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Opinion

Today's Challenges Need New Vision

By Bob Doppelt

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What is our vision of Lane County 10-15 years from now? What is our vision of Oregon? Do greenhouse gas emissions and ecological degradation remain unchecked, or are they tightly regulated? Does widespread economic inequality still exist, or has the gap between rich and poor been greatly reduced? Without a radical re-envisioning of what we want to achieve and why, the future appears gloomy.

Due to the control exerted by vested economic interests, our federal and state governments cannot resolve today's major challenges. Change must begin at the local level and force its way upward. Citizens will aggressively push for change only if they are motivated by a vision of a new society that works for the benefit of everyone, not just corporations and the super wealthy.

These are the key points of the enlightening book *Viking Economics*. I recently spoke with the author, George Lakey. He described how, in the middle of the last century, Scandinavian countries realized that creating a compelling vision of a new society focused on the common good was essential to overcome the dominance of moneyed interests and achieve significantly better social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has dominated our nation's vision. It is based on the idea that only individual self-interest matters, not social goals and responsibilities. "There is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families" is the way one European leader described it. People should therefore be freed from regulations, taxes and other social obligations to do whatever they want and make as much money as possible.

The neoliberal vision has fueled a 40-year campaign by major corporations and rich oligarchs to make material consumption the top American value, transform nature into a commodity for profit, eliminate job security, control all levels of government, funnel wealth upward and make these actions righteous.

The result is that half of Americans are now technically insolvent, surviving only by acquiring more debt, even as the stock market booms and official unemployment is low. Carbon emissions remain unconstrained causing record storms, wildfires and other disasters that intensify economic inequality.

The future looks bleak to millions because their lives lack meaning and purpose, they are trapped by vast inequality and feel hopeless.

The experience of the Nordic countries, said Lakey, shows that even in dire conditions, transformative change is possible. This made me wonder if we could learn from Scandinavia and re-envision our region as a place that enhances the well-being of everyone and our environment?

A successful re-envisioning process would need to engage diverse civic groups, non-profits, private and public organizations. It must also be holistic and address the links between economic, social and ecological well-being.

People could be asked, for instance, to envision ways to create widespread economic equality and a new sense of purpose through family-wage jobs in zero-emission, ecologically restorative businesses. They could also envision how this shift could occur in ways that lead to more meaningful connections with family, friends, community members -- and nature.

Re-envisioning our region as working for the long-term common good might lead to deep-seated beneficial changes.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.