

ERIK LARSON



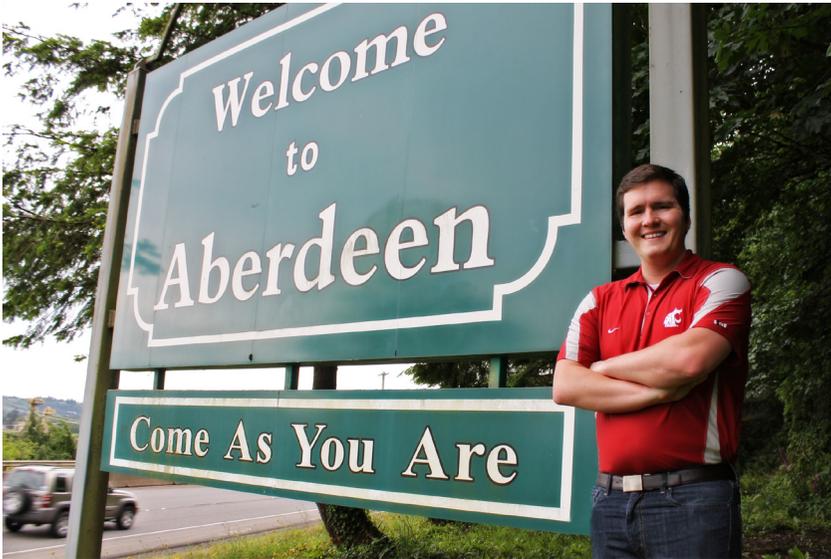
Come as
you are



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who ARE we?

Washington's Kaleidoscope



Cars honk as the mayor poses at the Welcome-to-Aberdeen sign on the bluff overlooking the city. The sign borrows its “Come As You Are” from a song written by Aberdeen’s most famous son, Kurt Cobain. A Nirvana fan, Mayor Larson was a toddler when Cobain took his own life. *John Hughes*

As the sun rises over Grays Harbor on a crisp October morning, Erik Larson and his brother place their decoys and rub the numbness out of their fingers. They’re crouched behind a duck blind. Sunlight flashes golden over the bay. Larson savors the moment, telling himself, “How lucky I am to live in such a beautiful place.”

In high school, Larson was an honor student and state champion swimmer. He graduated from high school and community college the same week in 2010. After earning a civil engineering degree at Washington State University, he did something out of the ordinary for a millennial who grew up in Aberdeen, an old timber town pundits have written off as dying: He came back home. Now, at 24, he’s the mayor.

Larson was elected in a landslide in 2015, capturing 71 percent of the vote against a former city councilman old enough to be his father. The two-term incumbent mayor—a contemporary of

Larson's grandfather—didn't even survive the primary. Records indicate that Larson, 23 when elected, is the youngest mayor of a sizable city in Washington state history.* Without question, he's by far the youngest in Aberdeen history. Larson oversees a city with a \$47 million annual budget and 176 employees. He is strikingly mature, articulate, boyishly handsome, clean-cut.

The mayor's Aberdeen roots are a century deep. His paternal great-great-grandfather, 19-year-old Paul Julius Larson, was one of the 1.2 million Swedes who migrated to America between 1870 and 1910. A hundred-thousand came to Washington state, and a thousand of those—mostly single men—high-tailed it to Grays Harbor County.

Arriving in Aberdeen around 1910, Paul Larson soon found work in one of the mills lining the waterfront. Their saws screeched around the clock, milling the knot-free Douglas fir lumber that rebuilt San Francisco after the great quake of 1906. Lumber schooners were docked up and down the Chehalis and Wishkah rivers. In 1920, Aberdeen was the state's eighth largest city, well ahead of Vancouver and twice as big as Olympia. Hoquiam, Aberdeen's twin, was No. 10.

The peak year at the Port of Grays Harbor was 1926, when two dozen sawmills cut 1.56 *billion* board feet of lumber. By then, Paul Larson was a lumber inspector for the E.K. Bishop Lumber Co. A proud naturalized citizen, Larson had a solid, unpretentious house and an industrious Swedish wife, Josephine Jonsdotter, who gave him four sturdy children, including the mayor's great-grandfather, Robert Larson.



