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providers in Oregon?

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Q4 2025

FEATURES

30 **Staying the Course** **Cover Story**

How Oregon nonprofits are weathering a chaotic year

39 **2025 100 Best Nonprofits to Work for in Oregon**

REGULARS

6 **Editor's Letter**

8 **Newsfeed**

12 **Tactics** Keely York, CEO of Thesis, talks about the current state of digital marketing.

16 **Profile: Dry Drinking** Portland's fast-brewing nonalcoholic beverage scene

22 **Spotlight: The Doctor Is Out** Why it's so hard to find a primary care provider in Oregon

58 **Powerlist** Credit unions ranked by total assets

60 **Downtime** Live, work and play with Treasure Valley Community College president Dr. Dana M. Young.

62 **Policy Brief** PR professional Kelliann Amico writes about why nonprofits need to embrace strategic communication.



Faith Dionne, maker of nonalcoholic beverage Dappled Tonic

16

BRAND STORIES

10 **WesternU** Oregon medical school to expand, change name to Heatherington College of Osteopathic Medicine.

14 **Marsh McLennan** Full-spectrum insurance agency helps protect mission-driven organizations.

20 **SeaPort Airlines** Northwest commuter airline makes crucial in-person meetings doable.

28 **GNSA** HR technologies that delivery strength and resilience to nonprofits of any size

56 **Oregon Community Foundation** The James Beard Public Market aims to help revitalize downtown Portland while creating a pipeline for wealth generation for entrepreneurial vendors.

CHECK OUT THESE EXCLUSIVES (AND MORE) ON **OREGONBUSINESS.COM**

■ **Amid a Challenging 'New Normal,' Portland's Design Community Reimagines the Downtown Waterfront**— Concepts involve splitting Tom McCall Waterfront Park in two, constructing temporary housing for homeless people and "re-wilding" a section of Salmon Street.

■ **Report: Downtown Portland Foot Traffic at Highest Level Since Pandemic**— Weekends are said to drive downtown activity, though office workers remain elusive.

■ **Rep. Dexter Hears From Tariff-Affected Small-Business Owners**— The Portland Democrat gets an earful about rising costs and unpredictable trade policy.



■ **In Conversation: Cascade AIDS Project's Edgar Mendez**— Cuts are 'permanently damaging' CAP's ability to provide services.



ON THE COVER

From left: Cecilia Estraviz, operations manager; CaSaundra Johnson, development manager; and Stephanie Barr, executive director of Lift UP Portland. See "The Hunger Games," p. 31

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Fly Away in a Day

SeaPort Airlines gets daily Portland-to-Seattle commuters home in time for dinner.

BY JON BELL

Back in early July, Kent Craford was driving north out of Portland on I-5 when he caught a glimpse of something that, in a way, only reinforced the case for his latest business endeavor: a miles-long traffic jam.

Over in the southbound direction, crews had closed a lane — mid day — so they could trim the cottonwood trees that line the highway. The resultant backup snarled traffic into a near standstill that stretched for miles between Woodland and Kalama.

"I mean, it's just ludicrous," says Craford, CEO of SeaPort Airlines, a reborn commuter airline offering daily flights between Portland and Seattle. "Those poor people. Some of them were coming from Seattle to Portland for business or vice versa, and they just added an hour or two to their trip, totally unplanned and unpredictable."

Fast-forward a week or two, and Craford was kicked back in one of the nine cush seats of a Pilatus PC-12 turboprop airplane, soaring past the snowy peaks of St. Helens, Adams and Rainier. The plane had taken off from the Atlantic Aviation terminal at Port-

land International Airport promptly at 9:26 a.m. It touched down not at the bustling Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, but at the library-quiet King County International Airport four miles south of downtown Seattle 41 minutes later.

Craford, a former lobbyist and political campaign director, took a meeting or two, extended an interview over lunch nearby, then hopped on a southbound PC-12 and was back on the ground in Portland by 3:30 p.m. — with plenty of time to make it home for dinner.

"These days, there's no truly reliable option to get between Portland and Seattle. The train, I-5, SeaTac, all of it is highly unreliable," Craford says. "We should be able to stand up a reliable, consistent, frequent and punctual transportation option



PHOTOS BY JASON E. KAPLAN

“Part of our business is predicated on the, I think, correct notion that those who are more successful and productive recognize the value of business travel and meeting in person. There’s just no doubt.”

KENT CRAFTORD, CEO, SEAPORT AIRLINES

between two major metropolitan areas. It is not a novel concept.”

In fact, SeaPort Airlines itself is not a novel concept. Craftord and several business partners initially launched the airline in 2008, but he left the following year after the business took off in a direction he didn’t agree with. It later landed in bankruptcy in 2016, but Craftord never lost sight of a future opportunity.

In 2011, he and some investors acquired a small commuter airline in Juneau called Alaska Seaplanes, which has grown into a fairly large regional service that, along with SeaPort and Island Air Express, boasts 300-plus employees and two dozen aircraft. He kept the focus on Alaska, all the while knowing that when the time was right, SeaPort would return.

That time came in May, when the airline, an entirely new, well-funded company, kicked off its daily commuter flights. It runs routes every 45 minutes during peak times, up to 24 flights per day. The cost per flight currently starts at \$279.

In addition to the short flight time, SeaPort also positions itself as a speedier, more convenient option than anything else, including other airlines.

“I call it a conveyor belt in the sky,”



Craftord said. “It’s like boom! You’re here. It’s like a time machine.”

Passengers, who need only arrive 20 minutes before their flight, can park for free at the terminals in Portland and Seattle, which are mere steps from the runway and the awaiting aircraft. There are no Transportation Security Administration checks or security lines, and upon arrival, it’s easy to hail a rideshare to get to a final destination. SeaPort also keeps passengers out of the ever-more-crowded and always-under-construction terminals at PDX and SeaTac.

“All of this airport infrastructure in this day and age, it’s all focused on how to make your suffering more comfortable,” Craftord says. “Let’s give you more lounges and more pretty stuff to look at while you’re waiting — and all the while, your most precious thing in life, your time, is just being burned away. And we’re here to say, no. Just leave all of that in the dust.”

About 17,000 people travel between Portland and Seattle every day, the vast majority up and down I-5. Craftord says

SeaPort hopes to capture just a small percentage of that traffic to really succeed. Some of that may come from adventurous folks who might not bat an eye at a quick day trip to Seattle or Portland, but the vast majority will be busy businesspeople who value their time. Even in the era of the perpetual Zoom call, Craftord believes in the enduring power of in-person business meetings — and SeaPort’s ability to make those happen.

“There’s always some new technology that is saying, ‘There’s an easier way. There’s a shortcut so you don’t have to travel,’” he says. “It’s always a siren song. As soon as you start ignoring the importance of the person-to-person connection, you’re falling behind. Part of our business is predicated on the, I think, correct notion that those who are more successful and productive recognize the value of business travel and meeting in person. There’s just no doubt.”

For more information, visit FlySeaPortAir.com.



SeaPort Airlines commuter flights from Portland to Seattle take about 41 minutes, and passengers need to arrive only 20 minutes before their flight. Plus, parking is free at the Atlantic Aviation terminal, where SeaPort Airlines takes off.