investment.

Despite the misinformation,

the majority of speakers were not wrong in their opinions, and those who criticize their tone should be aware that unfettered aid to those suffering from homelessness comes with its own set of challenges.

While our opinions may differ, I think we can all agree that the issue of homelessness is one that deserves a deliberate and careful approach before it becomes a problem locally, not after.

That's exactly what the city council and task force are doing, and I applaud them for that.

I also applaud the many residents — on both sides of the divide — who have become engaged with the city's leadership in determining what to do next.

If you haven't spoken out, there's still time.

The next meeting of the task force is set for 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 15, at the Yelm Community Center.

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Eric Schwartz is the regional executive editor for Lafromboise Communications. He can be reached at eschwartz@yelmonline.com.

GUEST COLUMNISTS

Direction of 'Comprehensive' Sex-Ed Legislation Is Problematic for Many

BY BRIAN MITTGE



The public had a chance to weigh in on a proposal to require that all public schools teach a state-mandated "comprehensive sexual health education" curriculum, starting in kindergarten.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction conducted the survey. The deadline to take the survey was Sept. 22.

It's fair to say that what the state proposes schools teach on the subject goes beyond what many taxpayers and parents would expect and want.

There is room for consensus on this issue, but as is, the state's proposal doesn't unite us as it could.

I think most people would support sex-ed that teaches students,

as they prepare to enter puberty, about human development of both genders, about pregnancy and how to prevent it, and about sexually transmitted diseases and how to protect yourself.

That fits with our state's longstanding mandate that all public school students be taught about AIDS and its prevention.

I think many people would support education on consent that is age-appropriate and emphasizing respect for self and others, at the earliest grades. Protection of our youth from exploitation and abuse is crucial.

That kind of sex-ed is common sense and I think would have widespread support.

However, the kind of "comprehensive" sex-ed being proposed in Washington and other states goes beyond that, into ideological territory that loses broad support — and even creates hostility toward public education.

As proposed in a bill that nearly passed the Legislature this year (SB 5395), and that is reportedly a priority of new House leadership in 2020, "comprehensive" sexual health education would begin at the youngest grades and would be required to affirmatively include education in sexuality and gender theory. (For more information on the bills and perspectives on what might be a healthier approach to sex-ed, search Facebook for "Teen-Aid Washington" or "Parent's Rights in Education of SWWA.")

Parents — at least those who know about it — could request that their children be removed from class, but the bill as written would not require schools to inform parents about their opportunity to review curriculum and exempt their students from participating, nor would it require schools to allow parents to sit in on classes to hear for themselves

what their children and their peers are being told.

It would not include protections for teachers who are uncomfortable teaching, as supposed scientific fact, ideas about gender fluidity that do not have widespread public approval, let alone medical certainty based on long-term studies of their impacts.

It would not include funding for training of teachers or outreach to parents.

OSPI, which conducted the survey, was an original proponent of SB 5395. In what might be a sign of the agency's outlook on the matter, question two in the survey asked for the respondent's gender — and provides eight different options.

It's a shame that an educational opportunity that could and should unify us — ensuring that our children are knowledgeable in how they will create the next generation — should become something

divisive.

The opportunity to help children understand how life begins, and how to be safe and wise as they protect their bodies and hearts going into adulthood, is instead expanded far beyond common-sense consensus, ranging into the realm of indoctrination in the latest sexuality and gender theory as mandates in every public school, starting in kindergarten.

It doesn't have to be that way. Consider reaching out to talk with your state lawmakers.

Together, we can be unified in focusing on a few universal, time-tested truths as we help our kids learn how to be healthy young men and women.

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Brian Mittge is a product of Washington's public schools and is the parent of three students in the public school system. He can be reached at brianmittge@hotmail.com.

Businesses Need to Tell Their Stories in Order to Thrive

BY DON C. BRUNELL



Many years ago, a reporter asked George Weyerhaeuser, then CEO of Weyerhaeuser Co., why his company spent so much time and money informing its workers, public officials and people about its business of growing trees and converting those trees into lumber and paper products.

His answer was simple: "People need to know what we do and why what we do is important to them."

He believed if people and elected officials understood Weyerhaeuser, they would make thoughtful decisions based on facts.

To Weyerhaeuser, there was no other option. Logging, milling and managing forest lands are very

visible to motorists and neighbors — some of whom continue to have strong visceral reactions.