The mayor's great-great-grandfather, Paul Julius Larson. *Larson family collection*

* Aberdeen's population is 16,896. The state's youngest ever mayor was Nicholas Bozarth, who at 22 in 2008 was elected mayor of Napavine, a Lewis County town with around 1,700 citizens. Wes Uhlman, an Aberdeen High School alumnus, was elected mayor of Seattle at 34 in 1969.

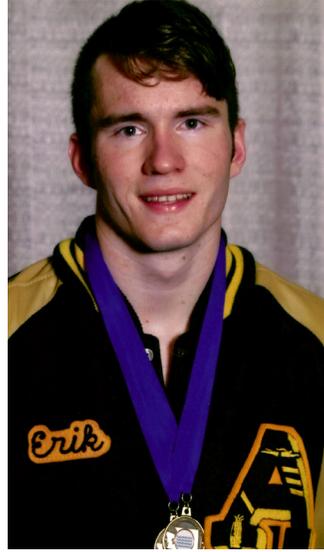
AFTER WORLD WAR II, Robert Larson left a plywood mill to become a partner in a new neighborhood tavern they dubbed Duffy's. The glory days of logging were over, though it took another 30 years for that reality to slowly play out. Duffy's thrived, becoming famous for pressure-fried chicken as it morphed into the area's most popular family restaurant. At Duffy's everyone knew your name. The mayor's enterprising grandparents, Ralph and Sue Larson, acquired the business in the 1970s and branched out to two other locations on the Harbor. The mayor's dad, the second Paul Larson, joined the company after graduating from WSU with a degree in hotel and restaurant management. Logger-size breakfasts with Swedish pancakes and Duffy's signature little wild blackberry pie kept the company afloat during the 1980s. On the Harbor, it was the worst hard time since the 1930s. Automation slashed mill payrolls while unprocessed logs were shipped to the Pacific Rim and the wily Canadians produced cheaper lumber.



Great-Grandpa Robert Larson, co-founder of Duffy's tavern. *Larson family collection*

The jobless rate in Grays Harbor County soared into double digits and stayed there year after year. The last blow was the most devastating: Set-asides for the endangered Northern Spotted Owl curtailed logging on public lands. Aberdeen lost nearly 12 percent of its population between 1980 and 1990. Then downtown was Wal-Marted. Just when things were looking up, the Great Recession hit. In 2010, when Erik Larson was setting a state record in the 100 freestyle as an Aberdeen High School senior, the unemployment rate on Grays Harbor spiked to 16.3 percent.

It was half that in the fall of 2016—though still twice as high as in King County and well above the state average—when the young mayor pondered his celebrity. Crosscut, the Seattle website billing itself as “News of the Great Nearby” for osten-



“He was swimming before he could walk,” his Grandma Sue remembers. Erik won two state swimming championships as an Aberdeen Bobcat in 2010, setting a meet record in the 100 freestyle. *Larson family collection*

sibly urbane readers, had featured a profile of Larson with a headline Grays Harbor folks viewed as Puget Sound’s typically patronizing view of its poor-relation colonies: “Can a millennial mayor save Kurt Cobain’s dying hometown?”

Alas, poor Kurt. Nirvana’s front man checked out at 27 in 1994 when Mayor Larson was a toddler. It took some City Council members and a lot of Aberdeen’s older generation several years to come to grips with the city’s status as a pilgrimage destination for Nirvana fans from around the world, Cobain having bad-mouthed Aberdeen, battled drug addiction and committed suicide. Forks had its vampires; the vampires had Kurt. A life-size, 600-pound statue of Cobain, shedding a kitschy concrete tear, languished for years in a local artist’s muffler shop. “There’s a difference between being famous and being infamous,” one Chamber of Commerce leader said, worrying that a city-sponsored memorial would send the wrong message to kids. “When he was famous, he was from Seattle. As soon as he kills himself, he’s that messed-up kid from Aberdeen.”

