

Multiple candidates seek commission seat

By **Jim Cornelius**
Editor in Chief

Phil Henderson will seek to keep his seat on the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners next November.

Democratic party voters will choose who his rival will be for the seat in the May 19 primary. Phil Chang, Greg Bryant and Ron Boozell are vying for the nomination.

Henderson, a Republican, has held the seat since his election in November 2016. He told *The Nugget* that, for the foreseeable future, the commissioners are going to be thoroughly absorbed in response to and recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It has identified, I think, a need in our county to have a more rapid ability to respond to a health situation,” he said.

The economic fallout of the shutdown enacted to slow the spread of the disease can’t be fully calculated yet, but it is sure to be severe — perhaps representing a blow equal to or greater than the recession that slammed the region a decade ago.

“I don’t know if we’re back to 2008-09 or not,” he said.

The economy will affect everything from land use to wildfire mitigation, he said. Henderson pointed to important strides on the wildfire

defense front, where he serves on the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Council. He noted that the prescribed burning program designed to provide community protection has been put in abeyance due to the pandemic. He said that Sisters needs to see more acres treated in order to maintain protection.

Henderson acknowledged that housing — especially workforce housing — has become an acute issue in the Sisters area.

“I support expanding the urban growth boundary when it’s necessary,” he said. “in general, there’s a shortage of housing in Deschutes County. For so many people, it’s unaffordable. We’ve got to open that up.”

Henderson, who has a background as a builder, said he also supports modifying requirements regarding non-resource rural land to allow for different uses and some housing uses.

“The whole prosperity of our county has a foundation in that we’re interspersed with farms and housing,” he said. “I believe in that.”

Phil Chang helped create the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project and served for several years as Senator Jeff Merkeley’s field representative in Central Oregon. The long-time Bend resident said that he is running for

the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners because “it’s a place where I thought I could plug in my experience and do some good.”

Chang has a strong interest in issues around managing growth.

“If we don’t grow well, housing availability decreases, traffic gets worse, we lose our wildlife and our quality of life decreases,” he said.

Chang believes in land-efficient, pedestrian-and-bike-friendly mixed-use development, which he believes is applicable (and happening) in Sisters. He thinks that the current commission is interested in challenging state land-use laws, which he thinks is a mistake.

“Allowing more rural subdivisions is not the way to go,” he said.

Chang sees transportation as a significant issue for the Sisters community, especially for seniors.

“The county has not made meaningful investments in the Cascades East transit system,” he said. “I believe that if we’re going to have good mass transit connectivity throughout Central Oregon, the county is going to have to step up and make it happen.”

Chang believes that the county needs to invest more in services for members of the community — and that those

investments are cost-effective in the long run.

“I think you can be fiscally responsible, but you can also be fiscally strategic,” he said.

Chang acknowledged that the financial impacts both on the economy and on government budgets will have a significant impact on what can and should be done over the next commissioner’s term of office.

Greg Bryant moved to Bend seven years ago to retire. As vice president of the Deschutes River Woods Homeowners Association, he has attended many commission meetings and he said he “didn’t necessarily like the direction they were going, so I decided to throw my hat in the ring.”

Bryant is particularly concerned with accelerating wildfire protection activities.

“They do a great job of keeping the fire fuels down, but I think that’s got to be done more because, with

climate change, I think we’re going to have drier summers and less water,” he said.

Bryant said he is also keenly interested in transportation issues, though he indicated that he does not have specific knowledge of the transportation situation in the west county. He acknowledged that there is tension between the desire to move traffic through the Highway 20 corridor and the desire of Sisters businesses to get that traffic to stop here and shop and dine.

Bryant believes his professional background as an accountant would be helpful to the county in making county departments as efficient as possible, as the county faces the potential for a deep fiscal crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’ve been through recessions,” he noted.

Candidate Ron Boozell declined a phone interview with *The Nugget*.

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