Weyerhaeuser and the forest industry went a step further.

They took public concerns to heart and changed the way they managed their lands. Some of those modifications were costly and put lands off limits to logging. For example, trees and shrubs adjacent to streams would remain in their natural state to enhance water quality and fish habitat.

The industry's initiative helped save its ability to stay in business. Over the years, other businesses have adopted similar approaches.

BNSF is a notable example.

Trains and tracks are also visible to motorists. They impact our rural lands, cities and neighborhoods, and often run along scenic rivers, lakes and seashores. People and those they elect to write laws and regulations want to know if the trains and their cargo are safe and have the latest safety and

environmental protections.

Just as the forest industry invests in public information programs, so have our railroads. BNSF recently hauled its fire suppression and safety equipment to its Vancouver rail yard. Its specialists gave interested citizens a hands-on tour.

On display was the latest technology to detect even the smallest crack in rails and quickly repair them. BNSF has more than 4,000 trackside equipment detectors that monitor locomotives and railcars on a 24/7 basis. At-risk train wheels and undercarriages are identified and immediately replaced.

The railroad utilizes high-speed laser technology to test track surface and alignment, uses X-ray technology to monitor the condition of rail ties, and ground penetrating radar to see if the ballast (rail bed) is weakened and needs replacement.

BNSF uses drones to inspect

hard-to-reach towers and tall bridges and installed Positive Train Control (PTC), which warns the crew of problems with speed and stops trains if needed.

Today, people care about climate change, especially CO2 emissions. Locomotives consume a lot of diesel. Railroads are actively working to lower fuel consumption and emissions.

The Association of American Railroads reports in 2017 alone, U.S. freight railroads consumed 732 million fewer gallons of fuel and emitted 8.2 million fewer tons of carbon dioxide than they would have if their fuel efficiency had remained constant since 2000.

Redesigned locomotives and rail cars now move one ton of freight over 470 miles on a gallon of fuel and account for less than 1 percent of our nation's total greenhouse gas emissions.

Just as the forest industry is a major employer and economic driver in Washington, so are

BNSF and Union Pacific — the nation's two largest railroads. Together, they employ 4,300 people in our state who are well paid with good benefits. The combined yearly payroll is over \$363 million.

The bottom line is the private sector must tell us its story and how it fits into our nation's ability to innovate, generate jobs and provide the goods and services we need every day. Otherwise, move over and allow government to take control.

Sitting on the sidelines and letting others define business is "not an option" if our market-based enterprise system is to flourish in the years ahead.

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Don C. Brunell is a business analyst, writer and columnist. He retired as president of the Association of Washington Business, the state's oldest and largest business organization, and now lives in Vancouver. He can be contacted at theBrunells@msn.com.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Personal Loss Brings Opioid Crisis Into Focus

BY ERIC SCHWARTZ

I didn't speak at my best friend's funeral.

It wasn't because I had nothing to say. It was because I had already had plenty of time to tell him everything on my mind as I sat alongside his hospital bed for a week while he was in a coma, at times violently seizing due to his damaged brain.

I had no more tears to give, no fond memories to adequately combat the dark reality that he was gone forever.

My best friend died of an opioid overdose last year.

It was an addiction he battled from the time he was prescribed painkillers as a teenager to the time a fatal dose of fentanyl stashed away his life for good.

He wasn't a bum. No one would describe him as a vagrant. Few actually knew the level to which he fought to stay clean,



often succeeding for months at a time before an inevitable relapse. He worked full-time and paid for his own apartment and vehicle. His family loved him dearly, as did his broad and diverse circle of friends.

That's what drug addiction can look like these days, not the dirty, unshaven, homeless criminal element many of us like to imagine when we ponder addiction.

It's not necessarily the guy squatting behind a bush with a needle in his arm. It can be the clean-cut man of means with a prescription or the young high school student with access to a medical cabinet.

It's an epidemic that knows no primary demographic, and one that will require an all-hands-on-deck approach at the local, state and national levels if we ever hope to see it subside.

That's why I'm pleased Thurston County government appears to be taking this crisis seriously.

Last week, the county unveiled its Opioid Response Plan, which includes 38 organizations

and nearly 100 individuals. Together, working over 11 months, they produced six goals and 25 response strategies to address what the county calls the "greatest public health crises of our time."