IN THE SPRING of 2016, boosters intent on restoring civic pride, paid for a new sign on the bluff at the city limits. Aberdeen, it declares, is the “Lumber Capital of the World.” Problem is, that’s demonstrably no longer true, as many have pointed out. No one denies, however, that the other Welcome-to-Aberdeen sign accurately reflects the character of a blue-collar town struggling to reinvent itself. “Come As You Are,” it says, reprising the title of a song written by Aberdeen’s most famous son. In the heart of downtown, there’s a striking new mural celebrating the birth of grunge rock. It features Kurt and his lanky Croatian bandmate, Krist Novoselic, two disaffected youth who put Aberdeen on the map and Nirvana in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The concrete Kurt was moved to the Aberdeen Museum of History in 2014, with Larson’s predecessor expressing the hope the museum will become, as a consequence, “as big as Graceland.” Larson, a Nirvana fan, isn’t counting on that.

Elvis, Kurt and the former mayor have all left the building. But is Aberdeen actually dying?

Homeless people still huddle in vacant storefront doorways, and the sad-eyed freelance hookers prowling the east end of the main drag keep a lookout for the cops and take refuge from the drizzle in bus-stop shelters. The mayor, City Council and police chief have been catching hell from business owners and citizens who say the city isn’t doing enough to deal with vagrancy. Larson observes that Seattle Mayor Ed Murray, who has Aberdeen roots, is dealing with the same challenge, just on a much larger scale. As for people living in cars and campers near the scenic riverfront walk, Larson tells a concerned citizen that the law ties his hands. All they have to do is move the vehicle a few feet every 24 hours. “And, after all,” he says, “who would live in a car if they had another choice?” If the state would provide adequate funding for mental-health programs, there would be a lot fewer people living beneath bridges, Larson says.

What’s clear, judging from a late summer Friday night, is that the rumors of Aberdeen’s death are exaggerated. The mayor and writer settle into overstuffed chairs in a busy new wine bar. The microbrew pub around the corner, next to the new bakery, is also buzzing. Two upscale restaurants down the



The mayor in downtown Aberdeen. *King-TV*

street are filling up, and a concert is upcoming at the handsomely restored D&R Theater. If many storefronts are still vacant, windows covered with peeling butcher paper, and the traffic outside is mostly headed for Ocean Shores or the tony new village of Seabrook, progress is apparent. Bulldozers are grading a long-vacant lot for a Tesla supercharger station. The trick will be getting the occupants of those pricey sedans and gull-wing SUVs to linger longer than it takes to recharge their batteries. In Aberdeen, a new Wendy's is still a big deal. The fact that Donald Trump carried Grays Harbor—for decades one of the most reliably Democratic counties in America—italicizes how left out Aberdeen feels.

“We’re growing like the national GDP is growing,” Larson quips, “at a rate so slow it’s almost unmeasurable. But we’re not dead yet and I believe there’s huge potential here. Which is why I came back home, and why I wanted to be mayor. Three years ago there was absolutely nothing happening downtown. We’ve still got a long way to go, but look outside: Every single parking space is full and you’ve got people out and

about, having a great time. Listen to the voices in this room. What it takes is enterprising people who can see past the doom and gloom. And some building owners were willing to take a chance and give people great deals to jump-start the revival of downtown. We have so many historic buildings. I think this is just the beginning.”

In 2016, James Fallows, the award-winning writer for *The Atlantic*, completed a three-year, 54,000-mile journey to assess “How America is putting itself back together.” Fallows came up with a checklist of traits shared by successful cities. The list underscores Aberdeen’s potential. It has a downtown with what Fallows calls “good bones”—classic Main Street-style structures built between the 1890s and 1940s. It also has a first-rate community college offering four-year degree programs. Further, Aberdeen “people know the civic story,” as Fallows puts it. The city takes pride in its resiliency and colorful history, which is replete with legendary saloons, soap-box orators, sensational unsolved murders and millworkers defying bayonet-wielding National Guardsmen.

Fallows points to another promising characteristic: “You can pick out the local patriots.” The first thing he’d ask when he arrived in a place was “Who makes this town go?” Sometimes it was a civic activist; sometimes a business leader, columnist, council member or the mayor. “What mattered was that the question *had* an answer.” At this writing, young Erik Larson has been mayor for less than a year, but a lot of people mention his name when you ask “Who makes this town go?”

