

THE 'NEW WEST/PROGRESSIVE' PARADOX

CONTINUED

people as they could into the space, in order to reduce the per person share of the cost. Desperate to pay the inflated rates, renters even sublet outbuildings as sleeping rooms—illegally but understandably--- to make ends meet.

Hedden had once said, "This used to be a hard place to get rich, but it was a real good place to be poor." Now that was all changing. But to 'progressives/environmentalists,' this was good news, at least in the long run.

Why? Because the changing demographics of Moab, as Lance Christie and others had observed a decade earlier, meant a population more sympathetic to supporters of wilderness. The New West functions like reverse gerrymandering—instead of re-arranging political boundary lines to create a constituency that represents a preferred ideology, you encourage the people with that ideology to move inside those boundaries (or opponents to move out of them) by creating conditions favorable to one and unfavorable to the other.

It would be foolish to suggest that there was any overt conspiracy or pre-planned strategy between mainstream environmental-progressives and no-holds-barred developers in the amenities industry to perpetrate this kind of demographic shift. But once progressives saw the advantages of such a change, opposition to the recreation economy and all its associated impacts vanished.

It was more like detente than collaboration at first. But eventually, many entrepreneurs who, justifiably or not, saw themselves as environmentalists too, embraced the amalgamation. From environmentalists and entrepreneurs, we found a new category—enviropreneurs, dedicated to creating a New West economy, driven by tourism and recreation and squarely opposed to the further exploitation of the West's natural resources. In Utah, the close ties between 'grassroots' environmentalists like SUWA and the GCT with the outdoor recreation industry became inextricable.

One can argue that such a partnership could help achieve the goals of progressives/environmentalists. But at what cost, even to its own supporters? Somehow they forgot that not all open-minded people with an environmental conscience can afford a \$300,000 home.

THE SEA CHANGE COMETH...NOVEMBER 2008

On the night Barack Obama was elected, Dave Erley, the new Castle Valley mayor-elect and an outspoken environmental activist, sent out a celebratory email to scores of friends and acquaintances.

He wrote: "Dear all, Obama carried Grand County, Utah. The progressive, green, candidate won all three contested County Council seats and the progressives now have a clear majority on the Council...This all reflects the demographic changes that have occurred in Grand County in the last four years... Fallout from the amenities economy I guess..."



He even invoked the memory of Franklin Roosevelt and the old Democratic Party theme song when Erley proclaimed, "How loud can I sing 'Happy Days are here again?'" At the 1932 Democratic convention, FDR supporters spontaneously burst into song—that melody—when Roosevelt's nomination was won. It became an anthem for the millions of poor and unemployed victims of the Great Depression, who hoped the new president meant better times ahead. Was this what Erley had in mind?

In Dave's open message, he saved a part of it for me. Noting The Zephyr's ongoing warnings about the impacts of an amenities economy, Erley wrote, "Jim, this is another aspect of the amenities economy you have been hammering on. I hope you have the courage to discuss the pros and not just the cons of (this) demographic shift..."

Besides the satisfaction of being elected, it was difficult to see the advantages, from an historic FDR--- "Happy Days are Here Again" perspective, of their victory. Was this a victory for the oppressed and the downtrodden? The poor and the jobless and the homeless?

On the other hand, from the point of view of an urban environmentalist/anti-production/pro-consumption mind set, the win was seminal. The new county council's progressive leaders established themselves early for their opposition to expanded energy production in Grand County. It openly opposed the proposed nuclear power plant near Green River. It expressed its dissatisfaction with a proposed tar sands test plant in the Book Cliffs and oil shale research. And some of its newly elected leaders offered public support for climate activist Tim DeChristopher, who did prison time for sabotaging a BLM oil lease sale.

In the area of recreation and tourism and the amenities economy, the council could not have been more accommodating. Newly elected councilman, Chris Baird served as project manager for the multi-million dollar "Colorado River Elevated Bikeway," (now completed) and played a key role in coordinating bicycle trail development throughout Grand County with local and federal agencies.

Baird claimed to see the inherent risk in placing all of the town's economic marbles in one basket. In a 2012 conversation he noted, "You make it sound like the recreation industry in Moab is some kind of unstoppable juggernaut. However, it just barely keeps people alive, and has facilitated a 1% growth rate. Grand County is the 4th slowest growing county in Utah." But then he explained, "I see how many of my friends are dependent on the recreation economy, and it is hard for me to say, to be so self centered, as to deny them that. I think non-motorized recreation is the best industry to push, if we are to push one."

