



Oregon

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State Land Board

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Governor

Senate Committee on Rules

Vicki Walker Testimony in Favor of SCR 10

Tobias Read

Secretary of State

Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Bonham and members of the Committee:

Elizabeth Steiner

State Treasurer

My name is Vicki Walker. I am currently the Director of the Oregon Department of State Lands, but at one time I was a member of this august body as both a Representative and a Senator. I served for 10 years in this building, not even half the time Peter Courtney walked the halls of the State Capitol. But in those 10 years I learned how to hone my skills, go outside of my comfort zone, and take on the heady issues facing our state, and I owe much of that education to Peter Courtney.

I first met Peter when I worked part-time in the district of the House Majority leader in the 1989 session and continued to learn more about him in successive sessions as I became more active in local and statewide issues. I was elected to the House in 1998, the same year Peter had moved to the Senate. He became my mentor in what was a very frustrating session where the Democrats were significantly in the minority in both chambers.

I joined Peter in the Senate in that historic evenly divided 2003 Session where Peter took the reins alongside Lenn Hannon to keep us out of partisan gridlock and lead us to a successful sine die. It was not the last historic session in which we would serve together.

In 2008, we met for what was called a Supplemental Session, a test run for annual sessions that was recommended by the Public Commission on the Oregon Legislature. The gavel opened that session on February 4, 2008, with Sen. Peter Courtney leading the way into history in the Senate, and Rep. Jeff Merkley leading the House. The gavel dropped on February 22, after passing 73 of the 109 measures in just 19 calendar days, one week ahead of our self-imposed deadline!

Peter liked to bestow historically significant gifts to members at the end of each session which I carefully treasure. In 2007, his gift was a replica of the Conestoga Wagon that later became the lighter-weight Prairie Schooner that brought thousands of families over the Oregon Trail. At the conclusion of that historic 2008 Session, Peter gifted us a book entitled "History in the Making,"

with a Sine Die speech called “First Wagon,” because we made history in a way that had never been done before, much like those who came over on those first wagons across the Oregon Trail.

Peter quoted John Bridwell, the organizer of the first wagon train, who said, “Our ignorance of the route was complete. We were ready to start but no one knew where to go.” Peter went on to talk about how we had carefully planned for the session, about our resolve in making sure we accomplished our goal, and that we had completed our journey. He said, “Each of you will decide, in your own way and in your own time, what to tell the world about what we have done or not done here.”

“But one thing is for sure,” he continued, “We have made history. We have made very special history in the “State of Oregon, My Oregon.” “No one will ever again take this path – no Oregonian, no Oregon legislator. For you see, you and me, we are first wagon. Our journey is over. I think we’ve done OK.”

Peter’s journey may be over, but I think we can all agree that what he accomplished was more than OK. I am confident no one will ever take his path again. He was First Wagon.

And while Peter’s “Oregon, My Oregon” was his adopted state, he never forgot the history that brought him here, the history of his “West, By God, Virginia.” His oratory would often invoke that phrase.

A few years later, when I was working for President Obama, I took a cross-country road trip from Oregon to our nation’s capital. Along the way, we stopped at the Visitor’s Center upon entering West Virginia. To my son-in-law’s surprise, I grabbed a plastic baggie from our snack bag, jumped out of the car and ran over to the flower bed. I scraped back the snow and dug with my hands in the dirt and placed it carefully in the bag. When I returned home, I hunted in secondhand stores for the perfect bottle to fill with that precious “West, By God, Virginia” dirt and presented it to Peter along with a Visitor’s Guide and a lapel pin given to me by my colleague from West Virginia. It is the one time I think I had ever seen Peter speechless; I could tell he was moved by the gesture.

I will conclude by saying I have never met an individual quite like Peter Courtney. He could yell at you one minute and speak softly the next. And his yelling was not always angry yelling, but it could be if things were not going well. He kept us on our toes, always wanting us to think creatively about how to solve problems and work across the aisle to build consensus.

And what was abundantly clear is that Peter Courtney loved his family, his adopted state, the Legislative Assembly and the people with whom he served. I am grateful his legacy will live on in future generations with SCR 10. Thank you.