

Richard A. Clucas

The Political Legacy of Robert W. Straub

WHEN THE OREGON HIGHWAY Commission approved a new route for Highway 101 over the sand spit at the mouth of the Nestucca River near Pacific City in 1966, the action led to a roar of protests by those who feared the road would destroy the natural environment along the spit and limit public access to the beach. Leading the opposition was Oregon Treasurer Robert W. Straub. The proposal, Straub warned, was a like a “cocked arrow”; once the state approved a road along the spit, it would begin building roads over other sand spits down the entire coast.¹ Over the next year, few issues were as important in Oregon politics, as it dominated headlines and galvanized debate in coastal communities and in the Willamette Valley. In championing the battle against the new route, Straub not only found himself challenging the highway commission but also ardent local advocates and the popular Republican Governor Tom McCall. Straub won an important victory in the battle when the U.S. secretary of the interior announced that the new road could not be built on Bureau of Land Management lands as planned because it was incompatible with the land’s designation as a recreational site. Although the issue continued to reappear for over a year, the ruling weakened McCall’s support and eventually led to the project being dropped.²

The battle over the Nestucca spit is probably the issue for which Governor Bob Straub is most remembered today. Yet, for more than twenty years, Straub helped shape political debate and policy making in the state and was an important leader in Oregon politics. He served as a Lane County



In October 1968, State Treasurer Robert Straub addressed a crowd at Cannon Beach urging them to support the initiative he was sponsoring to raise taxes so the state could buy private beach property and ensure public access. Straub had been a strong and vocal proponent of the Beach Bill, which the legislature had passed the year before.

commissioner, state senator, Democratic Party chair, and treasurer, and he was the Democratic Party's candidate for the governor in four consecutive elections, from 1966 to 1978. As state treasurer, Straub professionalized the state's financial investment practices and, as a result, significantly strengthened Oregon's finances. As governor, he pushed for economic development, the creation of a state power authority, better services for senior citizens, the reorganization of state agencies, and the passage of an innovative community corrections program.

For all of his accomplishments, however, one can argue that Straub's most important political legacy was in championing conservation and in helping create the environmental ethic that has become identified with Oregon. Straub was the leading proponent of the Willamette Greenway Project, for example, a plan to turn the land along the river into a 220-mile-long park stretching from Eugene to Portland. He played a major role in bringing about legislation to protect the beaches from development. As governor, he helped protect the state's fledgling land-use pro-

gram and jump-start the mass-transit system in Portland, and he used his position as a bully pulpit to promote a variety of environmental causes. Political commentators routinely emphasize the important role that Tom McCall played in shaping the state's environmental record and ethic, often referring to McCall's successes and the state's environmental ethic as the "Oregon Story." Straub deserves credit as one of the major contributors to that story. With his death in November 2002, it is time to reflect on Straub's position in Oregon's political history and the contributions he made to the state.

SCHOLARS OF STATE POLITICS argue that many factors influence the success that governors and other leaders have in shaping public policy.³ Some of those factors are personal in nature, reflecting the qualities that a leader brings into office. They include a leader's work ethic, negotiation skills, past experience in government, media savvy, and popularity among voters. No matter how forceful or skillful they may be, however, leaders cannot simply dictate the direction that a state takes. Their impact also reflects the environment or context in which they live. Such factors as the state of the economy, the extent of partisan conflict in the legislature, and the degree of political agreement among voters can all affect a governor's influence.

Straub, like other political leaders, entered office with traits, skills, and ideas that were important in shaping his legacy. His most prominent trait was his folksy style. Throughout his many years in politics, Straub was invariably described by the press and colleagues as "down-to-earth," "decent," "plain spoken," and "honest." Those who worked closely with Straub, as well as many members of the media, believed he was motivated more by a sincere desire to address state problems than by self-aggrandizement or self-promotion. He worked hard and was often aggressive on the campaign trail, yet he also went home for lunch almost every day when he was governor and he entertained political leaders by inviting them to barbecues on his farm outside of Salem. Straub, it is also worth noting, was a poor public speaker who fought throughout his political career to overcome a stuttering problem.