IT’S LIKELY that no mayor in Aberdeen history has had as much literal grass-roots experience as Erik Larson. In the summer of 2011, he was a day laborer for the Parks & Recreation Department, mowing lawns and tending flower beds. “That’s probably the lowest position on the city payroll—summer help,” the mayor observes. His boss, Stacie Barnum, is now one of his department heads.

Growing up, Larson also pulled some shifts on the bottom rung of the restaurant business. “Dishwashing is a horrible job,” he says. “It teaches you the importance of finding

a good job! The worst part was the heat. You're wearing your undershirt, your Duffy's shirt and your apron—three layers of clothes. The steam is filling the room. You're sweating to death, and when the plates come out of the dishwasher they're like 180 degrees. You'll burn your fingertips if you don't hurry. You can't fall behind."

Larson admires what his grandfather and father have accomplished in the restaurant business, but joining the company never appealed to him. Fascinated by an uncle's career as an environmental engineer, he was always intensely curious about how things worked.

"Erik was born 35," his Grandma Sue says. "When he was 18 months old, I was holding him on my lap. He looked at the cookie jar on the counter and said he wanted two cookies. So I opened the jar and gave him two cookies. *Then he gave me one.* That is so unlike a toddler. He's just way beyond his years. He was swimming before he could walk. He mulls things around in his brain and comes up with his own ideas. And when he sets his mind to something, he does it. At Saint Mary's School they have an annual science fair. The younger kids don't have to take part, but when Erik was in the second grade he wanted to. He came home one day and said he was going to build a hovercraft. My dad had a workshop with all sorts of tools. So Erik designed a hovercraft and went up to my dad's place and cut the wood. At the science fair, all the kids were riding around on Erik's hovercraft!"

Erik smiles at the memories of growing up in a close-knit family, with grandparents right across the street and lots of independence. "I've always been a very independent person. I bought my first car for \$9,000 when I was in high school. My mom took out a loan at the bank because I wasn't old enough to have a loan. I made the payments, except during swim season. My attitude was, 'You can't punish me by taking this away because it's *my* car.' I hate not having the independence to make my own decisions."

There was little need to ever punish Erik, according to his family. He loved hunting and camping, learning early on how to safely handle firearms. Tall and strong, he quickly de-



The mayor at city hall, with an aerial photo of the city behind him. *Larson family collection*

veloped into a powerful swimmer, studied intently and took piano and violin lessons. He grew up listening to 1970s and '80s rock with his dad and tuned in to the MTV Top 10 countdown before school. His first concert was AC/DC's 2009 stop in Tacoma, but he was never tempted to trash a motel room during a swim team outing. Larson was a Running Start student at Grays Harbor College during his final two years of high school, excelling in math. Engineering came to him intuitively.

In 2012, before his last semester at Washington State University, Larson secured a summer internship close to home with the Vaughan Company Inc. of Montesano. Vaughan is one of the leading designers and manufacturers of chopper pumps for agricultural and industrial applications, with 40 worldwide patents. Management was mightily impressed with the young engineer's ingenuity. Larson graduated on a Friday and started work that Monday. In his spare time, he bought a house, coached a baseball team and enrolled in the civil engineering master's degree program at Saint Martin's University.

"So now I'm a property owner. I looked around at what was happening in Aberdeen. What I saw was that we weren't making the investments we needed to make to create the quality of life that adds up to a healthy community. I asked myself,

‘How can we build property values, create more tax revenue and then use those tax revenues to invest in ourselves? Where’s the ROI project that’s going to multiply the effect of the money we spend? How can we create change?’ There was this idea that every year the budget’s a little bit worse. There’s less money coming in, so ‘OK, we’re going to cut services to make up for that.’ But when you cut services you have worse streets and worse parks; the utility bills are higher; there’s fewer police and firefighters. *Those things matter.* So it becomes a less attractive community; people don’t take care of their property, and now you’ve got even less money the next year. Nothing is going to get better that way. If you don’t invest in yourself, no one else is going to.”