"I'm very grateful for all the members of our community that worked so tirelessly to develop this plan. Together, we can save lives and hopefully end this epidemic in Thurston County," said Schelli Slaughter, Thurston County Public Health and Social Services director

Some might be skeptical. The government doesn't have a very good track record when it comes to confronting drug addiction. I choose to be optimistic because the county seems to be taking a ground-up approach to battling opioids in our community, even if they face a startling uphill journey.

It sure as hell beats doing nothing.

Frankly, if just one person's life is saved — one son, one daughter — I will count it as a success. That will mean one less

funeral, one less family left with only memories of a person who, despite their addiction, deserved many years of new experiences.

I've been in some tussles with local governments over the years when it comes to gaining access to public records.

In one case involving a superior court judge, the pursuit of the public's right to know took me all the way to court, where our newspaper won the right to documentation outlining alleged harassment.

Thankfully, that was not the case as we worked to publish today's front page story on an investigation and subsequent departure of Yelm's former finance director (see today's front page).

I found the city to be beyond responsive to our requests for information, assisting us in narrowing down our request for public records to an executive summary of the investigation.

I'm appreciative of the cooperation because, frankly, the document, and most others like it, belong to the public.

I don't think the story will make anyone happy, at least within city government. I'm sure former director Joe Wolfe would have preferred it wasn't written. But when local newspapers are at their best, they're lifting the curtain of government and allowing in sunlight, and that's what I think this news story accomplishes.

My thanks to the city for holding up its responsibility and cooperating with us on this controversial story.

Eric Schwartz is regional executive editor of the Lafromboise Communications, the company that owns the Nisqually Valley News, The Chronicle in Centralia and The Reflector in Clark County. He works out of Yelm daily and encourages you to drop into the office for a visit. Schwartz can be reached at eschwartz@yelmonline.com or 360-960-1615.

BACK TO BUSINESS

Family-Owned Businesses Are the Backbone of America

BY DON BRUNELL

During the 1992 presidential campaign, then-candidate Bill Clinton famously intoned, "I feel your pain," reassuring

voters he understood what they were going through. Since then, similar statements of empathy have become a staple for politicians. But it doesn't always ring true for every constituent.

Take family business owners, for example.

Family businesses account for 50 percent of U.S. gross domestic product, generate 60 percent of the country's employment and account for 78 percent of all new job creation, the Conway Center for Family-Owned Business reports.

Most elected officials have no idea what it's like to put their life savings on the line 12 to 16 hours a day, scrambling to make ends meet. Those families risk everything to



meet payroll and invest in new equipment for state-of-the-art facilities in spite of waves of new government regulations, taxes and fees.

One politician who got that first-hand experience was former U.S. senator and presidential candidate George McGovern.

In a 1992 Wall Street Journal column, "A Politician's Dream is a Businessman's Nightmare," McGovern described his experience running a Connecticut hotel and conference center. He ultimately went bankrupt, a failure he attributed in large part to local, state and federal regulations that were passed with good intentions, but no understanding of how they burdened small business owners.

Deeply affected by his failure, McGovern became an advocate for regulatory reform and lawsuit reform, saying, "I ... wish that during the years I was in public office, I had had this firsthand experience about the difficulties business people face every day."

While politicians often tout their support for family-owned businesses, they are the least understood and most overlooked political constituency.

Family-owned businesses are America's economic backbone.

According to the University of Vermont, there are 5.5 million family-owned businesses in America. Nearly 60 percent of all family-owned businesses have women in top management.

More than 30 percent of all family-owned businesses survive into the second generation but only 12 percent will still be viable into the third generation.

One third-generation Washington family thriving is Dick Hannah Dealerships in Vancouver. It started in 1949 when William Hannah opened a Studebaker dealership.

In 70 years, the Hannahs have taken calculated risks by expanding into multiple new and previously owned car and truck dealerships in the Vancouver-Portland region. In addition, Dick Hannah added

injection molding manufacturing of auto parts and auto body repairs.

With his son, Jason, and daughter, Jennifer, they just opened a multi-million dollar state-of-the-art collision center in Vancouver. It is well-organized, clean, clutter free, efficient and customer friendly. All estimates, work and deliveries are handled inside the 80,000 square-foot facility.