At the same time, Straub may have been the most successful businessman to serve as governor in modern times, which helped him understand the economic and business challenges confronting the state. Born in San Francisco in 1920, he received a master's degree in business administration from Dartmouth University. After he moved to Oregon in the late 1940s, he worked as an executive with Weyerhaeuser Timber Corporation before



Secretary of State Tom McCall (left) and State Treasurer Robert Straub (shown here with Governor Mark O. Hatfield on January 5, 1966) shared an interest in land-use and conservation issues. When they both ran for governor — McCall as a Republican and Straub as a Democrat — their public debates were so congenial that they were dubbed the “Tom and Bob Show.”

starting his own property development and rental company in Eugene. Later, he bought land for cattle ranching, farming, and timber in Wheeler, Polk, Yamhill, Lane, and Douglas counties. When he ran for governor in 1974, Straub revealed that he owned nine parcels of land in the state, totaling 7,648 acres, as well as five duplexes in Springfield. The value of his property was estimated at \$350,000. He also had personal experience in the stock market, investing an undisclosed amount in twenty stock funds, including Tektronics, Columbia Corporation, Goodyear Tire, and Great Western Corporation.⁴

As for ideology, Straub was a liberal, but more importantly his policy positions were close to McCall's. The two were so politically well matched,

in fact, that the media referred to their congenial gubernatorial debates as the “Tom and Bob Show.” They were particularly close on environmental matters. Straub, like McCall, was not a preservationist nor did he seek to cut off natural resources from commercial use. Rather, he was a conservationist who wanted to protect the state’s natural resources so they would provide benefits to the public, be it for economic, recreational, or quality-of-life reasons.

All of these aspects of Straub’s character helped shape his legacy and define his influence, yet his effectiveness was also shaped by the political environment in which he worked. When Straub was first elected to public office as a Lane County commissioner in 1954, the state’s political system was entering an important transitional period. The Democratic Party was becoming an important political force in Oregon politics, a position it had not been in since the 1880s. It was in 1954 that Richard Neuberger became the first Oregon Democrat elected to the U.S. Senate since George Chamberlain’s victory in 1914. Two years later, in 1956, Robert Holmes was elected as the first Democratic governor since 1934. In 1958, for the first time in the twentieth century, the party gained a majority of seats in both state houses. Despite the Democratic Party’s success, state politics during most of this period was marked by moderate bipartisanship, and most of the major political battles in the legislature and the state tended to be divided by region or occupation rather than by party. The conflict was generally split along urban and rural lines, between the Willamette Valley and other regions of the state, pitting the more urban work force against loggers, farmers, and other rural workers. As for the economy, its effect shifted over time. In the 1960s and early 1970s, as the economy grew, the state was more open to policy innovations, and by the early 1970s Oregon was gaining a national reputation for its collegial politics and innovative programs.⁵ The resurgence of the Democratic Party, the moderate tone of political debate, and the strong economy opened a door for new policy ideas. For many, Bob Straub — with his ability to work with others, his knowledge of business, and his passion for the environment — was the right man for the time. Later in Straub’s career, as the economy began to decline and the public grew more distrustful of government, the political climate in the state changed, making it more difficult for politicians such as Straub to champion progressive ideas.

One other factor affected Straub’s impact on Oregon and his political legacy, and that was the presence of a political leader who tended to overshadow all others. It is impossible to discuss Straub’s influence on Oregon without discussing Tom McCall because their two paths were so frequently

intertwined. Straub ran unsuccessfully against McCall for governor in 1966 and 1970, and he served as treasurer during McCall's two years as secretary of state and first six years as governor. The two men competed not only for public office, but also for the power to shape the direction of the state. Straub used the two gubernatorial campaigns and his position as treasurer to champion his own political ideas and to put pressure on McCall to adopt his proposals. The more charismatic McCall routinely overshadowed Straub in the press and in the public's imagination, but McCall nevertheless listened to and adopted several of Straub's major policy proposals. At times, the media wondered which one was actually leading the state.⁶ In many ways, Straub was not so much a competitor of McCall's but a partner in creating the Oregon Story. Reflecting on the ties between the two leaders, a 1970 *Oregon Journal* editorial captured the sentiment of many political observers at the time, concluding that the two men had "brought a rare combination of competition and cooperation that resulted in huge benefits to their state."⁷

IT CAN BE ARGUED that Straub's most significant impact on Oregon came when he was state treasurer, not governor. It was as treasurer that Straub emerged as a leading champion of the environment. It was from that position that he fought the battle over Nestucca spit, proposed the Willamette Greenway Project, and argued for beach protection, all of which helped reshape Oregonians' attitudes toward the environment. It was also as treasurer that Straub, drawing from his business background, transformed the way in which the state invests its funds.

