

THE OREGONIAN

**Where's Karl Rove when you need him?**

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By Steve Duin

So, we're sitting there in the Summit near the summit, watching the two congressmen -- Earl Blumenauer and Greg Walden -- trying to pretend we're all in this together. We're focusing on style because, doggone it, substance just can't catch up.

We're in Timberline's 66-year-old cathedral, listening to a lot of mumbling about the mountain from the state forester, 1000 Friends of Oregon and Gary Larsen, supervisor of the Mount Hood National Forest. At long last, Walden -- who was much slower than Blumenauer to get excited about this mile-high conversation but is much quicker to turn on the charm -- stands up and offers the wireless mikes to the audience.

We have about 20 minutes before our first break, Walden tells the crowd of 250: Are there questions, questions for our resource people, questions that will frame and energize a meeting of the minds on this wild and scenic icon?

In a word -- or a saga or a song -- no.

The opening act is a 79-year-old skier who first visited Mount Hood in 1924 and rambles on about his exploits for three minutes before the crowd -- still searching for a question mark -- begs him to sit down.

Next up is a guy from the Wilderness Society who seems content to announce he's in the room. While we're all chewing on the importance of that, the Warm Springs shaman suddenly rings his bells and tells everyone he's going to sing a spiritual ode to the mountain.

As the Native Americans dutifully rise and the Late Arrivals look nervously about, wondering if they should bow their heads, the shaman begins his serenade. A good -- actually, it wasn't that good -- five minutes later, the holy message rattles on much like another story without a point.

"I enjoyed that," said Steve McCarthy, an opponent of Mt. Hood Meadows' development at Cooper Spur. "I like to see the politicians hopelessly trapped."

So do we all. But that rare delight aside, the first Mount Hood Summit prompted this question if no others:

If you want productive action on a complex, contentious issue, do you stage a town meeting . . . or call Karl Rove?

When Walden needed to kick booty in the Klamath Basin, you may recall, he dialed up Rove, the president's political strategist. He also called the White House and the Interior secretary, Walden said Friday, in his quest to keep the Bureau of Reclamation from cutting off the irrigation flow to farmers in the arid basin last month.

But it is Rove, everyone assumes, who kept water running through the canals. He didn't go looking for consensus; he gave an order. You can understand why some find it troubling the administration's campaign strategist is dictating policy -- or is it payback? -- but I'm not sure why anyone finds it surprising.

Or less productive than your average town -- or mountaintop -- meeting.

Not all the afternoon consensus-building was wasted, mind you. There was a nice moment when Walden insisted "public involvement is essential" in the president's Forest Health Initiative, and Blumenauer quipped he was working overtime to make sure "the vision Greg articulated actually happens."

Gail Achterman -- who counts the Oregon Transportation Commission among her many duties -- created a buzz when she suggested pulling out the roads through the forest system built solely for timber removal and forest firefighting in the pump-truck days.

And Louie Pitt Jr., government affairs director at Warm Springs, was the most assertive and eloquent in his remarks, thoughts finally capped by his explanation for why he thinks we might want to pull back from development: "Maybe we owe the mountain something."

Those moments kept Blumenauer going. "I feel good," he said. "We have 250 people in this room who cover the political spectrum. I'm willing to plug away. We're in this for the long haul."

He's already talking about another Mount Hood Summit, an annual event. I'm there, Earl, with two suggestions: Invite Rove. And convene the summit somewhere below 6,000 feet, which must be the altitude where oxygen deprivation takes its savage toll.

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