

Mistakes: Peter Courtney, many; Patti Milne, none



Dick Hughes, Statesman Journal 10:08 p.m. PDT September 27, 2014



(Photo: DANIELLE PETERSON / Statesman Journal)

"Give an example of a work mistake you made and what you learned from it."

Ah, that's a typical question for a job interview. We often ask it of political applicants — people "applying" for public office at primary and general elections.

The answers given Friday by opponents Patti Milne and State Senate President Peter Courtney, who met together with the Statesman Journal Editorial Board, were illuminating.

History and voter registrations suggest that Courtney should win. But Milne, a former Marion County commissioner and relentless campaigner, may be the most formidable opponent that Courtney has faced in

Senate District 11.

The Editorial Board usually asks our question as, "Give an example of a mistake you made in politics (or in government) and what you learned from it."

I like that question because we all make mistakes, so the second part — what was learned — is revealing. As Statesman Journal staff members prepare to interview for job changes in the newsroom, our human resources professional has encouraged us to prepare how we would answer exactly this question, as well as others.

My own list of doozies is lengthy, extending into childhood. In a high school writing class, I remember writing, "The success of my life is due to all my failures." It remains true.

Years ago, I was heartened when Republican Gene Derfler, a longtime Salem leader and former president of the State Senate, told me that he considered it a good day when his day's successes outnumbered his failures.

Candidate Peter Courtney, a Salem Democrat who is Oregon's longest-serving State Senate president, inhabits the land of failure, mistakes and self-pessimism. He doesn't see the glass as half-empty; he doesn't even see the glass.

Answering my mistake-and-learning question at the Editorial Board interview, Courtney said, "Well, I've lost more than I've won in life" proceeding to reel off a list of his mistakes and subsequent lessons as a Salem city councilor and a legislator.

Of one particular dressing down by the late Salem City Manager Ralph Hanley, Courtney said: "He was right. I was wrong. I learned."

Milne, a Woodburn Republican, is 180 degrees the opposite. Although she served more than 15 years as a county commissioner and previously was a state representative and a Woodburn School Board member, her lexicon does not include a personal political mistake.

"You asked this question, I think it was during the primary, 'Are there any regrets?' No. I don't have any regrets. I do my homework. I'm always very prepared, study the issues, know what the varying positions are, what the unintended consequences may be," she said, later adding, "Because that's the way I do things, I don't see mistakes having been made."



Peter Courtney and Patricia Milne meet with the Statesman Journal Editorial Board during a Senate District 11 endorsement interview on Friday, Sept. 26, 2014. Ann Reed | Statesman Journal

My follow-up question to the two candidates was this: Give an example of an issue on which you changed your mind, and what caused you to change your mind.

Again, the issue itself isn't as important as the process. We're looking to see whether candidates are rigid and doctrinaire or whether they keep growing and learning.

Courtney: "Oh, I've changed my mind on so many things — the whole land-use area."

He no longer embraces one-size-fits-all statewide land-use planning.

"You've got to have more flexibility in land-use planning. There is an area where I've evolved in my thinking."

He proceeded to discuss the history of his thinking on land-use planning and on business taxes, before adding, "Of course, there are some other things I haven't changed my mind on, Dick Hughes, during 30 or 34 years."

Milne: "I can't think of something off the top of my head that would be one thing. I think the overall issue of the role that government plays in people's lives.

"It's so unfortunate that far too many people don't understand the role that government plays in their lives, and so it's always been really important to me to work with people so they better understand it, particularly young people, groups of young people, whether it's giving them the tour at the state Capitol, or to local governments and talking about how things work, how a bill is made, how you get involved in it."

She reiterated that she does her homework on major policy issues.

Responding to another question, Courtney was on a roll, listing examples of what the Oregon Legislature has done well, and not so well. He contrasted the Legislature's successful bipartisan special session with the federal government shutdown that occurred at the same time.

In contrast, Milne said the Legislature has done nothing she agrees with, citing a "decade or better of major catastrophes, boondoggles and failures. So in that period of time, what has gone well? Not much."

There you have it: two contrasting approaches.

I encourage you to watch the online video of Friday's Editorial Board meeting so you have the full context of the candidates' comments.

On Nov. 4, who will win in Senate District 11, which includes part of Salem, Gervais and Woodburn?

The district has 18,684 Democrats and 13,129 Republicans. Conventional thinking is that Courtney benefits from that strong Democratic registration edge among the district's 47,700 voters.

But in Oregon's U.S. Senate race six years ago, few people gave Democrat Jeff Merkley a chance against Republican Gordon Smith. Merkley is now the one seeking re-election.

Elections can be predictably unpredictable.

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