Straub was first elected treasurer in 1964 after defeating incumbent Howard Belton, a popular Republican, in a race in which he hammered Belton's record, especially on investments. Straub argued that the state could be earning millions of dollars more each year if it invested in higher yielding accounts, something Belton had not done.⁸ Straub won the election by fewer than 18,000 out of more than 760,000 votes cast, and he set about introducing more professional investment practices into the treasurer's office.⁹

In some areas, Straub was able to bring rapid change, especially in moving short-term investments out of idle accounts into interest-bearing ones. His actions in other areas were limited, however, because Oregon law did not allow state funds to be invested in any long-term investments except bonds. Straub tried to convince the 1965 Legislative Assembly to pass legislation that would allow his office to place state money in more



In August 1967, Straub addressed the opponents of a proposed highway over the Nestucca sand spit. The battle over the spit may be the issue for which Straub is best remembered today.

productive investments, but the legislature was unwilling to make the change that year. He was more successful in 1967. Working with Stafford Hansell, the Republican representative from Umatilla and the co-chair of the powerful Joint Ways and Means Committee, Straub convinced the legislature to abolish the restriction and allow the treasurer to place state funds in a wider array of investments, including mortgages, equities, stocks, real estate, and loans. The legislature also created the Oregon Investment Council to oversee investments and required the council to rely on professional investment firms in deciding where to invest.¹⁰ Today, the council is responsible for investing all of Oregon funds, includ-

ing those from the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) and the State Accident Insurance Fund (SAIF).

Straub moved millions of dollars in government funds out of accounts earning little to no interest and placed them into investments with higher returns, establishing a practice that has continued to this day. One source estimates that as much as 20 percent of state dollars were sitting idle when Straub was elected treasurer in 1964 and that less than 1 percent was not earning interest by the time he left office eight years later.¹¹ For long-term accounts, the state frequently earned little more than 3 percent when relying on bonds; after the 1967 law was passed and during Straub's tenure as treasurer, long-term interest income at times rose to 18 to 20 percent.¹² As for retirement money, the PERS credits Straub for helping to increase the system's investment income from \$7.9 million in 1965 to \$21.2 million in

1970 to more than \$3.4 billion in 1999.¹³ Finally, Straub met with local government leaders to teach them how to increase financial returns, helping improve the fiscal position of cities, school districts, and other local governmental entities.¹⁴

Although Straub's contributions to investment practices are important, his impact on environmental issues may have been more significant because he not only changed public policy, he also changed the way that Oregonians thought about the state's public lands. The conflict over the Nestucca sand spit was one of several high-profile issues in the 1960s that thrust Straub into the spotlight as one of Oregon's leading voices on the state's natural resources. During his first bid for governor against Tom McCall in 1966, Straub unveiled his most visionary proposal: to build a park along both banks of the Willamette River from Eugene to Portland. The proposal went well beyond cleaning up the river — one of McCall's signature causes — to preserve the river's natural state while opening up the river corridor for hiking, horseback riding, boating, and other recreational uses. The proposal was hailed by many in the press and was frequently compared with the forceful actions of Oregon Governor Oswald West to gain public control over the ocean beaches in 1913. Straub called the proposal "Willamette River Rediscovered"; it later became known as the Willamette Greenway Project.

