

RICHARD: One cause of polarization and political divides might be this: we simply don't spend enough time in the same room with people we work with, play with, or used to meet in person.

ASHLEY: That's part of what we learned in today's podcast with a conservative from a deep red district and a liberal from a decidedly blue part of his state.

RICHARD: They work together on bipartisan environmental legislation but only after they could meet face-to-face.

MARK KLICKER: What I've done with many of my friends in the environmental groups, they're personal friends of mine. We all think differently, but we can still all have many things in common, and that's really kind of the beauty of what we do.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. We're about to hear from two state representatives from Washington.

ASHLEY: Republican Mark Klicker and Democrat Alex Ramel. In the past year, they've worked together on a renewable energy tax bill that passed and has been signed into law.

RICHARD: Their work together came only after COVID restrictions on in-person legislative sessions and meetings in Washington State were lifted.

ASHLEY: Alex first became a state rep in early 2020. Mark's first term began a year later. We hear about why their proposal could be a win-win for environmentalists and rural communities in Washington that produce most of the state's renewable energy.

RICHARD: We also learn why their close working relationship was crucial to finding common ground, and there may be lessons here for others. Ashley kicked off our interview.

ASHLEY: Well, we're speaking to you both because you have found common ground on something that divides Democrats and Republicans, and that is climate change. Alex, you represent a blue district in western Washington State, and you've long been a climate advocate, right?

ALEX RAMEL: That's correct. I live and work in Bellingham, which is the very northwest corner of the state, and among other things, my district has a couple of oil refineries in it. And so a big priority for my community, my district is trying to find practical solutions to address climate change.

RICHARD: And your district is pretty blue, and many of your constituents have strong feelings about the threat of climate change, right?

ALEX RAMEL: Absolutely. It's definitely an issue that comes up in all of the forums and sort of just comes up, and the district clearly wants to elect somebody who's focused on positive solutions for what we can do to confront the climate crisis and turn the tide.

ASHLEY: Mark, what about you and your district in southeastern Washington?

MARK KLICKER: I'm completely on the opposite end of the state in a farm community, Walla Walla, and it borders Oregon and Idaho. As I said, it's heavily a farming and ranching community with a lot of grapes, as well. It's a very conservative area. My family migrated to the area in 1861 on my mom's side. My dad's side of the family migrated in 1891. So we've been there for a long time, very deep-rooted communities, and so that's kind of how it's been for generations.

RICHARD: So, Mark, your area around Walla Walla, Washington is red, and Alex's district is blue. How do you think about the environment and climate compared to Alex and those who voted for him?

MARK KLICKER: People look at it in different ways, so you look at Alex's side, as population growth in that area, a lot of people are looking at it one way. In our area, there's not much population growth. We look at it in a different way. But the thing is there sometimes becomes a wall in between us, and we can't recognize how the others are thinking, and how that was formulated over the years, I really can't put my finger on it.

ASHLEY: Alex, you and Mark first met not in person but online nearly three years ago. That was in the middle of COVID.

ALEX RAMEL: At the beginning of the 2021 legislative session, Washington did an entirely online, basically Zoom-based legislative session. We had never met in person before that. And we served together on a couple of committees, and I think it's probably safe to say we did not find a lot of common ground in those first couple years being on a screen interacting because through the sort of formal part of the legislative process, you can do pretty well over Zoom. The actual conversations that happen on the way into and out of those meetings are incredibly important, and we had none of those. So we found a lot of things to disagree about and not a lot of things that we could find common ground on.

RICHARD: Alex, be frank with us. What did you think of each other online? I mean, personally.

ALEX RAMEL: Well, personally, I thought Mark was kind of a grumpy person. I imagine he probably thought similarly of me, too, right? We found a lot of things that we were disagreeing. We voted no on each other's stuff a lot of the time.

RICHARD: And then, after almost two years, you ended the Zoom sessions for state legislators and resumed in-person meetings?