For environmental and worker protection, it has advanced dust and fast-drying spray paint systems that treat water and air before leaving the shop. There is a sophisticated vacuum system that collects dust that would normally end up on the floor.

The collision center is unique for its new ways of approaching repairs. Vehicles are elevated waist high to avoid workers having to crawl underneath. All of the services are contained within the shop, avoiding time delays by sending automobiles off-site for steering alignment and windshield replacement.

Finally, before exiting the center, technicians restore vehicles to their pre-collision condition. They completely re-instate and calibrate the crash avoidance and in-car electronics.

Just as Hannah strives to completely satisfy customers so they will return, that is the hallmark of successful businesses. That's one way small family-owned businesses compete with large corporations and their vast resources.

In the end, if customers feel valued and are treated right, they return.

Those are values that entrepreneurs, not government, create but that elected officials can hamper if not understood.

Don C. Brunell is a business analyst, writer and columnist. He retired as president of the Association of Washington Business, the state's oldest and largest business organization, and now lives in Vancouver. He can be contacted at the-brunells@msn.com.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

LETTERS POLICY: Submit letters to the editor typed or legibly handwritten. Generally, letters should be 350 words or fewer. Deadline is noon Tuesday. Include name, address and a daytime telephone number for verification purposes. No unsigned letters will be published. The editor reserves the right to edit letters for clarity, grammar and length. Bring letters to the Nisqually Valley News office, 106 Plaza Drive N.E., Building B, Suite 2, mail to P.O. Box 597, Yelm, WA 98597 or e-mail to yelmnews@yelmonline.com

Our Oceans and Rivers Are Dying; Say 'No' to Biosolids in Yelm

Since the threat of biosolids has come to the Yelm area, I have spent much time and energy studying the ramifications of this practice on our environment.

I just finished reading the saddest article about Tahlequah, an endangered South Puget Sound

resident orca whale whose calf died and she carried it on her head for 17 days while covering more than 1,000 miles, showing the world her pain and loss. Our water is a cesspool of sewage and garbage, and it's killing the oceans. Orcas are dying, as are salmon along with many other species of marine life. Many researchers believe this in large part due to the lethal toxicity of biosolids rampant in our environment.

When Chinook carcasses are examined, they have found co-

caine, antidepressants and pain relievers, medications such as Prozac, Advil, Benadryl and Lipitor. Up to 81 drugs were detected in the flesh of Puget Sound salmon. Reporter Jim Meader's recent work has shown that juvenile Chinook salmon, when migrating through contaminated estuaries in the Puget Sound, die at twice the rate of fish elsewhere. According to one study, 97,000 pounds of drugs and chemicals could be entering Puget Sound each year.

It is amazing to me that a gov-

ernment agency will hand out large grants to save the Nisqually River salmon, and yet possibly allow a determination of non-significance on human sludge spread on land where toxic pollutants would undoubtedly end up in the Nisqually River.

Why is cancer and so many life-threatening diseases so prevalent? If the dumping of sewage in our oceans was outlawed because it was killing the sea life at an alarming rate, how could it be safe anywhere? Do we make a differ-

ence to Tahlequah and the other beached dolphins and whales trying to get our attention that we are killing the oceans?

I ask the Department of Ecology to say no to dumping this toxic mix on 128th Avenue S.E. in Yelm and to support a more viable solution, such as thermal decomposition that will transmute this sludge into a product less environmentally and socially harmful.

Jeanne Jarecki
Yelm

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Reflections on a Prairie Days That Truly Delivered

BY ERIC SCHWARTZ

My 4-year-old son doesn't talk much.

It's not that he isn't capable. He's just a bit more introspective and shy than the average kid.

On Saturday afternoon, after about three hours spent at the Prairie Days Parade and subsequent festival activities in the park, I couldn't shut the boy up.

"That was awesome!" he yelled at least a dozen times from the backseat as we traveled home from the festivities. "Can we do that I again?"

Why, yes we can.

There will always be critics, but from my standpoint as a relative newcomer to the area, and that of my half-pint sidekick, the



2019 version of Prairie Days was an absolute hit.

From the Friday night street dance to the Sunday orchestra and play in Yelm City Park, the volunteers who worked to breathe new life into the revised festival were wildly successful.

The goal this year was to provide a "free, fun, family event," Yelm Mayor JW Foster wrote for the Nisqually Valley News in the weeks leading up to the extravaganza.

