

Two local government surveys are a sign some things are normal

2 local government surveys show all is normal in Thurston County

BY THE OLYMPIAN EDITORIAL BOARD

After two weeks of heart-stopping turmoil in our nation's Capitol, we are longing for normalcy. Fortunately, we found some this week, in the form of two local governmental bodies asking the public to fill out surveys about what we would like them to do.

The first is Thurston County, which wants us to participate in an online survey about its Community-Driven Review of Agriculture Policies and Programs. This is one of this year's comprehensive plan amendment topics. The county intends to re-examine land use policies, zoning, and incentive and regulatory matters. You just can't get more normal than that.

There's commendable work going on to promote the success of local farmers, both in Thurston County and in a larger region that includes neighboring counties. The Thurston Economic Development Council and a long list of other partners have teamed up to build an Agriculture Business and Innovation Park in Tenino for food-related manufacturing, processing, storage and packaging. There's also a lot of work going on to promote success for grain farmers who are growing crops for brewers, bakeries and animal feed for organic dairy farmers. All of that — especially the part about grain for dairy cows — seems pleasantly calm and normal too.

For those of us not directly involved in farming or related enterprises, the survey is a bit of a head-scratcher, because most of the questions are impossible to answer unless you're knowledgeable about the policy choices they ask about. Still, even just reading the survey is a mini-tutorial about how much we ought to know about local agriculture and don't.

In fact it's breathtaking how little we know about where our food comes from, or what we would do if food, rather than toilet paper, were suddenly in short supply. But that wouldn't be normal, so let's not think about it right now. Just breathe.

The [second survey comes from the Port of Olympia](#), whose leaders want to know what design choices we recommend as they develop their East Bay property. This is not a questionnaire about what businesses, services or amenities we want in the area between The Children's Hands On Museum and the Hearthfire restaurant; those decisions are part of an ongoing public engagement process that will continue for several months.

This survey is all about aesthetics; its authors want to know, for instance, whether we prefer craftsman, neo-traditional, longhouse, or contemporary architecture for East Bay.

Asking the public to make recommendations about architectural choices is quite an advanced democratic impulse that surely must denote a highly civilized society. It reminds us that Leon Trotsky once imagined that in a global socialist system, when class conflict and war were behind us, we might have political parties based on different schools of architecture because there would be nothing else to argue about. But of course that fanciful idea would be anything but normal, so once again, please excuse the digression.

The big idea in this project is to connect the last string of undeveloped waterfront parcels to the rest of downtown. This requires balancing competing needs and interests, taking sea level rise into account, and making the right judgments about what developers would actually be willing to do. [The Port's website](#) has lots of information if you wish to marinate your brain in the ins and outs of this project.

We recommend these two surveys for a couple of reasons.

One is, of course, that we need respite from the national nightmare in the other Washington.

Another is that these surveys are reassuring. Local governments comprise the foundation of American democracy, and ours are still solid, functional, and genuinely democratic. Because they are run by human beings, they can be messy and imperfect. They're not slick and fancy. But our local councils, commissions, judges, school boards and other special purpose districts are predictable and trustworthy enough that we can mostly take them for granted. And when we do need to argue with their decisions, we can literally do so without making a federal case of it.

That's a comforting dose of American normalcy, and we salute local elected officials, both past and present, for serving our community and sustaining our democracy.

But there's a third reason for paying attention to these surveys too: Both address genuinely important local issues that warrant more attention from rank-and-file citizens. Both are good faith efforts to engage citizens in making decisions. When we respond to surveys like these, we strengthen our community and flex our citizenship muscles. We make our democracy stronger from the bottom up. And when we finish, we feel calm and productive.