ALEX RAMEL: Exactly. We had a committee meeting in November of last year, and on the way out of that meeting in the hall, Mark comes over and shakes my hand, and we never met in person, I don't think. And people are just totally different in person. You can kind of tell online, but he's got a big smile, really warm. He was very excited to say hi. It just totally changed the impression I had of him, and he said some things about finding things to work together in that discussion, and I was like, "Oh, I got to file that away for —you know, is there an opportunity to find something to work together on?" I think that introduction, being back in person, seeing body language that you don't pick up on the screen made a big difference.

ASHLEY: Mark, what do you remember? Were you really excited to be back in real life?

MARK KLICKER: I was really excited. In fact, I was so disappointed when they decided to hold it completely, 100% virtually. To me, it was almost disastrous because I think that we could've really had a

fantastic couple sessions those first two years. And Alex nailed it. I mean, when you look at each other across the screen, not across the aisle, it is so hard to earn and learn the trust in each other. And so here I'm looking at this guy that I do not trust this guy. You know, he doesn't smile on there or anything. Well, none of us did because we were working. It was business. None of us really wanted to be on virtually. So it was very difficult. It doesn't matter what occurs in legislation. It is so different, and it was such a learning experience, the difference between virtually and being in-person.

So when we got back into session this last year, it was like going to Disneyland. It was great. People got to see each other. The freshman class behind all of us, they were able to meet in orientation. They got to know each other. They were working together. There were friendships built. We never had that chance. So now we have this opportunity this year, and we did it, and that was the time to reach out. It's been great, really has.

RICHARD: I think both of you are making a more fundamental point. The time of COVID when our relationships were confined largely to being online was really bad for finding common ground and did real damage and that perhaps now we're in a more hopeful time when it comes to reaching across the aisle. What do you both think about that?

MARK KLICKER: I think that's true, and I'd push it one step further, perhaps. I don't have experience working in Washington, D.C., but I think that a lot of communication between the parties happens through a different filter. It's not Zoom, but it's through TV or through talking points to the media, we find out where the other side is. And I don't think that that form for communication is conducive to finding common ground and building trust, either. It really laid it out clearly how dangerous it can be, I really believe dangerous, that if we went strictly to virtual —look what we see in the school systems. Look what we see with companies and everything else.

I think part of that is getting people back to work, and I think we saw that in the legislature this year. I think it was really critical that we were able to meet in person and build that trust up again, and we're seeing this lack of trust in Congress right now, that nobody trusts each other whatsoever, and sometimes you just have to work and find solutions where you can work together. You can disagree, be completely on the far end of the spectrum, and Alex and I are about as far apart as you can be, but if you can start finding some common ground on little things, maybe we can work to find common ground in the middle somewhere.

ASHLEY: So you're now back meeting each other in person during legislative sessions. How did that help push forward your work on the renewable energy tax bill? Let's start with you, Alex. You're in western Washington State, which is much more heavily populated than where Mark is.

ALEX RAMEL: Well, I think the big thing that we were looking for was some ways to address some of the challenges related to clean energy siting. In the eastern part of Washington State, there's more sun and more wind and more opportunity for developing wind farms and solar farms. And I think we've heard concerns from some of the communities where those projects are potentially going, but one of the big ones is the tax revenue and the economic development opportunities from those projects aren't coming into those communities as much as they might hope. To me, that is a problem that has a solution. And so it was trying to think through for a couple of years what change in our property tax policy towards those systems could look like.

RICHARD: So what did you come up with?

ALEX RAMEL: In short, the idea is that we would exempt some of the property tax that currently goes to the state for wind and solar development, collect an alternative tax for approximately the same amount, and then make sure that money goes to the local county, the local school districts, and local Native American tribes.

RICHARD: So there was a what's-in-it-for-me factor that you may not like the way a solar farm looks on the landscape, but at least if there's something in it for the local community, more money for schools, more money for public safety, more money for the community from the state, then there's a reason to go, "Okay, maybe we should have this." Is that right?

ALEX RAMEL: Yeah, I think that's part of it. It is separating out a list of concerns and saying, "These are concerns that we can address." And so one of the big ones was our community doesn't see economic benefit from these projects, and that's a problem we know how to solve. So we're trying to figure out what are those list of problems that folks are raising, and how do we address them systematically?