LARSON’S FRUSTRATION marinated for two years: “Nothing was changing,” he says. In the winter of 2015, when he told his parents and his grandparents he was thinking about running for mayor, they wondered whether he was aiming too high, or as his Grandma Sue put it, “One would think you’d run for City



Larson’s campaign signs sprouted all over town in 2015.



The campaigner.
Larson family collection

Council first.” One would. But Erik, as usual, had already explored that option. He admired the two bright women who represent his ward. “I didn’t want to run against either of them. In my mind, they weren’t part of the problem.” In fact, one of them, businesswoman Kathi Hoder, was herself weighing running for mayor. When she decided against it and gave Larson her blessings, he was off and running—with free advice from a seasoned political adviser.

Larson’s cousin, Tony Sermonti, is the policy and legislative director for the Washington State Department of Licensing. While attending The Evergreen State College, Sermonti volunteered with John Kerry’s presidential campaign. Three years later, he was on the primary trail with John Edwards, overseeing media relations and logistics. The stellar reviews Sermonti received from old-hand Democratic campaign operatives led to a post as an advance man with the traveling White House, handling press availability for President Obama, the First Lady and Vice President Biden. Sometimes he’d pinch himself and say, “I’m a kid from Aberdeen. What on Earth am I doing here?”

When the Larson elders beckoned Sermonti to a reality-check dinner with the prospective mayoral candidate, he was determined to be blunt. “It was sort of ‘Let’s see: Am I going to try and talk him out of it or go whole hog?’ It became clear very quickly it was whole hog. I told Erik, ‘If you’re going to do this, you’re gonna win! And you’re going to need to work hard or I’m not going to help you.’ Little did I know how hard he would work. We walked out of there as a solid family team. Erik and I became very close. Besides electing a visionary young guy as mayor, it’s also a story of reconnecting family, which is the most important part of it for me.”



Larson celebrates his landslide victory in the 2015 Aberdeen mayoral race at Duffy's, one of his family's popular restaurants. *Kyle Mittan/The Daily World*

The campaign was launched with a \$900 contribution from Larson family businesses and \$1,200 from Erik's savings. Beyond that, fundraising was no problem. Everywhere he went, people volunteered to chip in—young, old and in-between. The campaign cost \$8,500, expensive for an Aberdeen mayoral race, “but to people who've been active in politics that's nothing,” Larson says. He tapped into social media and installed a huge campaign banner on a prominent downtown building. Mostly, however, it was yard signs, doorbelling and the word-of-mouth momentum Larson achieved after capturing 54 percent of the vote in the primary.

“There was a lot of frustration with the city government,” Larson says. The nice-guy incumbent mayor, a retired JC Penney manager, had joined the City Council three years before Larson was born. The other mayoral candidate, a 60-year-old lawyer, was a polarizing figure. “I had a strong sense that people wanted someone new with new ideas,” Larson says. “The community was going to have to take a chance on me because obviously I had no government experience. There was nothing I could point to and say, ‘Here's an example of what I can do

for you. Here's my resume.' I'd never done anything in public service other than YMCA Youth and Government. And that's not something you should bring up in a campaign debate as an example of your leadership experience! Everybody's going to look at 23-year-old and go, 'OK, this person is not serious. It's great that he's getting involved but this isn't a real candidate.' I had to change people's minds. I felt that if I could get in front of someone and talk to them for 10 minutes they would at least realize I was competent. I might not have experience but at least I could understand the issues and make good decisions.

"I think there were two other things that really helped: One is that there's a large sector of the senior community that has seen nothing positive happen in Aberdeen for the past 30 years. I think those folks concluded, 'Well, it couldn't get any worse. We might as well give the kid a shot.' If I had a nickel for every time someone told me that, I'd have paid for the whole campaign right there. There was also a little bit of name recognition from my dad and my grandparents being so well known and respected in the community—and from my mom and her family as well. I had enough of a reputation that people felt I was intelligent and sincere. Some highly respected people backed me, so that was important to my credibility. But if you had told me in the beginning that I was going to win with nearly 72 percent of the vote, I wouldn't have believed it."