That meant no carnival rides in the park, a fact that might have been disappointing for some.

For this parent though, and many others, it was a godsend.

After three hours at Prairie Days, this thrifty father had spent exactly \$10 on snacks and water. Imagine keeping the bottomline that low with expensive carnival rides and games tempting a youngster. I know others were likewise pleased with the ar-

rangement.

"I can't believe this is all free," a mother said as she brought three of her children to a bean bag toss, one of many games offered by the Church of Living Water in Yelm. She held her pocketbook in her hand, adding that she had been prepared to pay an entrance fee.

Imagine the relief for a parent on a tight budget. No one likes telling a child 'no,' especially when others are enjoying an expensive activity.

By erasing all that pressure, I imagine the volunteers behind Prairie Days provided a level of joy that cannot be calculated for families with financial constraints.

My boy spent more time on the bounce house slide provided by Living Water than would be recommended. He'd probably still be there if not for the allure of a military robot that was rov-

ing the grounds throughout the event. It lured him away briefly, up until the point when he noticed the brand new play area in Yelm City Park.

Though fencing still blocked off the soon-to-be open splash pad, the city was able to open the news slides, swings and playtime apparatus that had been under construction this year.

What a great addition to the city.

We made sure to visit the build-your-own rocket station, took a stroll through the Yelm Farmers Market and took a few whacks at the Thurston County Youth Football League tackling dummies before finally heading for the exit.

We traveled home with so much candy from the parade that I briefly considered whether I could be arrested for trafficking in undeclared merchandise.

As I was putting my son to

bed Saturday night, he quickly began recounting the day in what very possibly could have been a sugar-induced frenzy.

"Remember when we went to the parade?" he asked.

Yes.

"Remember all the candy?"

Yep.

"Remember that new park? I like that new park."

We can go back.

"That was awesome!" he said once more.

I couldn't agree more.

Here's to making more memories at Prairie Days 2020.

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Eric Schwartz is regional executive editor of the Lafromboise Communications, the company that owns the Nisqually Valley News, The Chronicle in Centralia and The Reflector in Clark County. Schwartz can be reached at eschwartz@yelmonline.com or 360-960-1615.

Washington Needs a Unified Vision for Our Housing Future

BY STATE REPS. ANDREW BARKIS AND MIA GREGERSON

Within the next decade, Washington will grow by nearly one million people. We are already in the midst of a housing shortage with no end in sight. We need a unified vision for housing that ensures all Washingtonians have a home they can afford.

Yet special interests in cities across Washington are road-blocking construction of the homes we need now. Even when cities want to expand their housing stock, the pace of progress does not match the challenge before us.

As one example, for the last



four years, a small, but affluent neighborhood group has forced the City of Seattle to pay for exhaustive studies and costly legal battles simply over easing restrictions on homeowners who want to build backyard cottages and mother-in-law suites on their own property.

Four years is far too long. We need solutions now.

Though we are from opposite sides of the aisle, we teamed up in Olympia this past legislative session to co-sponsor a bill supporting this common-sense part of the solution to our housing crisis. Sprinkling cottages, mother-in-law suites and basement apartments — homes collectively termed accessory dwelling units (ADUs) — across existing neighborhoods will create below market-rate housing throughout our cities without changing the look and feel of those communities, or dipping into the public purse.

ADUs are ideal homes for our students living on tight budgets, young couples starting out, and

seniors looking to age in the communities they love. In addition, the rental income ADUs generate can support homeowners struggling to keep up with their own housing costs.

Where ADUs are legal in most Washington cities, local codes often place onerous restrictions on construction. As a result, Washingtonians have pent up demand for ADUs, made obvious in the few cities that have been able to loosen these bureaucratic restrictions.

After Bellingham permitted backyard cottages and reduced parking requirements in 2018, ADU permit applications quadrupled. Since Renton halved its ADU fees in 2017, there has been steady growth in construction applications for these small apartments. In 2017, Vancouver removed the anti-renter requirement that a homeowner with an ADU live on site — a requirement not placed on any other housing type. Since then, applications have risen from one in 2016 to 45 in 2018.

Within any single city this housing growth may go nearly unnoticed, but taken together across the state, these cottages and basement apartments can make a big difference in reducing and preventing homelessness.