ASHLEY: Democrat State Representative Alex Ramel who represents the 40th District in the Washington State House of Representatives. His district is blue.

RICHARD: And Mark Klicker from Walla Walla, Washington represents the mostly conservative 16th District.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We're getting very close to publishing our 100th podcast, and we're proud of the common ground stories we've been sharing. They're different from the clashes, controversies, and contests that we hear so much about in the media.

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RICHARD: Now more with Washington State Representatives Mark Klicker, Republican, and Alex Ramel, Democrat.

ASHLEY: During our interview, Mark Klicker told us he learned about the importance of finding common ground during years of working on water quality in the region where he lives in southeast Washington.

MARK KLICKER: It goes back about 24 years. The National Marine Fishery Service implemented these rules for some of our waterways, rivers, riparian areas along the Columbia/Snake Rivers and tributaries going into that to create water quality and water quantity. And some of the farmers, over the years, have

irrigated many of these rivers dry. And so the salmon habitat was basically extinct. There was no salmon left because in the summer months, there was no water. But farmers needed to preserve their water rights, but they were using all the water, and the water flows just weren't making it down for the salmon to migrate.

So an environmental group came in and filed a litigation against farmers within our valley in both Washington and Oregon, and it started the movement that we had to do something. So we came together at the local level where we had environmentalists, farmers and ranchers, the tribal community, government —both federal and state, local governments and businesses, and we had a confluence. We met for two days, and we started hashing out what we did, what our life was like, our different backgrounds. Then we started working about what we needed to do in our future and laying out some long-range planning.

So over a 24-year period, we created what they call the Walla Walla Way. We have created friendships between environmentalists and farmers. In fact, whenever we're working on a solution to take on any of the environmental causes, things that we need to do locally, the environmentalists say, "Well, we need to do it, but we have to make sure the farmers and ranchers are able to financially be able to make it through it or they can make money on it." And then the farmers say, "We need to do something to make sure we can wear the white hat, create the hotel for those fish to come up because we want to" —so we are working in unison together.

Just recently, this last year, we had a legislative bill for the Walla Walla 20/50 Plan that would take water mitigation between the tribes, the farmers, and the state with the Department of Ecology to enhance the rivers and make sure that we have plenty of water and the quality of water coming down those rivers. So it just continues to grow, and we create trust within each other, and that's what I think Alex and I are able to start doing here within the state.

RICHARD: In a couple of sentences, Mark, could you just tell us what you think of or what you say when people ask you, "What is the Walla Walla Way?"

MARK KLICKER: It is coming together and creating a mindset of working together. I think that, in one sentence, is how I would say it. So there's still the arguments and difference of opinions and ideologies, but we still find solutions and work it out. That's what the great thing is, within our valley, anyway, and I would like to see that throughout the state of Washington if we can do it.

ASHLEY: And Alex, the renewable energy tax bill that you worked on with Mark passed, correct?

ALEX RAMEL: It did. It did. I really want to credit Mark for the time that it took to look into it, right? I think part of the difficulty when you're working across the aisle is you don't start off with a ton of trust. On a bill that's reforming tax code, there's infinite number of details, any one of which you could disagree with or could be a pitfall to reaching agreement. It took some time and attention, which is always in short supply, to reach that conclusion. Then, once he had done that, that was a little bit, I think, of an open door. Other Republicans signed on in support.

MARK KLICKER: And I could say that, you know, hats off to Alex. He did not need to do this. They have the majority within the legislature. They can push through anything they really want, and he stepped across and presented that to me. So Alex taking the time to come over and say, "Hey, let's start working on solutions," that's a huge step, a huge step.

RICHARD: So your bill, which is now law, will provide tax incentives for local communities to say yes to wind and solar projects because they'll get some tax revenues. Mark, share with us a case study of how that might work.

MARK KLICKER: For example, we have a little town in southeast Washington called Pomeroy, Washington. It doesn't even have a traffic light down the main street. And the community is really struggling. A number of farmers have an opportunity to get some leases on putting in some wind farms, but a lot of the community and the other farmers are not happy with it. They're against it because, to them, it'll ruin their [00:20:40]. But something like this would help that community bring in more business, help in the schools, hopefully maybe eventually the hospitals or the rest of the economy. So even though they're not for it, if it happens to be the case, and they do go in, they're at least seeing some reprieve out of that.

