

Skykomish Hotel Disaster Begins

Transcript - Skykomish Hotel Liberty Forum Speech – Bellevue, Washington



Thank you for your kind invitation. It is an honour and pleasure to speak before you this evening regarding the Skykomish Hotel disaster.

Having never met, you and I nevertheless share a common bond...recognition that the 'self' in self-government refers to 'us'. We gather this evening with the sincere desire to further this process.

Our government, once an instrument of service to its citizens, has become an oppressor, tyrant, controller and limiter, at the very moment in human history when burgeoning technological progress extends the promise of personal liberation, and freedoms never before envisioned.

The very foundations of this great nation, the right to own property, pursue dreams and retain the fruits of our labour, are under assault by those who believe it their destiny to control, without investing one penny or firing a single shot.

Make no mistake. We are at war! The enemy's front line advances daily through increasing control of the now choking governmental bureaucracy and its rule making process.

Failure to wrest control, returning it to citizens, voters and taxpayers will mean a future very different from the past. The consequences, real enough for us today, will be especially onerous for our children and succeeding generations.

The personal story I bring you this eve is not uplifting nor is a happy ending included. It is the story of theft... theft of our property, the fruits of our labour and our dreams.

No, this despicable act didn't occur in the middle of the night, nor was it the work of common burglars. It took place in broad daylight over the course of many months and was the calculated effort of Skykomish Town officials and King County bureaucrats.

On holiday in the summer of 1992, we laid eyes upon and fell in love with the rundown 1904 architectural masterpiece known as the Skykomish Hotel. This Cascade mountain marvel was not for sale so our dream would have to wait.

As the new millennium began, we were able to purchase this venerable old structure.

We crossed the threshold to this piece of history for the first time as owners in September of 2000. Following completion of a 1.2 million dollar renovation, the fifteen-suite luxury bed & breakfast with fine dining restaurant, 55-seat conference and banquet centre would have been the pride of Northwest bed & breakfasts'.

We well understood this structure had been designated an historic landmark. One could not just throw on aluminum siding and mural stone, calling it good to go. No, this project would have to be done right.

In 1995 Skykomish signed an Interlocal Agreement with King County Landmarks and Heritage Commission, following their promise to be a major contributor in a much-needed Skykomish economic redevelopment.

Skykomish established an historic district wherein all structures required local and or King County approval before any exterior change could occur.

Prior to purchase we had very positive conversations with King County Landmark's representatives. Traveling from our home in Colorado to their Seattle office, we described the proposed renovation in detail and received extremely positive feedback, for they stated this would be their largest and most prestigious project.

We explained that while we were familiar with Colorado historic renovation, we lacked commensurate experience in King County and requested their assistance, counsel, guidance and advice.

We were assured that experienced, expert staff stood ready to assist at every turn, providing technical assistance, securing tax incentives, grants, low interest loans and overcoming potential bureaucratic hurdles.

We interviewed Landmarks three recommended architectural firms specializing in historic renovation; retaining the services of the company we felt would best fulfill our dream.

Comprehensive plans fully compliant with historic guidelines in fact and spirit were developed. While the interior would receive extensive renovation, few changes, roof replacement, soundproof glazing, fireplace vent caps and the addition of balcony exit doors as required by fire code were proposed for the exterior.

Our first inkling that all might not be right in the kingdom came Monday, October 23, 2000 with a scheduled visit from King County Landmarks Officer Kate Krafft and State Officer of Archaeology & Historic Preservation Steve Matheson.

Mr. Matheson had been invited to perform an initial determination whether the project could qualify for Department of The Interior historic renovation tax credits.

The 28-room Hotel originally housed Great Northern Railway train crews, company officials, visiting dignitaries, travelling salespersons and tourists. It is located less than 100 feet from today's busy BNSF Railway Chicago-Seattle mainline and the Skykomish 5th Street railroad grade crossing where about 24 trains pass daily, repeatedly sounding horn and bell as required by federal regulation.

Acoustic engineering consultants had been employed to quantify railroad noise issues and provide mitigation recommendations to architects. The renovation would require extensive sound mitigation, including replacement of all 2nd, 3rd and 4th floor glazing where overnight guests would sleep.

Present Hotel noise levels reached 127 decibels, contrasting with human sleeping tolerances of only 25 to 40. No company in North America produced glazing to successfully mitigate this problem, but a Canadian firm offered to custom manufacture this glazing and duplicate the exterior appearance of the original wood windows.

This day, our architect and acoustic engineer were present to meet and discuss plans with Mr. Matheson and Ms. Krafft. Mr. Matheson's arrogant and condescending demeanour soon caused us to become agitated. Constant review of his watch made it clear his presence in Skykomish was a burden and imposition.

He stated that very few if any, projects he was involved with ever qualified for the federal tax credit. Mr. Matheson stated the original single pane wood windows must be retained, but storm windows could possibly be added to the interior.

