

# VOTE FOR THE CLIMATE

September 20, 2020

Alabama and Florida are under water while California and Oregon are on fire.

In the last few days, Hurricane Sally has dropped more than two feet of rain in many areas across the South, displacing tens of thousands of residents and cutting off power to 320,000 homes and businesses. And there have been so many Atlantic storms this year that we've run out of letters in the English alphabet – according to recent reports, Subtropical Storm Alpha is weakening, but Tropical Storm Beta is forecast to strengthen into a hurricane.

Meanwhile, wildfires in the West have burned 6.7 million acres of property – that's more than 10,000 square miles. Entire towns have been devastated, thousands of homes destroyed, there have been mass evacuations, and more than 30 people have burned to death. In California, 17,000 firefighters are battling major blazes, and Senator Jeff Merkley of Oregon described the scene in his state as "apocalyptic"

And all of this in the middle of a pandemic which has killed more than 200,000 Americans – a number which may well double by the end of the year!

There's an interesting similarity between these environmental and public health catastrophes. In both cases, the natural processes responsible for these disasters are well understood by scientists and the most effective, evidence-based public policy responses have been clearly communicated, ... and yet government has failed to implement the recommendations. And, in both cases, the role of government has been framed as striking a balance between "protecting the environment or public health" ... and "protecting the economy."

Since "protecting the economy" is widely viewed as being important, it's reasonable to ask *what exactly is the economy*, and *what's its purpose*? Earlier this year, I posed these questions to the 4,000 constituents in Columbia and Boone County who receive my monthly newsletter – and I think that list includes many of you.

- Some of you said the economy is *the efficient allocation of scarce resources which have alternative uses*.
- *It's an organized system of human activity involving the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of goods and services*.
- In discussing the purpose of the economy, many people said *full employment should be the objective* and defined a "successful" economy as *one in which everyone has a job*.
- I dug into the purpose of paid work with several folks – *is it to give people an income, ... or to create necessary products and services, ... or to generate profits for shareholders?*
- Others thought about the economy in a rather different way:
  - *No-one should be left behind*.
  - *A good economy would ensure everyone can live a life of dignity with their basic needs met*.
  - *Nobody should have to work 3 jobs to barely survive*.

Economists measure the strength of the economy in terms of employment numbers and the gross production and consumption of goods and services, but that doesn't make sense to me. By creating policies that maximize those performance measures, we promote energy use and resource extraction, even though our true quality of life is less about the things we own and more about economic security, a safe place to live, good food, access to health care and educational opportunities, clean air and water. And no-one should have to sacrifice their bodies and health in order to earn a paycheck, as essential workers are expected to do. All of this makes me think there's something wrong with our concept of "the economy."

A strategic planning process usually starts with a high-level vision for the future, then identifies more specific goals which (if achieved) would realize that vision, and finally develops strategies for accomplishing those goals. So, let's do some "blue-sky brainstorming" and come up with a vision for a new economy – would it be "*everyone has a job,*" or "*the efficient allocation of scarce resources,*" or "*ensuring everyone can live a life of dignity with their basic needs met?*" ... I know which one I prefer, and I'd love to facilitate a community conversation to cultivate the appropriate goals and strategies, ... and then implement them to create the new economy founded on Dignity for All.

Instead, as Wendell Berry observed, "*we have an economy founded foursquare on the Seven Deadly Sins - just go down the list.*" ... Envy, Gluttony, Greed, Lust, Pride, Sloth, and Wrath. ... This is an economy that has been designed by and for the benefit of those who already have the greatest power and privilege. They are the shareholders of the oil companies, investors in the health insurance industry, and beneficiaries of the "status quo" which turns a blind eye to the racial and economic injustice of climate change, an exclusionary healthcare system, housing and transportation policy, law enforcement, and a dozen other compounding systems that lock people, especially people of color, into an inescapable cycle of generational poverty.

I believe this cognitive disconnect about the economy has created a "false binary." It explains why we cannot *protect the public health* because we have to *protect the economy* – by keeping bars open even though it increases the spread of a deadly virus. It explains why we cannot *protect the environment* because we have to *protect the economy* – by allowing fossil fuel firms to externalize the environmental costs of energy production and blocking public policies that would increase energy efficiency and reduce our carbon footprint.

However, if we were to create a new economy based on the vision of "*ensuring everyone can live a life of dignity with their basic needs met:*"

- We would save our most vulnerable residents from the terror of sleeping on the streets;
- We would invest in our poorest neighborhoods first and make it a priority to integrate our communities;
- We would have national housing, healthcare, and unemployment benefit systems which would not allow millions of low-income families to fall through the cracks;
- We would enact sensible public health restrictions and bold climate action plans, without pushing businesses into bankruptcy or workers into poverty;
- We would prioritize health and the environment because we would all be in it together.

I'll finish with two calls to action – please support the Economic Dignity and Survival program, which Mike Trapp and I are proposing to fund through a small property tax increase and, as we approach the election season, please Vote for Justice and Vote for the Climate.