Sermonti wasn't surprised: "He's very mature for his age and he exudes poise. He was viewed as a change agent." Now comes the hard part: doing something. "Erik knows you have to do more than one thing at once. It comes around to public investment and buy-in. He's now the No. 1 cheerleader, and not just as the sash and bouquet. Aberdeen has been hobbled for so long by an inferiority complex. Erik is saying that it's OK to do nice things. It's OK to invest."

Long-term, Sermonti says, what Aberdeen needs is to get people Erik's age to come back home. "You get that critical mass of energy and ideas and stuff starts happening. But you have to make the investments first. I about died when I saw that 'Lumber Capital of the World' sign. The way it used to be is not the way forward. Erik understands all this."



Secretary of State Kim Wyman poses with Mayor Erik Larson and his family at the opening of the “Who are we?” exhibit at the Capitol. From left: the mayor’s parents, Paul and Karin Larson; his brother, Hunter Larson; his girlfriend, Kariann Penttila; the mayor, Wyman, and the mayor’s grandparents, Sue and Ralph Larson. *Ben Helle*

Erik’s brother, Hunter, two years younger, is doing his part. A Gonzaga graduate, he moved home from Seattle to take a new job with D.A. Davidson, the investment company.

ELEVEN MONTHS into Larson’s four-year term, the honeymoon was lingering, thanks in part to the novelty of his victory. Besides being young and smart, he is simultaneously persuasive and respectful. WSU should be arriving any day now to shoot one of those “Go Cougs!” commercials. If he succeeds as mayor, some believe he’s a natural for the Legislature.

Larson has mixed emotions about all that. On the one hand it’s “Whoa!” On the other, he understands making hay while the sun shines.

“When I was elected there was a lot of media coverage, and a lot of people around here were thinking, “This is the

most positive coverage we've received in a long time.' But the story isn't good unless I'm good," Larson says. "So the media have to make me look good regardless of whether I am. While that lasts, I can leverage my age to spotlight some progressive things. So far, I think people have been happy at least with the attitude change, but I still have to prove myself. People will expect results—actual changes that you can see and feel and experience."

One of Larson's role models is Elson Floyd, the dynamic WSU president who succumbed to colon cancer in 2015 at 59. Floyd inspired people with his warmth, vision and unflagging civility, Larson says. "He made you feel important and led by example. At WSU I was part of a national civil engineering competition. Afterward, the university's board of regents had their annual meeting and Dr. Floyd invited us to come and talk with them. He met individually with us before the event. What he projected was that he genuinely cared about every single one of his students. You can't fake genuine like that."

Larson's authenticity may be his strong suit. He's a good listener. He does his homework, understands the issues and avoids bureaucratic jargon. He's unfazed by 16-hour days. Usually at work as an engineer by 6 a.m., he heads to City Hall around 4 p.m. and often has meetings that last past 9. "You could make a case that it's an advantage for the city to have a mayor who's only 24," Larson says. "If I had a wife and kids, there's no way I could maintain that kind of schedule. It would be an exercise in futility." One thing is for sure: Larson is not in it for the money. Aberdeen pays its mayor \$13,094 per year.

LARSON IS NOW getting his first chance to help write the city's budget. He's pushing for a city administrator, noting that Aberdeen is the only sizable city in the state without one. The City Council's president is skeptical. Larson also wants three more police officers, two new corrections officers and a rental property inspector. The safety of the city's rental-housing stock, wood-frame construction with ancient wiring, dating to the 1920s and earlier, is of great concern to the mayor and his fire

department. More money for abatement of derelict properties is another of Larson's priorities. These steps will require no hike in utility or ambulance rates, Larson assured the council.

Another intriguing development is that Aberdeen, Hoquiam and Cosmopolis—Siamese triplets joined at the hip—are once again exploring the possibility of consolidating some key services. The idea has been raised practically every 20 years for a century. In the 1970s, in fact, Aberdeen and Hoquiam briefly consolidated their police departments before the plan ran afoul of bureaucratic snafus that slighted Hoquiam.* But Hoquiam now has a new young mayor of its own, 30-year-old Jasmine Dickhoff. And budget challenges. Public safety concerns are paramount for the leaders of all three cities. "It is imperative," they wrote in support of a comprehensive new study, "that we have a unified emergency management system that is responsive to both the day-to-day public safety needs of our communities and to the increasing challenges posed by rising costs and diminishing revenues."