McCall's response to the proposal was not acrimonious or partisan, but it reveals the nature of his relationship to Straub. He did not attack the plan for being too costly or an unfair intrusion on the rights of the property owners along the river. Nor did he ignore the proposal, as some gubernatorial candidates might do to keep the public focused on their campaign themes. Instead, McCall proclaimed Straub's plan to be a "magnificent" idea both in "scope and in sweep."¹⁵ After McCall defeated Straub in the 1966 election, he adopted the Willamette Greenway Project as his own, creating a task force to study its potential and then proposing legislation to make it a reality. The Legislative Assembly passed the Willamette River Park System Act in 1967, taking a step toward Straub's vision. To be sure, the law was a far cry from what Straub had originally proposed. Responding to pressure from private landowners, the legislature did not give the state the power to condemn lands for the Greenway and, in so doing, reduced the state's ability to gain control over much of the riverbank. The legislature also appropriated only \$800,000 for the project, far less than the \$15 million deemed necessary to acquire riverfront property.¹⁶

As the proposal for the Willamette Greenway was moving through the legislative process, Straub placed himself at the front of another political

battle — public access to coastal beaches. Access to the beaches became a major political issue in 1966 when Bill Hay, the owner of the Surfsand Motel in Cannon Beach, fenced off the sand between his motel and the water to give his customers exclusive use of the beach. Since 1913, when Oswald West had convinced the legislature to declare the beaches to be public highways, the beaches had been open to the public and protected from private ownership. West's decree, however, had placed only the wet sand into public protection. Bill Hay and several other landowners claimed ownership of the dry sand. When the legislature convened in 1967, it wrestled over whether or not to extend state ownership over the dry sand. By May, House Bill 1601 — better known as the "Beach Bill" — was stalled in the House Committee on Highways, where it met resistance from conservative rural legislators who viewed it as a threat to property owners. Tom McCall has received considerable credit for his efforts to get the bill out of the committee and through the legislature, but Bob Straub was just as vigilant in pressuring the legislature to act and was often the most vociferous supporter of the bill as it moved through the legislative process.

The passage of the Beach Bill in July 1967 did not end the battle over public access. The main component of the law was that it gave the state Highway Commission the authority to protect public access through easements. The law did not, however, establish public ownership of the land or set aside funds to acquire it, and many landowners claimed they had the right to restrict beach access because the dry sand was included in their property deeds. In 1968, Straub championed an initiative that would allow the state to raise \$30 million through a temporary one-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax to buy the dry-sand areas to ensure public access to the beaches. The measure also prohibited building on the beach and restricted motor vehicles and littering. McCall initially supported an alternative initiative that would have given the state the power simply to condemn the beachfront land, but he threw his support behind Straub's proposal when that initiative failed to reach the ballot. The measure was defeated in the November election, garnering just 40 percent of the vote. Two months later, McCall offered an alternative that, though smaller in scope, was modeled after Straub's initiative — a \$15 million bond that would be paid back out of state highway construction funds. By late August 1969, McCall had whittled the figure to \$2 million, though by then the battle was nearing its denouement.¹⁷ The question was settled in December 1969, when the Oregon Supreme Court ruled that because the public had freely used coastal beaches in the past by custom, property owners could not restrict access. Oregon's beaches belonged to the people.¹⁸

Beyond these high-profile issues, Straub repeatedly weighed in on timber management, salmon and steelhead protection, highway billboards, the proposed creation of the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area, the diversion of Columbia River water, and waste treatment. He also spoke out repeatedly and critically about the problems of air and water pollution. McCall's legacy is often tied to the clean-up of the Willamette, but it was Straub who was most energetic in keeping the polluted river in the news in the 1960s, demanding that the state take more aggressive action.

THE FOCUS OF STRAUB'S energies changed after he entered the governor's office. While he had been playing a highly visible role as a crusading champion for the environment, he now began to focus on the pressing concerns of his new office and on filling in the details on programs created during McCall's tenure. Straub enjoyed a large Democratic majority in both chambers, but other forces constrained his leadership. A new political environment was taking shape as the economy slid into recession, inflation rose, and unemployment reached over 12 percent.¹⁹ The nation confronted an energy crisis in 1974 and a public that was beginning to lose faith in government in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. In 1975, Straub's first year as governor, he was forced to concentrate on building the state's economy and addressing the energy crisis. During the second, a statewide drought hit.