Noble words. But just how does this economy benefit his friends, especially the lower wage earners that represent so many of the county's residents? Going back to the 1990s, twenty years ago and more, enough warnings about runaway home prices in tourist-dominated economies were being issued to give everyone pause, especially "progressives" who maintain their concern for the working



class. But who noticed?

In Mayor Erley's 2008 victory dance, there is the suggestion that the "amenities economy" somehow created a political atmosphere that would allow the election of a progressive government and create an opportunity to find solutions for issues like affordable housing, when, in reality, it was the amenities economy that created the crisis in the first place.

Yet progressive politicians continue to talk about affordable housing problems as if they're as shocked and dismayed as everyone else. Baird, running recently for election again (he won) said, "There's a lot of people in this community that work three jobs and it's difficult for them to find affordable housing." Even higher wage residents struggle—teachers in particular have found housing costs too high to consider a move to Moab. Baird noted, "The entire economy relies on affordable housing...We need to be proactive about it."

And no doubt that's true. But isn't it a bit disingenuous? "Progressives/environmentalists helped create, or at least gave their tacit approval to, an economy that by definition restricts the kinds of residents who can afford to live there. It's an economy embraced and promoted by them for two decades. But there's a catch. The amenities economy needs those same "undesirable" residents, as food servers and busboys and clerks and maids, and other low-paying jobs, to keep the recreation/amenities economy running full tilt.

Realistic efforts by government agencies to provide assistance via low-interest loans can only do so much to alleviate the problem. The Housing Authority of Southeastern Utah discovered in 2014 that they couldn't even find building lots within their applicants' price range. Critics have noted that many of these home buyers who take advantage of the low income status are free to flip those homes at a better price. And they do. And despite a lot of hand wringing, there's very little anyone can do to stop it. And more than any other factor, real estate developers and the contractors who build them are in business to make a profit. As one honest observer noted on a facebook page, "Money can be made faster by building for the second/third/forth home market, even on speculation. So land gets used up that way because the land owner will make more money faster."

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Other Moabites noted that "NIMBYism" (Not In MY Back Yard) plays a role in keeping prices high. Zoning residential areas for higher densities could reduce the housing costs but efforts to increase density have been met with stiff resistance, particularly from environmentalists, many of whom are relatively new Moab/Grand County residents. Everyone in the New West, it seems, wants to own their little ranchette.

But NIMBYism in the New West extends beyond zoning ordinances and back window view sheds and who lives next door. The issue was expressed succinctly in the local papers by Moabite Carol Mayer, who had no problem sharing her feelings...

"Not in my backyard," Mayer proclaimed. "Who has the right to say that any more? In these days of rampant oil and gas exploration, very few...I wish I had several million dollars to fund a lawsuit against the oil companies for the wells, pipelines and truck traffic that will cause irreparable damage to land, air and water in my 'neighborhood.'"

For Mayer and so many other relatively recent Moab/Grand County residents, they believe any energy extraction and production in their new homeland is nothing short of sinful. "For American visitors and concerned locals who live here, we have a big stake in protecting this area," she says. "We taxpayers own it. To stop the abuse, we must act. Conservation voices, rise above those of the rapacious profiteers. We must protect Greater Canyonlands. Shout... 'NOT IN OUR BACKYARD.'"

Many agree. Former SUWA staffer and longtime Moab resident Kevin Walker complained at a hearing last summer, "This is a crazy place to have oil and gas drilling." If you could leave it to many of Grand County's newer residents, they'd ban the energy industry altogether. Perhaps they know it isn't a realistic approach, but it's what resides in their 3 am hearts. And the shift in sentiment in this once rural part of the West continues..

'THE WOLF BY THE EAR'

And yet, for every Moabite who actively promotes the complete transformation of Moab/Grand County into a New West tourist mecca, there are a much greater number of conflicted citizens, caught in the whirlwind and unable to extricate themselves from it. They follow the course being set for them more out of necessity and even survival, and less out of enthusiasm and unbridled support.

Sometimes they are the owners of small businesses directly connected to tourism; sometimes it's the low wage earners who work for them. And sometimes it's craftsmen and artisans and other businesses that aren't in the tourism industry per se, but who on some level benefit from its presence.