RICHARD: This bill and coming together, both of you working on it, one conservative Republican, one liberal Democrat, what lessons have you learned that maybe you're going to apply to the future or advise other colleagues on when it comes to making progress?

ALEX RAMEL: Well, I guess a couple of things. As Mark mentioned, though, in Washington State, we've got a Democratic majority in both the House and the Senate, and our governor is a Democrat. So, in one sense, you could say, well, we could do whatever we want. We don't need them. But the truth is that because time is limited, when you frontload that effort to find common ground, and we modified the bill to make sure that Mark and his team were enthusiastic, and doing that work meant that when it came time to run the bill in committee, when it came time to pass the bill on the floor, there was support from both sides. That means that you spend less time arguing about it or disagreeing and debating. So, even in a situation where one side is in the minority, they have the ability to encourage those changes because when we find that common ground it is easier and less time-consuming for us to get things done.

Also, we're all people, and we like getting along with each other for the most part, and when you pass a bill over top of strong disagreement from the other side, it takes an emotional toll. It takes more energy, where if you can do something that everybody is enthusiastic about, that feels good and is more exciting and empowering. So I think there's a real benefit to doing it even if you don't have just from a counting-the-votes perspective.

MARK KLICKER: Yeah, and don't we all want the same thing? It's just how we go about it. We all want clean air. We all want clean water. We all want safety, and we all want to be healthy. Sometimes everybody has a different way of going about it, and then sometimes you get your ideologies, and then we've created a wall on: how do we get there? So how do we break that wall down, and how do we have everybody come to the same mindset, at least agree? Sometimes you have to agree on little things to agree on bigger things, and I think that's how we really need to get started.

ALEX RAMEL: One of the things that I think is sometimes missed because just of the way that the lawmaking process gets covered in the newspaper, the stuff where there's big disagreements, that's the stuff that gets covered. That's the stuff that gets attention, that draws clicks, and it's one of the things I appreciate about what you're doing with this podcast is drawing attention to the things that are —you know, there wasn't an argument about it, but it is important.

ASHLEY: Switching back to the personal for a minute, when you go back to one of the first times that you met in person to now, I know it's only been a year or so, how would you say your relationship has changed? Would you describe yourself as friends, friendly?

ALEX RAMEL: I would say Mark's a friend. During the process of this bill, we had a lot of occasions to talk, and we serve on a couple of committees together, as I mentioned, bump into each other in the halls on a regular basis, and at one point, I invited him over to my office, and we met after hours and had a chance to have some longer conversation and just kind of get to know each other. And I'm very much looking forward to finding more things that we can work on together in the future.

MARK KLICKER: Well, this next year, when we can kind of get everything together, I think Alex and I are going to probably get together more, and even if we don't do legislation or anything else, you build those friendships. It just reminds me so much, when I say the Walla Walla Way, what I've done with many of my friends in the environmental groups, they're personal friends of mine. We all think differently, but we could still all have many things in common, and that's really the beauty of what we do.

ALEX RAMEL: I will also note that Walla Walla has a number of fine wineries, and Mark's encouraged me to come down and visit him and go do some tasting, as well.

MARK KLICKER: He'll taste the wine, and I'll taste the beer.

ASHLEY: I noticed the wine, as well. I love Washington wine.

MARK KLICKER: Well, come to Walla Walla. It's a fun place.

RICHARD: State Representatives Mark Klicker —

ASHLEY: —and Alex Ramel, working together to find common ground.

RICHARD: You know, when we planned to do this interview, Ashley, we thought that most of our conversation was going to be about their innovative proposal that concerns tax incentives for wind and solar.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and then they told us how they'd met and why in-person meetings made such a crucial difference to getting things done.

RICHARD: Yeah. Face-to-face contact could help overcome many other divides. Let's hope so.

ASHLEY: Absolutely. That's our podcast for this week. Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee.

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ASHLEY: 53555 and then CGC. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

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