Straub's first year in office went poorly. He was able to get several major proposals through the legislature, but there were few high-profile victories of the kind that build a permanent legacy. Still, through his urging, the legislature created a Department of Energy, increased limits on farm loans, placed a measure on the ballot providing \$140 million in bonds for elderly and low-income housing, and boosted state highway fund. He also fought off efforts to extend field burning in the Willamette Valley. At the same time, his economic stimulus package fared poorly, and his proposals to strengthen the Greenway Project and to regulate health care costs were defeated.²⁰

Part of Straub's problem during the 1975 session was poor staff work. The governor's staff had little experience, was often in conflict, and frequently lacked direction. A few weeks after the session ended, the *Oregonian* reported that political insiders were using such terms as "Turf problem. Identity crisis. Over protective. The Flounders" to describe Straub's administration.²¹ The staff appeared to be the weakest in the area where Straub needed the most support — public relations. As a poor public



Throughout the mid-1960s, Robert Straub frequently appeared in the news in order to draw attention to the problems of pollution in Oregon. This May 6, 1966, Oregon Journal photograph shows Straub (right) meeting with fisherman Ken Backman, who displays a pollution-clogged net.

speaker and with little emphasis on self-promotion during the session, Straub could have used a more effective public relations team, one that could have pushed his policy goals more effectively and improved his public image. Instead, Straub's image suffered, until by October 1977 the *Oregon Journal* was reporting that the governor had "developed an image as being a bit of a bumbler."²²

With the appointment of Loren (Bud) Kramer as Straub's executive assistant prior to the 1977 session, the staff problems diminished and the

governor began to have more success.²³ His top legislative priority that session was to create a Domestic and Rural Power Authority (DRPA), which would provide lower-cost electrical power to residential and rural customers. The bill was enacted, but only after a considerable lobbying effort.²⁴ Straub also convinced the legislators to adopt an economic development package, to allocate more aid to cities and counties through state revenue sharing, and to provide a wide variety of new programs for senior citizens. The legislature approved his community corrections program, which was designed to improve rehabilitation, reduce costs, and provide more flexibility in sentencing by placing less dangerous criminals in local corrections centers. In some areas, such as support for education and property tax relief, the legislature actually exceeded the governor's requests.²⁵

As governor, Straub also played a critical role in developing the state's land-use planning rules, which had been created under McCall's leadership. Senate Bill 100 had been passed in 1973, but it contained few details on how the law would be implemented, leaving that task to future legislatures and the newly created Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). It was particularly problematic that the law did not identify state land-use goals nor did it lay out how the state would review local plans.²⁶ Throughout the 1975 and 1977 legislative sessions, there were repeated efforts to weaken or dismantled the newly enacted law. In addition, opponents of land-use planning turned to the initiative process in 1976 and 1978 to attack the new rules. Straub stood his ground, telling opponents that he would do everything in his power to protect the new law.²⁷ He also successfully pushed the 1975 legislature to adopt a sizeable \$6 million budget for the LCDC.²⁸ Without his support at that critical juncture, the character of Oregon's land-use laws could have been very different.

Straub also played a central role in blocking the proposed Mt. Hood Freeway and in creating light rail in Portland. In the 1940s, Robert Moses, a nationally known planner, had developed a plan for enhancing the city's economic growth. Among other recommendations, Moses called for several new highways, including a major thoroughfare from downtown Portland toward Gresham. In the late 1960s, the city of Portland began planning for an eight-lane freeway that would stretch from Johns Landing across the Willamette River to connect with another new freeway, Interstate 205, west of Gresham. Local residents feared the freeway's impact on their community and protested the proposed destruction of several thousand homes.²⁹ Although many people were involved in the freeway battle, including local citizen groups and Portland Mayor Neil Goldschmidt, Straub's involvement was critical to the outcome. The opponents of the

freeway had hoped to use the \$110.9 million in federal aid that had been targeted for the freeway to begin building light rail, but they needed permission from the U.S. secretary of transportation.³⁰ For that, they had to have the governor's support. Straub not only wrote a letter to the secretary asking for the transfer, but he also actively lobbied for it.³¹ His effort brought an end to the freeway proposal and began the funding for light rail. Finally, Straub saw the LCDC incorporate the Willamette Greenway idea into the state's land-use plan and establish boundaries for the Greenway corridor.

