

Five Reasons to Believe

The future of Centralia is bright. To outsiders, the story of Centralia has been a sad one. A doomed coal town with high poverty, failing schools, catastrophic flooding – a script we all know. Yet, even in the darkest winters, dedicated Centralians kindled a light of optimism for the future and stoked that fire with their time and talents. They believed the future would be better and they were willing to work for it. Now, Centralia is on the cusp of a great transformation. In a flip of the old saying, you have to believe it to see it. Here are five reasons to believe in Centralia.

Reason #1: Economic vitality. Jobs are here, jobs are coming and people are investing in Centralia. These aren't the same old low wage jobs. The hydrogen valley is developing rapidly in Lewis County. Centralia is smack in the middle of it. Five different energy innovation companies are looking to locate at the TransAlta/IPAT site right now. We have an energy distribution infrastructure, a desirable location and local experts that continue to attract interest. Thanks to the Economic Alliance of Lewis County and Twin Transit for driving this concept. The Port of Centralia has started construction on the Centralia Station, anchored by Winco. You can see the revitalization around Mellen that started with Fiddlers Coffee and continues today with La Quinta and other developments. While the big dogs are definitely interested, equally important is the investment happening with small businesses all over town. Downtown Centralia has many new restaurants and stores (The Luxe being one of the more recent!) and have you seen what is happening on Main Street? Hello Sweet Dough Cookie Company and Fern Ridge Floral and Design! In 2022, Centralia welcomed 72 new businesses! And we have so many small business owners who have been here, investing in Centralia for years. Good Health just celebrated 30 years and Hubbub 17 years. I wish there was room to list every small business making good things happen here in town. The breadth of economic growth here is encouraging. I can't wait to see what happens next.

Reason #2: Education. Education is core to any community's health. Without a strong educational system, families won't move here. Have you noticed lately what is happening with education in Centralia? Dr. Lisa Grant is doing incredible work. She and our School Board members have added extra-curricular activities (elementary basketball!), recruited strong educators and are changing the culture in our schools. We have an active booster club in the CAAFF, constantly working to support our students and schools. Councilor Sarah Althaus and I recently attended Mr. Bligh's high school civics class. The students inspired us with their energy, intelligence and engagement. Over at Centralia College, we see increasing enrollment, new four-year degrees and a campus master plan coming to fruition that makes the campus a gem in Centralia. It is a gathering place for the whole community. Combine all of this with the promise of 20 years of operational funding for the United Learning Center, a growing Boys and Girls Club and the phenomenal Kiddin' Around team, and you can see that we create a child-centered educational pipeline that provides our youth with safe, nurturing places to be from pre-school through college or career readiness options.

Reason #3: Civics and Community. Community service thrives in Centralia. I am constantly amazed by the sheer number of dedicated volunteers and the creativity they bring into our community. How many communities have a Clean Team composed of people who pick up trash all over town on a regular basis? Or a Public Works Department that gives up a lunch hour each month to perform community service? We've added Pine Street Plaza and a Farmers Market downtown thanks to volunteers with a vision. Volunteers led the Greenwood Cemetery restoration. Our Christmas Tree Lighting event was epic this year thanks to the Centralia Downtown Association and Karen St. Clair - a volunteer who moved here

three years ago and is bringing her vision and creative spirit to share. We had Pride and Juneteenth celebrations in 2022 because community members made it happen. We have multiple service clubs contributing to our parks and helping others. Led by Mayor Pro-Tem Cameron McGee, Business Week was a partnership of multiple organizations working together for our high school juniors. A whole cadre of talented people volunteer on local Boards like the Fox Theatre, Centralia Downtown Association, Seminary Hill Natural Area and many, many more. This list wouldn't be complete without acknowledging our city team. We have a team of dedicated public servants truly working for the betterment of Centralia and not for themselves. I deeply admire their experience, professionalism and commitment to the public good.

Reason #4: Tourism. There is an increasing regional buzz about Centralia. In my day job, I am often asked where I live. For years, people would either not know where Centralia was or would say something about stopping for gas here while traveling. That is changing rapidly. I spoke to someone recently from Bainbridge Island. When he found out I was from Centralia, he started telling me how much he loves our City. He has a friend in Portland and they meet up at O'Blarney's regularly to watch the Patriots. Another person from Olympia told me that she and her husband love the feel of our downtown and come to Centralia on the weekends to find a new place to eat or shop. Just an idea 12 years ago, the NW Sports Hub now brings people in from around the region almost every weekend. We have a wide variety of event venues and a thriving arts community. We're making a name for ourselves!

Reason #5: Vision. With all this growth and possibility, we need to have a vision and plan so we grow into the City we want. Your City Council has a vision of a blue garland laced throughout the city where we use our waterways to connect neighborhoods with walking and bike trails. Imagine walking from downtown along the banks of China Creek to the Skookumchuck and then under I-5 by Plummer Lake over to Borst Park – all along a natural path. For a longer trip, you could start at China Creek Basin and make your way over to Discovery Trail on the northwest edge of town, meeting friends along the way. We want to create neighborhood hubs with central gathering areas where people meet for coffee, go to the salon or drop by the corner store to pick up a few items. As we grow, these neighborhoods will preserve our small town feel with neighbors knowing neighbors. We have a long way to go to make this vision a reality, but we know that hard work now will lead to a beautiful place for Centralians to live, work and play. Councilors Sarah Althaus, Elizabeth Cameron, Leah Daarud, Cameron McGee, Max Vogt and Mark Westley are all leaning into this effort. I feel fortunate to serve alongside them.

Now I know I said five reasons to believe, but I have to sneak one more in! Reason #6 is you, the people of Centralia.

Reason #6: Resilience, grit and helping hands. An outside consultant once told me she thought of Centralia as having "social density." What she meant is that our social fabric is knit tightly together. Not a day goes by that I don't hear a story of someone helping someone else in just an incredibly kind way. A local landlord helped a new shop owner out on a busy night so the owner could have a little extra time to spend with her kids. Another business owner is donating a service to a community member just out of appreciation for all the ways that community member makes Centralia better. The Shady Lady makes sure every local girl has a dress for homecoming. The outpouring of support for kids battling illnesses is love personified. Our community response to flooding was both expected and exceptional – in every possible way people looked for ways to help and just showed up and started doing. This is not a new

phenomenon for Centralia – it is built into our DNA. Centralia is a deeply caring community. It is one of the main reasons people love living here.

There are always problems we can identify and reasons to feel discouraged. But, what you believe will shape what you see. I'm here to tell you, Centralia's future is bright. We're thriving in multiple ways. We have the resources, ingenuity and drive to figure out any problem. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those that have worked so hard all these years to improve our town. Every day we're building on their legacy to create the future. They say if you want a happy ending, it depends on where you end the story. We're still writing ours. As we go into 2023, I'm confident it is a story of triumph and prosperity.