We stated the necessity our project result in an economically viable business operation and that it was imperative guests be able to sleep through the night. Mr. Matheson responded that he didn't care and wasn't concerned about the economics of this or any other project.

With great difficulty we bit our tongues, continuing to listen to his drivel instead of following our instincts and escorting him from the property.

Architects and we were now forced to decide whether to direct our work with Mr. Matheson toward insuring renovation design compliance with his interpretation of National Park Service guidelines, or to cut him and the tax credit loose as simply not viable.

After all, we could devote extensive financial and human resources toward this end without reasonable opportunity of success. The decision was made to cut them loose.

The next milestone occurred November 20th, 2000. Our project was to be reviewed before the joint Skykomish and Landmarks Design Review Board. Following a review of architectural plans, local Board chairman and King County staff indicated approval to proceed to the permitting and construction phase was expected without opposition.

This apparent light at the end of the tunnel would however soon be revealed as a fast approaching train wreck. The historic Design Review Boards were not, as advertised, composed of experts, objectively and dispassionately deciding our project's fate based upon written, codified historic preservation guidelines.

Quite the contrary...these arrogant, uninformed individuals were bent upon imposing political agendas and personal proclivities, regardless of the consequences to our business, investment, the community or us. Facts, guidelines, regulations and statutes were not going to get in the way of their overriding desire that we dance to their tune.

The present cedar shingle roof, now 14 years old, was badly rotted, leaking and in need of complete replacement. In a climate receiving several times the annual rainfall of Seattle, copper shingles with their minimum life expectancy of 300 years promised both beauty and durability. They were permitted under historic guidelines and had the established precedent of historic use in the area.

The initial bright copper colour would fade to brown within months, remaining so for approximately 15 years and then developing a greenish patina lasting for centuries.

When polled, a majority of Board members stated they would not approve copper. The architect's query as to why received no response. He went around the table, inquiring if it was the colour? They responded affirmatively.

Ascertaining it was the greenish patina they didn't like, he presented a plan to chemically treat the roof, preventing the change from brown to green. Once again he went around the table querying whether they would now vote to approve. They would.

A new motion was introduced but the same Board members again voted no. The astonished architect now requested an explanation from the Board, which arrogantly responded... 'they were not required to explain their decisions'.

Copper Shingled Roof was Denied

Soundproof glazing was next. The architect gave a concise, compelling presentation, but one Design Review Board member stated 'he could not sleep at night knowing such windows would be in the Hotel'.

The architect explained the exterior appearance would exactly match the original glazing and that four recent Skykomish historic projects had already been approved with windows that were not historically correct. The Board stated it had to tighten standards and the present was a good time to begin.

Ms. Krafft chimed in that we could install interior storm windows. When the acoustic engineer explained this would have no effect, she added that we could in addition use heavy lined curtains. The engineer further stated this would not solve the problem.

She then proffered that we could install soundproof interior shutters along with the storm windows and curtains. The engineer again explained why this approach would not work and quipped, that even if it would...was this really going to be the kind of place where guests would want to stay?

Ms. Krafft responded this was not her concern. **She informed us, King County Landmarks was also going to require strict adherence with all National Park Service guidelines for historic renovation, independent of any tax or incentive issues.**

We immediately recognized a fundamental and decidedly negative shift in Landmarks strategy had occurred.

A Board member now asked if we were going to market the bed & breakfast as historic. She stated that if we advertised the building as having original wood windows, more guests would come.

I responded to this absurd statement by offering to sell the Hotel to her or anyone else in the room so they would be free to test this hypothesis with their own money. All declined.

Soundproof Glazing was Denied.

Each guest suite was to receive its own fireplace for heating and to provide ambiance. A small unobtrusive exterior vent cap would be required for each stove. The architect's presentation explained why this heating system had been chosen over alternatives and demonstrated the unobtrusiveness of the proposed vent caps. Design guidelines allowed such exterior alteration due to installation of updated mechanical devices.

The Board inquired as to the type of heating system original to the building. It was explained that coal fired steam had been used. The Board now insisted this system be reintroduced and tenaciously clung to the notion even after the architect offered a cogent explanation why such inefficient, labour intensive, expensive, noisy, high maintenance systems had been abandoned decades earlier.

Vent Caps and Fireplaces were Denied.

Last was the issue of exit doors onto the balconies. Each suite was to have private balcony access for guest convenience. It was also explained this was necessary to properly reconfigure the interior suites. The new doors would exactly duplicate originals in exterior appearance although they would be soundproof. It was further explained; secondary room exits, a safety issue, were now required by fire code.

Doors were Denied.

Skykomish does not possess a healthy economy. Originally a railroad, logging and mill town, Sky fell on hard times following World War 2 and never recovered. Its economic slide continuing to this day means few jobs and closed businesses.

In spite of King County Landmark's 1995 promises, the business district is in its worst shape ever, due in part, to county funds being diverted to outrageous government boondoggles like the Skykomish School's new \$400,000 dollar covered playground and \$250,000 community centre.

