

Citizen Comment – News-Review

Although the economy is looking up slightly, unemployment in Douglas County still stands somewhere in the mid-teens.

Against the backdrop of that information, I heard a presentation last Thursday about progress on the Southern Oregon Wine Institute.

As a relative newcomer to Southwest Oregon, I've had limited exposure to the wine industry here and therefore I might have passed off the report from the standpoint of a bystander—except for one major fact—I lived in Walla Walla for twenty years and witnessed the rebirth of a local economy.

We moved to Walla Walla in 1982 at a time when there were only a couple of wineries in operation. Like many communities in Eastern Oregon and Eastern Washington, Walla Walla was primarily rooted in agriculture and while wheat still made a major contribution to the economy, the town was in desperate need of a transfusion.

Downtown Walla Walla looked like it had some kind of an infection with empty-building syndrome creeping ever closer to the intersection of First and Main. Today, I would rank Walla Walla as one of the two most interesting and vibrant downtown areas in the Pacific Northwest—the other being McMinnville. Ironically, both are major wine centers.

Today, Walla Walla has an estimated 150 wineries and the number seems to keep growing. The downtown area is anchored by tasting rooms, upscale restaurants, specialty shops, and other successful businesses. It's the place to be.

Thirty years ago, Walla Walla was at the end of the road. Today it's a destination.

Compare that with Douglas County which is bisected by a major interstate highway. And with all due respect to the amber waves of grain which have sustained life in the Columbia Basin, the 100 valleys of the Umpqua provide a magical setting for a tourist-oriented industry—that and the fact we are a stone's throw away from the ocean beaches.

Economists project that within eight years, the wine industry could produce 5,000 jobs and \$115 million in wages for this region. I might have chalked that up to a pipe dream had I not personally witnessed the same phenomenon in a community with less potential than Greater Roseburg.

William Arthur Ward reminded us "If you can imagine it, you can achieve it; if you can dream it, you can become it."

I applaud those who envision the Southern Oregon Wine Institute and have dedicated themselves to making it a reality. It will be an important step in helping make the wine industry a key ingredient in our local economy.

They are 85 percent of the way toward their initial goal but still need a million dollars to get there.

This is a wonderful opportunity to help diversify our economy and enhance our future.

George Murdock
Roseburg