By all accounts, Straub also appointed more women, minorities, and the disabled to state positions than any governor before him.³² He revamped the state's bureaucracy to provide more centralized control and to make it better equipped to implement policy. In particular, he focused on consolidating the agencies that managed natural resources and on restructuring the Department of Human Services to make them more effective.³³ He attempted to increase economic development and overcome the state's anti-business image, which had grown during McCall's administration, by actively recruiting industries in other states to build in Oregon. He was particularly interested in attracting high-technology industries because they were seen at the time as being less polluting.³⁴ During his reelection campaign in 1978, Straub maintained that his administration helped attract two new Intel plants as well as seventy other new industries to Oregon.³⁵

IN 1978, AFTER ONE TERM as governor, Straub soundly lost the election to Republican Vic Atiyeh. At the time, Atiyeh was considered to be part of the conservative wing of the Republican Party, though today he is often remembered as a moderate Republican governor because of his pro-business focus and his middle-of-the-road stand on social issues. While Atiyeh's victory was not a landslide, Straub was defeated in all but three counties — Columbia, Lane, and Multnomah. Atiyeh simply out-dueled Straub, raising twice as much money and running a more effective campaign.³⁶ Straub was also a victim of changing times. When he had dominated the headlines in the mid-1960s as state treasurer, Oregon had been growing economically and the general public had been more open to progressive proposals, especially in protecting the environment. By the time Straub entered the governor's office in 1975, the state was suffering from a severe economic downturn and an energy crisis. By the 1978 election, the state, like much of the nation, had begun to move to the right, and there was growing support for tax limits and resistance to

big government. Straub also opposed two popular measures on the ballot that year — one restricting property taxes and the other restoring the death penalty. It was not the politically expedient course to take.

To many observers, however, Straub's loss of the governorship could not be blamed on the campaign or on changing political tides, but on Straub himself. As the *Willamette Week* noted in 1976, Straub had not "touched the public's imagination."³⁷ He had campaigned in 1974 to continue McCall's efforts, yet he had not been able to convey the same ability to lead or the vision as his predecessor had. As a poor public speaker, unconcerned about self-promotion, and lacking in charisma, Straub simply did not inspire the public. A year before the 1978 election, Straub hired a professional political consultant from New York City to advise him on his reelection campaign. After conducting a statewide poll, the consultant told Straub that he had a "public-perception problem."³⁸ The problem, the report concluded, was that Straub's achievements were not visible to the people.

Even if Straub did not capture the public's imagination, he left an indelible mark on Oregon, from state investments to the hiring of women and minorities to programs for senior citizens. For almost twenty years, he played a central role in shaping Oregonians' attitudes and public policy on the environment and was the most important leader on several of the major environmental crusades of the time, from protecting beach access and bringing mass transit to Portland to shaping land-use rules.

It is important to recognize that an assessment of any politician's legacy often depends on one's political outlook. Today, Oregon politics is no longer characterized by a bipartisan moderation as it was when Bob Straub and Tom McCall wrestled over the direction of the state. Instead, Oregon is deeply divided along partisan, ideological, and geographical lines. Since the early 1980s, the regions of the state have grown further apart than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Many urban residents have come to cherish Oregon's record on the environment, land-use planning, and the role of government in protecting natural resources, and they wonder why more cannot be done to expand this record. At the same time, many rural residents have grown increasingly disillusioned, seeing the state's land-use and environmental laws as an unfair intrusion on their rights and a major impediment to economic growth. In many ways, how one views Straub's legacy, especially on environmental issue, will depend on which side of this sharp divide that one stands. It is also important to recognize that Straub may have helped plant some of the seeds that created this divide. As one of the leading champions of the environment and land-use planning in the

1960s and 1970s, Straub helped move these issues to the forefront of Oregon politics, where they have stirred emotions on both sides and generated strong political debate ever since.

Regardless of one's political attitudes, however, it is clear that Robert Straub played an important role in shaping Oregon post-war politics and in defining the state's character. As important as McCall was in creating the state's environmental record and image, Straub was there to aggressively champion conservation causes, raise the public's awareness on environmental issues, and even motivate McCall to take up some of his ideas. McCall may have been the author of the Oregon Story, but Straub deserves recognition as one of its major contributors.

Notes

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