



Braver Angels

BRAVER ANGELS RURAL/URBAN DEBATE JUNE 12, 2024, VIA ZOOM

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SUMMARY OF DEBATE:

This Braver Angels debate was intended to assist rural and urban Oregon residents to listen to and better understand each other's perspectives about the political, economic, cultural, and socioeconomic divide between them. Approximately 125+ Zoom attendees heard from six speakers supporting, seven speakers opposing, and two other speakers discussing the resolution: **"Resolved, Oregon's Rural/Urban Divide is Insurmountable"**

The following summarizes the points made by speakers and questioners during the debate:

1. The debate was a welcome, respectful method to discuss difficult topics and experiences.

Participants and a few observers appreciated (and in some cases were surprised by) the civility and thoughtfulness of discussing real issues and personal experiences without hyperbole, anger, or accusation. Participants commented that they had new perspectives and insights into the "other's" positions or perceived positions. Several commented that the issue is more complex than they had believed.

Several commenters suggested that the discussion continue with educational programming and other debates.

2. The Rural/Urban Divide is more than political.

The Oregon rural/urban divide is about social differences, and also about how business works differently, how people work differently, how the land affects family and economic prosperity differently, and how communities function differently.

The national polarization in politics has driven much of the recent frustration in the rural/urban divide, but the fundamental issues are real, economic, and practical.

3. Rural residents feel coerced, not just unheard.

Rural residents face different circumstances than urban residents geographically, economically, and socially. Hard work and self-reliance in rural areas are not optional, but critical. Rural lifestyle is a choice that needs to be respected.

Statewide taxes, social programs, and business regulations often do not work in rural areas, and cost rural areas businesses, jobs, economic progress, and social cohesion. One-size-fits-all regulations serve only urban needs in most cases.

Examples:

- Guns (Measure 114)—there is a real, practical difference about the purpose and usefulness of guns. Rural people see them as a necessary tool, and are therefore familiar with them. Urban people see them as a threat and are generally less familiar with them.
- The commercial activity tax (CAT), rental taxes, gas taxes, etc. disproportionately hurt rural businesses and have driven many to close.
- Forestry policies, lawsuits, and land management strategies developed in urban Oregon have had many unintended consequences which have damaged the economic base and opportunities for rural towns, including significant unemployment. In one community that had seven lumber mills, only one remains. (It remains open because of a negotiated accommodation between environmental, timber, and local interests.)
- Requirements for electric vehicles ignore rural realities and create disproportionate impacts on rural residents paying gas taxes. New regulations need to realistically address rural needs, or provide rural accommodations or exceptions.
- Rural residents resent state leaders who want to apply policies equally across the state, despite good reasons for counties and cities to decide what works best for their communities. How state funds are allocated are often dictated by the majority to apply statewide, even when not practical or effective in all areas of the state. Better outcomes could be achieved by allowing local control of the use of state funding.
- Pharmacy services in one rural area reduced from three in a town to one, and then to one in the county. This requires driving hours and many miles to secure needed medications.
- A recent Oregon Supreme Court decision against Umatilla County's self-governance was mentioned.

Rural residents are not monolithic, however. Politically liberal residents live in Eastern and Southern Oregon who feel differently about some of these issues, although they may agree with other issues.

4. Citizens can be heard and make a difference.

Speakers against the resolution have seen ways in which many rural residents' concerns can be addressed. Persistent, strategic advocacy can still make a difference, but it often is incremental.

Examples:

- Economically, urban and rural communities rely on each other more than we realize. We can emphasize and itemize these areas of mutual reliance to policymakers.
- The use of local option legislation would go a long way to allow rural elected leaders to affect their economic development.
- Disability services in rural areas have been improved by persistent lobbying in Salem. It takes hard work, but has resulted in rural-based exceptions or accommodations in some state healthcare practices.
- Environmental preservation groups have, in at least one instance, successfully negotiated with local representatives to develop solutions for local economies affected by litigation and land-management policies. (Through brave conversations, an urban speaker overcame her attitude of "evil loggers in the woods" to see the effects of her litigation and policies on rural citizens and their real economic needs.)
- State rules that require compliance through technology and internet-access in some state policies were changed for rural areas that don't have access (or dependable access) to the internet or adequate technology.
- Broadband equity is being advanced by residents all around Oregon, which focuses on providing education, healthcare, and emergency services to all corners of the state.
- Some elected leaders (either by choice or necessity) have better perspectives on both urban and rural needs. Leaders with a better understanding of the issues driving the divide need to be developed and elected. Restoring a culture in the legislature of working across the aisle is necessary.
- Some rural communities are not accepting economic decline and are developing new economic plans that create new industries. As farming becomes more corporate and mining and lumber decline, new options have been and can be developed.
- Group letters to policymakers and regulators can have an impact. Organizing these efforts happens differently in rural and urban areas.
- Residents across the state can attend almost all hearings of the Oregon legislature online, and everyone can comment on legislative proposals.
- New federal USDA/BLM programs (and perhaps others) are intended to foster collaboration of competing sides in land management policy.
- Urban areas can benefit from rural values and lifestyle. (An example was given of an historic structure in John Day that experienced no vandalism or graffiti for 30 years.)

- Schools are now provided state funds per child, not per district. This is intended to assist rural communities.
- “You don’t have to understand people, but you do have to accept them.” Tolerance is integral to democracy. But urban residents and rural residents do not understand how the others live. Cross-cultural education is needed to find common ground.

5. The Greater Idaho Movement (GIM) is an active option, which also fosters communication.

There is a divide, and it must be addressed. There is no time to wait for incremental change anymore. State government now is one-size-fits-all, without due consideration of the basic economic, socioeconomic, and social differences between communities.

If the real differences between rural and urban Oregon cannot be addressed (and they largely have not been), there will be no peace with rural residents.

There are many challenges to implementing GIM: Can GIM work in practice, or does it just create other problems? “How do you force rural liberals to change states?” Practical nuts-and-bolts issues will not be simple, but some majorities favor change and, in a democracy, the majority governs.

Idaho is becoming more conservative. Many immigrants to Boise and Idaho are conservative. And 400,000 new Oregon residents would offset 500,000 Boise residents, which would further provide the rural balance that GIM seeks to achieve.

Please note: the preceding summary is a record of the debate. We, the Oregon Rural/Urban Project team, are not responsible for fact checking or any misrepresentation of fact.