

Kozowski seeks change in sheriff's office

By Craig Rullman
Correspondent

Two candidates will face off this November in an election to decide who will be Deschutes County Sheriff. Eric Kozowski is challenging appointed incumbent Shane Nelson for the post.

Kozowski is passionate about his reasons for running for sheriff, citing what he considers a culture of nepotism inside the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office which has, in part, led to a string of recent high-profile firings and resignations among the command staff — and no shortage of public embarrassment.

For Kozowski — who told *The Nugget* that if he is elected, "The public would see very little change" from the outside — this season's campaign is focused on improving conditions inside the DCSO.

Kozowski, married for 25 years, with a daughter in college, is an Oregon native, and has served with DCSO for six years as a patrol deputy, after an impressive career at the Wallowa County Sheriff's Office, where he was in part responsible for obtaining the agency's largest-ever grant, \$350,000, to overhaul the county communication system.

While at Wallowa, Kozowski also rebuilt the agency's reserve deputy program, and was the lead investigator on several high-profile criminal investigations — including a double-homicide that resulted in a conviction.

Prior to working for Wallowa County, Kozowski co-founded an information technology company serving

Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Western Montana, which was eventually acquired by IT giant NTT. He also served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a combat engineer.

Kozowski believes many of the DCSO's current problems are the result of a failed leadership culture and "good old boy" network that has existed inside the agency for years, pointing to the recent firing and arrest of Scott Beard, a former DCSO Captain.

"If you want to get any-

“They (the employees) know where the problems are, and they know how to fix them.”
— Eric Kozowski

where (inside DCSO) you have to ride on somebody's coattails. A lot of the employees are so frustrated with that situation, hard working people who do the job well, who get passed over time and time again," he told *The Nugget*.

On the current Sheriff's handling of the recent string of resignations and firings: "I was hoping beyond hope that Shane was going to be the guy to start making significant changes, starting July 1 (the day Nelson took over as Sheriff from previous Sheriff Larry Blanton). I've always liked him, he's a nice guy, personable."

But Kozowski cites a marked lack of transparency in the investigation, which now includes the discovery

that Beard's background file is missing.

"Nothing's changing," says Kozowski. "He's only addressing things he's forced to address."

Kozowski cites inefficiencies in the Sheriff's office that he would change as Sheriff, pointing specifically to the ratio of supervisors to deputies, which currently stands at one supervisor for every three employees.

"Where, anywhere, does that make sense?" Kozowski asks, saying that this ratio is "bloated," and "not a wise use of our money," and contributes to a culture of "over-supervision" of subordinates inside the department.

That over-supervision, Kozowski says, has led to a progressive decline in morale within the agency.

With 80 percent of the sheriff's budget dedicated to personnel, Kozowski says the ratio is also evidence of fiscal irresponsibility.

"Having so many supervisors is costing us roughly \$600,000 annually ... that money translates into six deputy positions, or obviously, more support positions. It's just not fiscally responsible, we have supervisors trying to justify their existence."

On the subject of Sisters and the City's current contract for law-enforcement services, Kozowski told *The Nugget* he believes that in some ways rural residents are being short-changed in services, with deputies required by the contract

to spend three-quarters time in Sisters itself. He believes that requirement may be reducing response times in both directions, as deputies are often tasked to provide backup outside the city limits.

As sheriff, he would re-evaluate how the department's patrol districts are aligned, seeking out inefficiencies in the current deployment program.

When asked about average response times in Sisters itself, Kozowski indicated that outside of the department's computer-aided dispatch, the numbers aren't likely tabulated regularly.

For Kozowski, the problems with the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office are largely internal, but he also believes the solutions can be found there. He refers to the many hard-working deputies, and civilian support staff.

"What we all want is a good, healthy, fun place to work that serves the citizens well. We have a lot of good employees, but we are all seeing the same thing (regarding misconduct). How are these people getting into these positions?"

For Kozowski, the necessary resources are already in place, it is proper leadership that is lacking.

"They (the employees) know where the problems are, and they know how to fix them. But I don't think anybody's ever asked them," he said.

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