Mayor Larson has high hopes for a proposed new tourist information and job-creation "enterprise" center at the west entrance to downtown. For better or worse, Aberdeen's main streets are also the state highway that funnels traffic to and from the beaches and the upper Olympic Peninsula. Downtown Aberdeen has been so threadbare for so long that there's little incentive for those panzer divisions of clam diggers and campers to stop and shop. New sidewalks, street lamps and hanging baskets brighten the corridor, but visitors still see vacant storefronts and, lately, a boarded-up, cut-rate motel that was home to an array of unsavory goings-on until the city and the Health Department forced its closure.

Look more closely, however, and you'll see the "good bones." Larson believes the rehabilitation of the city's landmark Morck Hotel and the construction of the "Gateway Center" could be the catalysts for a comprehensive revival of the city's historic downtown core. Built in 1924, "the Morck" was a source of civic pride until, like the Davenport in Spokane and

* One wag once observed that the surest way to achieve consolidation of Aberdeen and Hoquiam would be to get Aberdeen to agree to call the new city Hoquiam.

the Marcus Whitman in Walla Walla, it lapsed into seediness in the late 1960s. An ambitious renovation plan was derailed by a partnership dispute in 2007 and further stymied by the recession. The summer of 2016 brought signs that the project could be back on track. That would be a huge civic morale builder, Larson says. “Having a quality hotel as the hub of the city is important to our future.”

Grays Harbor always seems to be tantalizingly on the verge of landing a new industry or major business. It’s always one step forward and two back. Lately, the visionary yet mercurial investor who plowed major money into the historic D&R Theater and other downtown buildings has been sparring with City Hall over perceived slights.

Larson seems unperturbed. He refuses to let past history, foot-dragging and “predictable setbacks” dampen his enthusiasm. When he surveys his city he sees opportunity on practically every corner.

The stately Becker Building, the city’s tallest, stands virtually vacant a block from City Hall. “It’s a jewel with all sorts of potential,” the mayor says, emphasizing that the city needs to create a climate that promotes re-investment. “We haven’t seen much major investment in Aberdeen since about 1960. All of the major buildings that comprise our retail infrastructure are old. That’s a costly problem. Many are negative equity properties. If you paid a dollar you’d be paying too much. The remediation costs and upkeep costs are so high that it completely wipes out the project value. From a government standpoint, you look around and realize you’ve got all of these properties on your tax rolls that are worth negative dollars. Nobody’s going to invest in them and create opportunities until we can get that at least to zero. Somebody’s going to have to make up that difference—whether it’s the city or the county or the state and federal government providing funds to help mitigate that. I’m not saying we should throw good money after bad, but if making the city more livable is important, we’re going to have to face real-world realities and find ways to promote re-investment.”



Larson with Congressman Derek Kilmer, who has made economic development on Grays Harbor one of his priorities. *Larson family collection*

ERIK LARSON'S ENGINEERING mind envisions progress as a series of interlocking pieces, like rebar and girders. A new flood-control project is the foundation for much of what he envisions. Aberdeen and its west end are built atop dredge material and sawdust spaltz—scraps from lumber and shake mills. In the 1890s, rough and tumble Aberdeen was known as “Plank City.” Wooden sidewalks rose and fell with the tides. Over the past 40 years, storm drain and levee projects have reduced flooding in the low-

lying areas along the Chehalis, Wishkah and Hoquiam rivers. But Aberdeen still averages 84 inches of rainfall annually. A January storm at high tide can leave the city wet past its ankles. Sand bags are on standby all along main street.