Maybe they were in Moab before things went crazy and tried to adapt. Perhaps they came in the late 80s, when Moab was still a quiet place and they thought it would be a good town to run a low-key tourist business, where, if the mood struck, you could hang up a "Gone Fishing" sign and take a couple days off. After all, commercial rent for a decent sized Main Street shop in those days was about \$600 a month.

But as the years passed and news of Moab's 'success' spread, and new businesses came to town to compete with the ones already there, and as out of town investors began to buy up as much of the commercial property as they could get their hands on...well...life in Moab changed. It tended to destroy the very reasons living in Moab was once so appealing. It changed the way we define success, it changed our values—in fact, it created a situation where the future we once loathed the most, became the future we absolutely required, just to survive.

And so, we remembered how we once longed for Spring—the warmth of an April sun, the burst of wildflowers, the sweet aroma of cliffrose, the chance to hike and explore—and we cringed at the noise and the congestion and utter chaos that March and April and May brought us. BUT, Moabites needed the latter, because it was the sudden infusion of tourist money, after a long winter, that allowed them to pay the bills.

Store owners who once thought nothing of taking a day off now couldn't afford the luxury of a quiet 24 hour escape; instead many extended their operations to seven days a week. They needed all the business they could muster to pay their skyrocketing commercial rents. Young Moabites had

come to town for the beauty of the place, but needed to work extra shifts to pay their rent as well. Someone longing for peace and quiet had to greet a packed restaurant with mixed feelings—was this why they came to Moab? But it was all those tips that allowed the servers to pay the bills.

The more success Moab found, the more competition it created, as more investors came to southeast Utah (At press time, plans became public for five new motels in Moab, with construction to begin soon—and with four more in the hopper.).

Business owners, seeing their own share of the pie shrink, called for more promotion. The tourist bureau sought ways to “build up the shoulders of the tourist season.” The tourist season had once begun on Easter Week and ended after Labor Day, with a brief shot in the arm for hunting season. But as time passed, the shoulders got closer together. Many sought ways to extend “the season” into December. And then they tried to get the tourists back in February. How much longer until those shoulders touch? It’s the goal of some, a necessity for others.

Thomas Jefferson once said, “As it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” He was talking about the institution of slavery, but the citizens of modern day tourist towns must feel similarly. To oppose this ‘amenities monster,’ at this late date, would be a challenge for anyone struggling to survive in a town like Moab. Holding onto the wolf is a matter of “self-preservation.”

And the challenge here is greater than just economic considerations; other factors come into play. Our most cherished personal values are sometimes called into question. A tourist town is a tough place to be an idealist.

For example, a couple years ago I was called on the carpet by a young Moab activist, Heila Ershadi. I had written a piece called, “Is There Anywhere Good to Frack?” It was about the NIMBY attitude so many people embrace about the energy industry and their opposition to the impacts extraction and production cause. And I questioned whether the commitment to oppose fossil fuels was as strong as some claim. It was my contention that even the most dedicated environmentalist, who struggles with a modest income and bills to pay, quietly does a “jump for joy” when the price of gas goes down a dime.

But Ms. Ershadi took me to task. In a public comment she wrote, “I personally do a little ‘jump for joy’ when the gas price goes UP. And since I’m not a unique and beautiful snowflake, I’m sure I’m not the only one. I wish it would hit \$5. Yes, it will make my life harder; my family of four lives off of about \$26,000/year, and that’s gross, not take-home. But I am pretty sure that nothing will change systemically until there is sufficient financial incentive. And systemic change is what we need.”

To read the article and the comments:

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2013/04/01/take-it-or-leave-it-is-anywhere-good-to-frack/>



But Ershadi was also in the process of running for Moab City Council and since then, trying to represent the people of the community, she’s had a change of heart. She recently explained, “What changed my mind was continuing to read and talk about the subject with people of many different backgrounds and opinions, both on and off the campaign trail...Change is unlikely when people have to go against their own economic self-interest to get there, and mostly NOT due to greed but just the need to get by... The idea behind the idea that higher gas prices could have an overall good effect is that it will make alternative, less energy intensive ways of doing things more appealing. I still fear what will happen to us due to the ecological destruction brought about by the intensive use of fossil fuels. And if higher gas prices could avoid that, it would be a small pain compared to what is likely to happen down the road to lower income people as environmental

damage reaches a critical point...The problem is that there’s not a good reason to think that will

work at all.”

