

# Henderson seeks second term as commissioner

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

Phil Henderson believes his track record as a Deschutes County Commissioner should earn him the votes for a second term in Position #2. He is running for re-election November 3, against challenger Phil Chang.

Henderson cites his work on resolving problems with a new 911 radio system, efforts to promote affordable housing, and forest management as areas where his efforts have given value to the citizens of Deschutes County.

## HOUSING

The commissioner acknowledged that the Sisters area and western Deschutes County are different in some ways from other areas of Deschutes County. The county owns little land in the area, which takes leveraging county lands for affordable housing off the table here. But Henderson believes his approach to land use could help Sisters provide for more housing.

Henderson is an advocate for allowing for more housing in rural areas whose current farm or forest zoning would not allow for it — areas that are “zoned one way and it’s really not usable that way,” as Henderson puts it.

“I think our land use system is kind of archaic,” he said.

He advocates for “allowing rural residents to have accessory dwellings. Accessory dwelling units would be a great place for someone to rent out to someone who’s working in Sisters, or a family member who wants to live there,” he said.

He noted that the county will play a major role in helping the City of Sisters to determine where and how to expand its urban growth boundary during the comprehensive plan update that is just now getting underway.

“We need to have places that people can live in and own for less than \$300,000,” Henderson said. “Young people are buying houses that are really expensive.”

The commissioner does not believe modification of land-use policies will lead to urban sprawl.

“Eighty percent of our county is publicly owned anyway, so we’re not going to lose that feeling of openness, of ruralness.”

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

The commissioner is pleased with the “good contract” between the City of Sisters and the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office, which provides for deputies who serve only in the Sisters area. He said the county is committed to having a law-enforcement presence that is well-integrated into the

Sisters community, which is evidenced by the county purchasing the building that houses the local sheriff’s substation.

Henderson says he does not see a strong sentiment to “defund the police” in Central Oregon.

“I think we’re a pretty strong law-and-order community in Central Oregon,” he said. “It seems like there are different kinds of problems in different places, and we really haven’t seen the kind of problems that have been complained about and protested about in other places in America.”

He acknowledged that responding to mental-health-related calls is a significant aspect of law enforcement’s challenges in 21st Century America — and he thinks Deschutes County is doing a good job on that front.

“I think our sheriff has been pretty progressive at looking at the mental-health aspect,” he said. “He also pushed for mental-health services in the jail.”

The Deschutes County Stabilization Center — designed to provide short-term assistance to people in crisis who have been referred to law enforcement or the Emergency Department — is slated to go to 24/7 service in October.

While his opponent criticizes the County’s hesitancy to fund mental-health services (*see story, page 7*), Henderson is pleased with the two-year grant funding they secured for the Center.

“We were able to reduce the budget significantly from what they wanted to spend initially, and we have the services we need,” he said.

He said that it is important to raise awareness of the Stabilization Center so that it is used appropriately.

“If it’s working, I’m not against 24/7,” he said. “I’m just cautious about making sure we do it right and don’t have people idle and that sort of thing.”

## WILDFIRE

The threat of wildfire is ever-present in Sisters Country — and feels even more acute in the wake of the catastrophic blazes that destroyed communities on the west side of the Cascades earlier this month. Henderson holds the County Commission’s seat on the Deschutes Forest Collaborative, pressing for forest treatments to protect communities in the wildland-urban interface.

“I’d really like us to keep doing what we’re doing — but do more of it,” he said. “I’d be for as much as we can get done.”

Henderson said that the Oregon and other Western congressional delegations

have not always presented a united front in advocating for more intensive management of forests. And congressmen and Senators from Eastern states don’t understand the perils and imperatives of public land management in the West. Earlier this month, Oregon Senator Ron Wyden said that the suffocating cloud of smoke that inundated Sisters and most of the rest of the region is “debt coming due” for decades of “lousy” forest management.

“That is a huge breakthrough,” Henderson said.

“We need to march together,” he said. “County commissioners can advocate for that.”

Henderson has told *The Nugget* that emphasis in recent years has been on changing smoke rules to allow for more prescribed burning in the springtime. Areas that have been thinned and burned have provided fire breaks that materially assisted firefighters in protecting Sisters from the 2012 Pole Creek Fire and the 2017 Milli Fire.

More prescribed burning can be a tough sell to local residents. Henderson isn’t sure that will change, even in the face of this year’s catastrophic blazes.

“I think it should, logically,” he said.

But Henderson noted that locals pushed back on more burning after the Milli Fire, which inundated Sisters with smoke for weeks and forced the cancellation of the Sisters Folk Festival.

“They were so sick of smoke they were *more* sensitive to it,” he said. “Lots of smoke this year does not make people want more smoke next year.”

Henderson pointed to the hiring of a second county forester to work on creating fire-safe communities and a doubling of FireFree debris disposal days as concrete steps toward protecting communities.

## COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted government functions, just as it has the business and cultural life of Central Oregon.

The county budget did not take as big a hit as was anticipated when the crisis began in March, as gas taxes and transient room taxes held up. Property taxes continue to hold up as the area continues to grow, though there may be some impact if people impacted by COVID-19 are slow to pay their taxes.

Henderson says that he is proud of the County’s response to the pandemic.

“I think we’ve done a tremendous job,” he said. “We’re the seventh-largest county in the state and we’re 18th in cases by population.

I think the people who live here did a tremendous job... For a very heavy commercial, heavily-traveled area, we’ve done very well.

He also cited the work of County staff, whom he regards as some of the best contact tracers in the state.

The commissioner argues that the county could have done more to assist people put under stress by the pandemic, but counties, he said, “didn’t get our fair share of the CARES ACT (funding).” He argues that the State of Oregon held onto a disproportionate share of that funding for its own priorities.

“We’re on the ground; we know what would help,” he said.

He said that the county attempted to assist with childcare provision, business assistance, and fee rebates for restaurants.

“We did things that tried to target certain entities and needs,” he said. “We could have done more if we had our full allocation.”

Henderson said that as the pandemic and its impacts linger, the County may be able to help events and activities move forward by providing space, including the Deschutes County Fairgrounds.

“We’ve got a lot of square



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footage to spread people out in,” he said. “We’re very supportive of that — all the commissioners are.”

“I’m ... concerned about the long term,” he said. “That this will just keep going like it is.”

Henderson believes his work has earned him a second term and that his background as a builder and an attorney is an asset.

“I’ve contributed on so many issues,” he said. “My experience does help... I’m not a perfect public servant — but I think I’m a good one.”

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