



Proven Partners • Thriving Communities • Lasting Value

Speech given at the Oregon Opportunity Network Gala

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Monday, September 12th, 2011

Oregon ON was formed in July 2008 as the result of the merger of Oregon's two community development associations, the Association of Oregon Community Development Organizations and the Community Development Network. The merger happened because it was clear then - and is even clearer now - that community development organizations in Oregon must support one another, and speak with one voice, if we are to be effective in securing the future of our industry and helping those people and communities we exist to serve.

Oregon ON is only three years old, but we've accomplished more than I could have hoped for when we got started. I'm especially proud and grateful for all the ways that Oregon ON provides opportunities for us to work together as an industry. Our attention to best practices, peer support and training, leadership development, the Policy Councils, and our advocacy in City Hall and in Salem – these are all things that have significantly expanded our effectiveness as a network of community development organizations.

And we are not sitting still. During the past year, Oregon ON has:

- Said goodbye to retiring Executive Director Cathey Briggs, and welcomed new Executive Director John Miller.
- We've expanded voting membership eligibility to include housing authorities, and we've welcomed six new voting members and a dozen great new affiliate members.
- With the support of our members, for the first time we hired a lobbyist, Doug Riggs, to represent our interests in Salem. Working with the Housing Alliance and others, we helped secure the extension of the nonprofit property tax exemption, the Oregon Affordable Housing Tax Credit, and \$5 million in funds for housing preservation. I think it's safe to say that the hiring of a lobbyist was a milestone for Oregon ON because it signaled we intend to have an ongoing presence and a stronger voice at our state capitol.

- We launched distance learning technologies, including video conferencing and webinars. Have you seen our new ‘panoptic camera’? It reminds me of the two things I remember most from my visit as a kid to the New York World’s Fair in the 60s: by now we’re supposed to be flying around using jet packs and we’re supposed to be using video phones. I’m still waiting for my jet pack, but video phones are here, and Oregon ON has one.
- We now have six active Peer Support Working Groups: Homeownership Education and Counseling, Resident Services, Multi-Family Development, Single family development, Fiscal Managers, and Executive Directors. Tomorrow, at our Industry Support Conference, we expect these peer support groups to total well over 250 attendees.
- We also opened up sponsorship of the Industry Support Conference for the first time, and want to acknowledge these sponsors for their support:
 - Bank of America
 - Jones and Roth CPAs
 - The Network for Oregon Affordable Housing, or NOAH
 - JD Fulwiler Insurance
 - Multnomah County
 - The real estate law firm of Kantor Taylor Nelson Boyd & Evatt
 - Coin Meter laundry programs, and
 - Morrison Hershfield engineering consultants.

Please visit their tables in the lobby this evening or tomorrow, check out what they offer and please join me in thanking them now for their support.

Finally, I want to highlight one of the most important Oregon On initiatives, LEAD ON, a new program created last year to build leadership, performance and impact within our industry. LEAD ON stands for “Leadership, Excellence, Achievement and Development,” and is a nine-month program in which participants choose a challenge currently facing their organization, and are given the tools to tackle it. The initiative is modeled after the “NeighborWorks Achieving Excellence” program at Harvard. LEAD ON Program leaders Charlie Baum and Cynthia Winter have done great work launching the program, and have committed to doing it another year. This year’s 16 participants will graduate next month.

Thank you so much for being LEAD ON pioneers. To learn more about joining the next LEAD ON class starting January, please check out Oregon ON’s table in the lobby or go to our website.

Before I hand over the podium there’s something I want to say about the future of Oregon ON and the future of the community development industry. There is no more important time to be a member of Oregon ON, to be active in everything Oregon ON offers, and to support Oregon ON with your time, your dues and your donations.

You know the challenges we face, especially at the federal level: debt, deficits, divisiveness, and dysfunction. During my career, there has never been a more uncertain and risky time to be a developer of affordable housing, a more complicated time to be a provider of homeownership services, and a more worrisome time to be a provider of supportive, human services. The uncertainty is chronic, intense, and wearing.

But remember this: there is no better antidote to hopelessness than positive action.

And yes, I will admit it right now and proudly so, I am talking about that “hopey changey thing.” I might even mention something about being a community organizer.

When I think about what all this means to me I always think of my father. I grew up in a small town in Massachusetts. Our local government was based on the Town Meeting. When the annual operating budget, a public works project, or a new ordinance needed to be approved it happened at a town meeting to which all registered voters were invited and eligible to participate. My dad was the Town Moderator, an elected position he held for 17 years. He ran the town meetings and sometimes as a kid I would attend and watch, even if I didn't understand it all.

So I grew up thinking it was normal for people to be involved, it was normal to have a voice, it was expected for people to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Coming of age in the 60s, I also came to understand that direct involvement could come in many other forms, not all of which my Dad liked very much - but that's another story.

But whatever the form, I have come to understand that direct involvement in the welfare of our organizations, our communities, and our nation is an inherently hopeful act. Hope is also why our industry exists. The whole field of nonprofit, community-based, community development organizations was created, not that long ago, by people who said:

This is my neighborhood you've messed with and I refuse to live this way.

My family and I work hard in your fields and we refuse to be treated this way.

This is supposed to be a land of opportunity and it's time for my family to have a fair chance at the American Dream.

And isn't the American Dream, at its core, about hope for a better life? And isn't hope at the heart of what we do?

We know that although we live in a land of opportunity, opportunity is not evenly distributed. Some people face tougher challenges than others. So organizations like those here exist to open doors:

- a decent, affordable place to live and raise a family
- the ability to get control over my finances, save for the future, buy a home, and maybe send my kids to college
- the chance to turn hard work and a good idea into a thriving business.

So if hope is what we're about, let's choose to act with hope.

I know it's not easy. Although we face a lot of uncertainty, there is a future that looks likely: funding cuts, dwindling resources, reduced services, suffering and loss.

But now is not the time to sit back and watch it happen. We cannot afford to be observers, because if we do, that is surely the path towards diminishment.

I also know your budgets are tight. I know you're overworked and worried. I know the pull is towards hoping someone else will do what's needed because I sure don't have the time or money.

But despite these pressures, let's agree – right here – tonight – that now is precisely the time to invest even more in the effectiveness of our network. To help one another in our pursuit of excellence. To hire the lobbyist. To organize. To show up – over and over again - in City Hall, in Salem, and in Washington DC. To show up in the streets if we have to.

And yes, to do everything we can to support our collective work in the form of the Oregon Opportunity Network.

Now more than ever, it's time to tell our story to everyone who will listen: the work we do today was born of collective action among ordinary citizens who decided to work against great odds, for fairness, opportunity, equity, and justice - and that we - here tonight - commit ourselves to continuing that great legacy.

Thank you.