The tax base continues its decline. The school with only 65, K-12 students is in danger of closing and town infrastructure continues to deteriorate. Many towns in this position would welcome the first class renovation of their largest and most prominent historic structure, especially desirous of the 18 full-time jobs and tax revenue that completion would have meant.

Things had actually begun on a more positive note in Skykomish. The mayor originally heralded our arrival, stating the project would be the cornerstone of economic rebirth.

Unfortunately it was the mayor's wife and Design Review Board member who most vehemently spoke against the Hotel on November 20th. Just days later, as we enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner at the mayor's house, he explained that while he believed his wife's decision to be wrong, he was never the less going to stand by her.

Within weeks they and the Town turned against us with a vengeance. They reclassified our water and garbage service to the highest rate and tried to have the service shut off until our attorney pointed out the ordinance and its application was unconstitutional.

Over the following year this increasingly bitter and ugly fight continued with the Town and King County. By late summer 2001 our persistence and tenacity had achieved some positive results, but the battle had left us and our marriage seriously wounded.

We had lost faith in the Town's desire or ability to pull itself back from the economic, social and cultural abyss and were now terribly fearful of committing such a large investment in this bitter and politically hostile environment.

We chose not to proceed with the renovation.

The heavy, intrusive, oppressive hand of government is no esoteric concept to us, but a very real and present danger to our freedoms, the pursuit of our dreams and the

American way, often fought and paid for in blood for over two hundred and twenty five years.

If you are at all tempted to believe this tragedy, this train wreck, was just an accident, the culmination of mistakes, missteps or miscalculation by otherwise well-intentioned individuals...think again.

Policy 221 of King County's Comprehensive Plan states... "King County shall acquire historic resources whenever possible." Yet, there appear no budgetary provisions for accomplishing this mission...leading to speculation that confiscation and theft have become legitimate and acceptable means to this end.

Published statements from Landmark's monthly newsletter, 'Community History' lend credence to this. Excerpts include:

"The permittee was required to donate certain parcels of property...and contribute the lump sum of \$45,000..."

Now, to me, 'required' and 'donate' do not belong in the same sentence. Fact is, the 'project proponent' had a gun placed to his head and refusal to 'contribute' and 'donate' would have been fatal.

Regarding the halt to another project, Landmarks stated..."An archaeologist, who just happened to be in the vicinity, noticed archaeological resources in a sewer trench and notified authorities."

At one Skykomish Town Council meeting, Council members became so emboldened as to freely discuss to what purpose the Town was going to put the Hotel, following its 'acquisition'. Again...since the Town has no money with which to 'buy' the Hotel, one can reasonably conclude confiscation and theft were once again going to be the order of the day.

Yes, make no mistake...We Are at War!

Should I stand before you this evening pleading assistance in reforming our governmental process?

No! History clearly dictates that government cannot effectively be reformed. The best we can hope is that it may be limited. Our founding fathers well understood the damage intrusive government would cause. Early legislatures met infrequently and then only for short periods, knowing less time produced less legislation which produced less damage.

Today, legislatures grind out bills in unimagined abundance, while bureaucracies, rules, procedures and an unintelligible tax code leave citizens and business choking, gasping and reeling. Even powerful Congressmen now quiver in fear of IRS and Justice Department persecution.

Our public education system, long ago captured by public employee unions, preaches that individuality and independent thought and action are now un-American but delivering third-world quality learning educational experiences is apparently ok.

Our presence here this evening is evidence a storm is gathering.

Let us work long and hard to release professional politicians, government hangers-on, union parasites, tax attorneys, accountants, lobbyists, pollsters, focus groups, bureaucrats, regulators, aids, assistants and clerks to once again perform useful service in the private sector, enriching our economy instead of depleting it.

An economic and creative miracle such as the world has never witnessed would be unleashed, its tidal wave floating all boats while raising standards of living to unprecedented levels.

A return to historic principles of common sense would automatically and seamlessly allow successful integration of the technological revolution, which requires nothing more than being left alone to flourish.

Yes, America would still be an imperfect place...there will always be cracks for some to fall through. One thing I have learned...no matter how well intentioned, government is a poor substitute for anything else or nothing else.

At the risk of preaching to the choir, let us remember in our quest that there are many false starts and great wreckage by the roadside.

We as individual statesman for our cause must not appear dogmatic. Instead, we must continually demonstrate common ground with those we hope to include.

We must not venture too far ahead of the safe middle ground at the centre of the 'bell curve' where most voters reside.

Political movements often become prisoners of their own platforms and yet heartfelt principles, quickly jettisoned in the name of expediency, demonstrate a lack of integrity. It remains a fine line to walk.

America desperately quests for political leadership displaying passion, purpose, enthusiasm, courage, clarity and integrity.

God have mercy on us should we fail in this mission.

Thank You,

Dieter Benz

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