Flood insurance has emerged as a major problem for Aberdeen and Hoquiam. The bureaucratic snafus that emerged from Hurricane Katrina caused flood insurance costs to skyrocket nationwide. The premiums are now at mortgage-level rates for folks in the blue-collar west end of Aberdeen. And you can't refinance or secure a home-improvement loan without buying flood insurance—sometimes twice as much as the house is worth. Aberdeen and Hoquiam are working with their congressman, Derek Kilmer, to secure funding for a comprehensive flood plain management program. “In certain areas we'll have new earthen levees, with a waterfront boardwalk,” Larson says. “There might be areas where we'll build a seawall or an aesthetically attractive, textured concrete wall to protect against the storm surge. And here's what's so important to future development: If you build a levee and get it certi-

fied, the flood insurance requirement goes away. I have people contacting me seeking help as the cost of flood insurance rises. It's a big impact on home ownership. I can't force the banks to give them a loan. I can't tell FEMA or anyone else to let them rebuild their homes at the current level. So it's frustrating—heartbreaking in fact. Until we fix that issue, we're not going to see any significant development." Larson and the City Council hope the voters will recognize that the cost of the bonds to build a levee will be less than the rising tide of flood insurance.

Larson and the staff at City Hall also are working with state agencies to ensure that the site where the pontoons for the new Lake Washington SR 520 floating bridge were constructed remains viable for another industry.

Though the area badly needs more jobs, the Aberdeen City Council unanimously adopted an ordinance banning crude oil shipments. The companies pushing the hotly debated plan are wooing Grays Harbor "because nobody else will take them," Larson says. "This wasn't their first choice, both for cost and environmental impact. And I don't think it's the best use of our rail capacity. We've already had a major oil spill in this area. Is this a great place to transfer oil through? A place that intersects wetlands? Probably not. You'd never be able to contain a major spill because the current in the rivers is too fast. By the time you deployed containment it's already in the bay. At the first low tide it's going to get in the mud. And you're never going to get it out. Would it create enough jobs and revenue to offset the risk? Probably not, in my mind."

The controversy over oil trains has overshadowed the importance of rail to Grays Harbor's future, Larson says. Rail, unquestionably, is a crucial piece of the infrastructure that has spurred the Port of Grays Harbor's rebound from the recession. "A lot of people feel the railroad isn't making enough investment in the Harbor area. But most people don't understand rail in general," the mayor says. "They're spending tons of money, and they need our support to replace some of their infrastructure. If that rail line goes down, we're done. If we don't have rail access to our port, the port's finished. And if the port's finished, it would be the death knell."



Larson (front) and his brother Grant duck hunting on Grays Harbor. “The sunrise is just beginning to appear on the horizon as I get to the blind,” Larson writes. “And I think to myself how lucky I am to live in such a beautiful place.” *Kyle Mittan/Washington Coast Magazine*

IT’S OFTEN SAID that “quality of life” begins with a decent job. The challenge facing Mayor Larson and the City Council is to leverage the Harbor’s natural assets—and affordability—to spur investment, without compromising the environment. Long gone are the days when Harbor-area folks characterized smokestack stench as “the smell of jobs.”

Most of the hundreds of thousands of visitors who pass through Aberdeen every year can’t see beyond the downtown grunge, Larson says, yet in the immortal words of Joni Mitchell Seattleites have paved their own paradise and put up a parking lot. Larson’s 15-mile “commute” to his job near Montesano is a lark while Puget Sound is gripped by gridlock. And the average house there costs \$500,000.

“A lot of people are getting tired of all that—especially people who want to buy a home and raise a family,” Larson says. “Increasingly many people are able to work from anywhere, and we can provide the quality of life they yearn for. We’re going to attract new business for the same reason if we

create the right incentives. But you can see the big ones by just looking around: the beaches, the rain forest, the natural beauty of the area. We're going to be well positioned for the future if we work together and invest in our city."

BACK AT the duck blind, Larson nearly has his limit by 10 a.m. Then he and his brother help their dad collect crab from the pots they placed in the bay two days earlier

For the mayor of Aberdeen, a perfect fall Sunday ends with a Seahawks game on TV at his house, with a few friends and a growler of local brew.

He doesn't have to say, "Come as you are." In Aberdeen that's understood.

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Legacy Washington
Office of the Secretary of State
Published in 2016



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