That’s a change in tone from two years ago, when Ershadi declared, “The current order of things cannot continue much longer. I don’t mean that it shouldn’t; I mean that it can’t.” Her new job requires her to be less global and more local; she represents the people who elected her, many of them are connected in some way to the amenities economy. And nothing, of course, could be more damaging to a town dependent on tourism than \$5/gallon gasoline.

Ironically, if Ershadi lived a hundred miles to the north in Uintah County, where the oil and gas boom has been as transforming to that part of Utah as tourism has been to Grand County, she might find herself again supporting \$5 gas, but for an entirely different reason. The majority of jobs in Uintah County flow from oil and gas and the recent collapse of oil prices could have a devastating effect on its citizens. Supporting high prices there would ensure jobs.

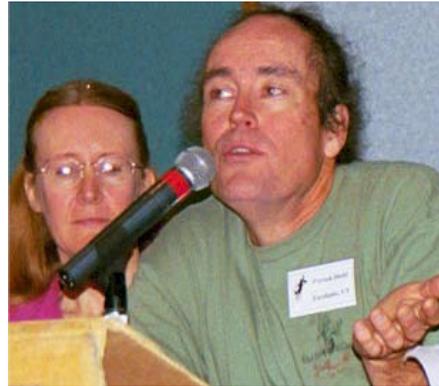
The simple truth is, most people are too busy just trying to make ends meet to worry about the broader issues. Climate change looms out there, somewhere beyond the horizon, like a gathering storm, but who’s going to feed the kids tonight? How do we find the \$1200 rent? How do we make payments for a home in a town where ‘starter homes’ begin at \$200,000?

It’s Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. It’s about the priorities we create for ourselves, again, more out of need than desire. We need food and water and shelter; we need to know that we’re safe and protected from external threats and risks; and when all those needs have been met, then...maybe... we can worry about the broader implications of an economy based on oil and gas development or tourism and recreation. Consequently, most of us relinquish our responsibility on those larger issues to the relative few...and that’s where the power lies.

In Moab, where the average weekly wage (\$553) is barely half the national average, and lower than 26 of Utah’s 31 counties, more and more of its citizens find themselves entrapped in a 21st Century version of a medieval system—a New West Feudalism that drives a large part of the economy. Many of its citizens, its ‘serfs,’ depend on a relatively small number of employers. And though it requires the majority of the residents to make the amenities economy work, its architects either knew this was the future they were helping to promote and didn’t care about the consequences, or failed to comprehend the innumerable warnings that were being voiced more than a decade ago. Which leads us to—now.

MOAB 2015—‘THE FUTURE VIRTUAL GATED COMMUNITY?’

More than a decade ago, this publication interviewed two of southern Utah’s most controversial environmentalists. Patrick Diehl and his partner Tori Woodard had moved to Escalante, Utah a few years earlier and, from the get-go, they expressed an open hostility for the very conservative local culture. The animosity, of course, cut both ways.



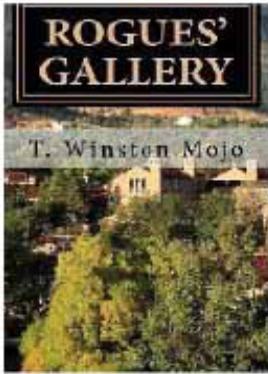
In a candid interview with Erica Walz, also a resident of Escalante, neither Diehl nor Woodard was in a mollifying mood. Diehl could find nothing good to say about the town they’d chosen to call home. “I can’t imagine enjoying it. I really loathe this town,” he said. “And you can quote me. Socially it’s a really loathsome place. You can put that in the paper. Absolutely. It’s the worst place I’ve ever lived, and I’ve lived quite a few places. So some people like it--it’s like there’s no accounting for taste.”

He and Tori had moved there for health reasons, they said, but hated it. They liked the landscape and that was the extent of their affections. They opposed farming and ranching; Diehl

noted that he’d like to eliminate every alfalfa field in southern Utah. “I don’t have the impression that the people in this town know very much at all about the land around them. They have a very narrow knowledge of a few things that are of practical relevance in their lives, so I’m not convinced that family ranching and family farming fosters a valid connection to the land.”

Diehl proposed a ‘New Economy’ for Rural Utah and explained, “The ‘amenities economy’ idea

next page...



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