

Cook seeks Position 1 on county commission

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

When James Cook settled in Redmond in 2010, he took an immediate interest in his community. Living near Dry Canyon, he became involved with the Dry Canyon Master Plan Update Committee, which led to his most recent public service role as chair of the Redmond Urban Area Planning Commission.

The Democrat candidate for Position 3 on the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners is seeking to expand his service to a county-wide role.

Cook sees housing and transportation as key issues as the county copes with an influx of people who want to share in the region's natural beauty and lifestyle. He acknowledges that "Oregon land-use laws somewhat limit that ability of the county to address (the housing) issue."

However, he favors providing county-held lands for pilot projects to create more workforce housing in the region. He notes that the county has virtually no holdings in the Sisters area for such projects.

And, he says, "urban growth boundaries are going to have to expand" to account for growth, and he sees a big role in the county for helping to guide how such expansions shape up.

"I think transportation is going to be a huge issue going forward," he said, including public transportation options between Bend, Redmond and Sisters.

He's willing to see the county make some investment in that direction.

"I think if we can contribute financially in a way that makes sense to increase ridership, I think that's a good thing," he said.

Cook notes that the county will have to work with other entities to make public transportation truly an effective means of getting people to work and other activities in the region.

"We need to figure out that last mile to get people to their jobs, to get people to their homes, to make public transportation really work," he said.

Cook sees fiscal responsibility as a matter of "when you spend money, you get value for that money."

Regarding the compensation packages for county staff, Cook believes using western Oregon counties for salary comparison was appropriate.

"The obvious logic is, that's who we compete with for employees," he said. "I don't think our salaries are out of line. I think that's required to get and keep good employees."

Cook told *The Nugget* that he does not see an area of the county's budget that he would cut. He notes that reserves are always an easy target, but prudence dictates healthy reserves be set aside when things are good so that they can be tapped when things go bad, as they did during the Great Recession that started in 2008.

"Those reserves are going to help us get through that without cutting services," he said.

Cook believes that asking questions is a key element of the commissioners'

job. Widely reported difficulties in standing up the countywide 911 system are an example.

"What looked to be a big financial savings is not turning out to work the way we wanted it to or expected it to," he said.

He is concerned that the county did not — and still does not — have the technical expertise in-house to evaluate such complex projects. He says commissioners have to be diligent about asking questions in such circumstances.

"We should have known what we were buying, and you do that by reading and going to the lawyers and saying, 'What does this mean?'" he said. "I've been a squeaky wheel in Redmond quite a bit and I don't have a problem doing that at the county level."

He also doesn't believe in being a squeaky wheel for its own sake. Now, he said, the focus has to be on fixing dead spots and making the system work effectively.

"Then we have to go back and ask two things: How did

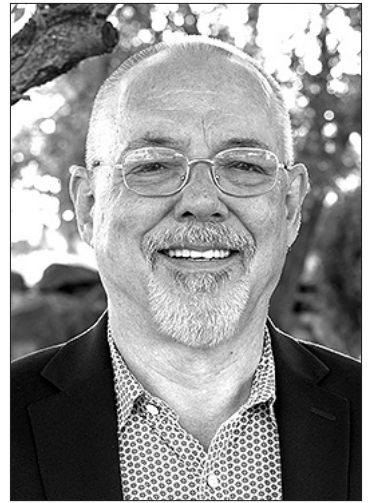


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James Cook is contending for a seat on the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners.

this happen? And how do we make sure it never happens again?"

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Habitat seeks new Thrift Store home

Sisters Habitat for Humanity may end up with a new home for its thrift store operation, which is currently located on Main Avenue in Sisters.

Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Sharlene Weed acknowledged that the organization has been in discussions regarding the former site of Sisters Drug and Gift on the corner of Cascade Avenue and Fir Street.

However, she notes that the acquisition of the property, which would house the Thrift Store but not Habitat Restore is not "a done deal."

In response to a Facebook

post on the matter, Weed said, "Not quite a done deal but an exciting opportunity that we are pursuing. We are still in negotiations but very hopeful. The owners are doing all they can to help us. If it does go through it will be for the Thrift Store only. We will look toward a permanent home for the ReStore next year."

The Sisters Habitat Thrift Store deals in clothing and the like, while ReStore handles appliances and furniture and other large items. Both operations are key fundraising programs for Sisters Habitat for Humanity's home-building program.