

The Oregonian

Volunteerism: Boosting the mileage

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Many vital organizations in Portland are fueled by volunteerism, but some waste this fuel. Volunteers need to be trained, sustained and channeled toward new challenges that fit their talents. Some organizations simply use volunteers -- and in the process, use them up.

Even in boom times, that's a spendthrift approach. When times are hard, and volunteers are needed more than ever, it's just plain foolish. That's why we were pleased recently to learn that two volunteer agencies in Portland have decided to merge forces.

Up to now, Hands on Portland has specialized in one-time and episodic volunteerism; VolunteerWorks has been a clearinghouse, matching volunteers with longer-term opportunities. By working together, these agencies should be able to identify one-time volunteers who might be interested in becoming something more.

Along with several other volunteer groups, they've already launched a Web site, www.volunteerhere.com, listing volunteer opportunities. They hope to develop a database and the ability to deploy 10,000 volunteers a year.

The Portland Parks Bureau dramatically shows how volunteerism can stretch an agency. The bureau, with about 365 full-time employees and 1,000 part-time seasonal ones, relies on the contributions of 10,000 volunteers a year, counting coaches and one-timers.

What's even more impressive, however, notes the bureau's Steve Pixley, is that 1,900 people volunteer regularly. They guide tours, teach recreation classes, deadhead or do other kinds of upkeep in Portland's gardens.

But these volunteers can't herd themselves. To effectively deploy them, the bureau has had to grow in its own expertise. And that, in microcosm, is what has happened all over America in the past two decades, as volunteering has become more engrained.

To see it take hold and win widespread approval has been wonderful, but capitalizing on the trend requires sophistication -- at a minimum, a "volunteer coordinator" or two or three, often as paid positions. Among other things, Portland's new combined volunteer agency plans to train volunteer project leaders and help nonprofits learn how to work with volunteers.

That's a real key to maximizing volunteering, since long-term volunteers are even more desperately needed. A decade ago, according to the Oregon Progress Board, 60 percent of

Oregonians volunteered. Today, it's more like 52 percent. Still, says Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands on Portland, that's better than the 44 percent U.S. average.

But surely Oregonians can do even better.

The beginning of summer is a great time to dip a toe into volunteering. Summer vacations take many volunteers out of circulation, so organizations are eager for the help. And summer is a great time for families to volunteer together, a trend that the new combined volunteer agency is trying to promote and encourage.

Or how about a birthday party that eschews all the regular hoopla -- and instead focuses on a volunteer project, followed by a water-gun fight or a slumber party? We can see it now: Parents trying to outdo each other, not on birthday party entertainment, but on cool volunteer projects kids can do.

Following the lead of this merger, Portland agencies can make even better use of a precious resource. A volunteer is a terrible thing to waste.