The demand for ADUs is no surprise. Today, many of the neighborhoods with best access to schools and parks come with a steep price of admission: purchasing an expensive detached house. It's a financial barrier to entry that serves to keep people out. ADUs offer an easy way to add housing to established neighborhoods, creating opportunities for families from across the income spectrum to access these public goods.

These small homes also make clear the connection between housing and our environment. As we stare down the reality of a rapidly changing climate, we need to take advantage of existing infrastructure via infill housing to prevent further sprawl and protect our farms and forests. Backyard cottages do this, fitting seamlessly

into existing neighborhoods.

Despite the fact that a handful of cities have eased local codes, bureaucracy and small resident groups wielding outsized influence to block development shackle most. Meanwhile, our housing market becomes more exclusive by the minute.

We cannot wait for each city to fight its own multi-year battle for this simple affordable housing solution. It's time to recognize that land use decisions extend beyond any single city's limits and affect us all.

Even though our bill did not make it to Gov. Inslee's desk this session, it sparked a rich debate on both sides of the aisle about how our state will respond to growth. We plan to bring both the bill, and this vital conversation, back next session to ensure everyone has a safe place to call home.

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Rep. Andrew Barkis, R-Olympia, represents the 2nd Legislative District. Rep. Mia Gregerson, D-SeaTac, represents the 33rd Legislative District.

Restoring Affordability to a College Education Is Vital to America

BY DON C. BRUNELL

When my parents graduated from high school in 1936, a college education was too expensive for the son of a copper miner and the daughter of a plumber.

Eighty years ago, our country was in the middle of the Great Depression, and teens took odd jobs to help put food on the table and pay the family bills. In those days, no bank would lend money to college students.

Following World War II, there was new hope for veterans. The GI Bill paid for veterans to complete their college or trade school education. My father, for example, graduated from trade schools in Seattle and Chicago and became a journeyman electrician thanks to Uncle Sam.

In the 1960s, the federal



government introduced the work-study program, allowing students from middle and low income families to work their way through college. I found jobs and fortunately didn't have to borrow money to complete my degree.

Today, it is a much different story. Student loans are the norm rather than the exception. As a result, the national student loan debt has shot past \$1.56 trillion spread out among 45 million borrowers. In 2018, nearly 70 percent of college graduates took out student loans and will eventually face their careers with an average of \$30,000 in debt.

Growing student loan debt is a concern among Americans.

"Spurring the free-college movement is the anxiety over the cost of tuition, which has risen at more than double the inflation rate since 1990, while student debt has tripled since 2006," The Wall Street Journal recently reported.

Free college for all would

cost a minimum of \$75 billion each year if tuition was \$4,400 per year, Quillette, an online think tank, estimated last September.

"That doesn't pay the bills even for in-state students at many public flagships. The University of Michigan, for example, costs over \$15,000 per year for Michigan residents, and about \$50,000 for out-of-state students," the think tank wrote.

There are a variety of other approaches that can make higher education more affordable.

For example, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, wealthy anonymous donors pooled their money and started a free college tuition program. It is one of more than 300 cities and states around the country offering a variety of tuition assistance programs.

The WSJ reports that since 2006, the donors contributed \$124 million in tuition subsidies for nearly 5,400 students. The Upjohn Institute, which has been

tracking the Kalamazoo Promise, found that tuition assistance needs to be augmented with additional student career counseling in the K-12 system and other living costs for students.

Many small business owners in Washington state offer college scholarships and combine them with work and other benefits. Hopefully, the up-front funding offsets the need for loans and makes it possible for students to complete their college education or technical skill training.

For example, in Seattle, Dick's Drive-In offers employees who work 20 hours a week for at least six months and continue to work at least 20 hours a week while going to school access to a \$25,000 scholarship over four years.

In addition Dick's pays higher than minimum wage, provides an employer paid health plan and pays up to \$9,000 in child-care expenses.

Other donors are stepping

forward. Billionaire Robert Smith, founder and CEO of Vista Equity Partners, surprised Morehouse College's 400 graduating seniors announcing his family is paying off their student loans.

The estimated value of the gift was \$40 million. He also challenged other donors to do the same.

Making higher education affordable is a national priority. The focus needs to be on approaches that are affordable and effective for students and their families.

The issue is larger than just having the federal government provide free-tuition for all.

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