

The LINKING LETTER

A briefing on the city of Independence

by Anne Scheck

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Preface: The first two weeks of 2017 brought Senator Ron Wyden to a town hall meeting, put a young lawyer on the Independence City Council and saw different marijuana regulations introduced in Independence and Monmouth.

Question: *What's the New Year ringing in for Independence?*

(1) Senator Calls for Renewed Emphasis on Local Citizen Participation.

“Political change doesn’t start in a bunch of government buildings,” but begins instead with friends and neighbors who band together to make things better, U.S. Senator Ron Wyden told a crowd of about 120 people at a town hall event Saturday. Senator Wyden, a democrat, is the ranking member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance.

The most influential force in cities comes “from the bottom up,” he said during a 90-minute session that included only questions from the audience. Inquiries ranged from that of an 11-year-old boy concerned about the future to a self-described “white-hair head,” who shared retirement worries.

Independence Mayor John McArdle asked if federal sources will help meet pressing local infrastructure needs, such as transportation funding. That’s a challenge across the state, but “it is do-able,” the senator told the mayor. Most of the questions -- from Medicare financing to college debt -- reflected bipartisan issues, he pointed out.

The outcome of the presidential election meant that some voters were “very happy, some not,” Senator Wyden acknowledged. But “we can find common ground,” he stated. The forum was held at Western Oregon University.

(2) City Council Brings Millennial Lawyer On Board As New Member

The youngest candidate to vie for a seat on the Independence City Council last November got the job -- despite losing the election. Michael Hicks, a lawyer by training and a fresh face in more ways than one, is the first councilor in anyone’s memory to be chosen to replace an elected candidate who decided to resign before taking the oath of office.

Mr. Hicks also is thought to be the first person under 40 years of age to serve on the City Council in at least the past decade, possibly much longer. He's packed a lot of learning into early adulthood: After graduating from Western Oregon University, Mr. Hicks and his wife, Leslie Howerton, moved to China for two years to teach English. Upon return, they lived in Houston, where Mr. Hicks received a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Houston. He then went to law school at Willamette University.

Since then, he's worked for various House members of the Oregon Legislature as a policy advisor or researcher. Asked if he is looking forward to life as an elected official, Mr. Hicks said: "I appreciate the opportunity to serve the city of Independence. I look forward to entering into a dialogue with the residents and business leaders of the community in an effort to address the issues we face."

(3) Diversity Between Independence and Monmouth on Marijuana Rules

January is ushering in regulations on marijuana sale, processing and production in "M-I" – but the "sibling cities" are addressing the rules in different ways. Independence added its recent regulations into business-license language, which passed as a new ordinance; Monmouth is putting its marijuana regulations directly into city code, by adopting a series of provisions like those enacted by Hillsboro, near Portland.