

Chang seeks seat on Deschutes County Board of Commissioners

By **Jim Cornelius**
Editor in Chief

Phil Chang is bringing the experience of a career in public service to a seat on the Deschutes Board of County Commissioners. He is challenging incumbent Phil Henderson for Position #2.

Chang spent nine years at the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC), and helped create the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project. He also served as Senator Jeff Merkley's Central Oregon Field Representative and managed Oregon's Federal Forest Restoration Program.

He believes that his background working collaboratively with wide-ranging and sometimes opposed interest groups provides the right experience for leading Deschutes County through challenges posed by growth, the coronavirus pandemic and the threat of wildfire.

HOUSING & GROWTH

"The broad challenge across Deschutes County is how do we add thousands of new homes and have affordability and keep traffic under control and not gobble up too much of the landscape," Chang said.

He noted that the City of Sisters has nearly tripled in population since 2000 and that the county will play a major role in helping the City shape future growth through its comprehensive-plan update, currently in its beginning stages. He thinks that by diversifying the Sisters economy, Sisters can avoid becoming a bedroom community for the greater Central Oregon region, with the loss of identity and traffic that that entails.

Chang opposes converting marginal rural lands into zoning that would allow for more residential construction.

"I believe in orderly UGB (urban growth boundary) expansions," he said.

"I would really encourage the community of Sisters to use land efficiently," he said.

That could mean more townhomes and condominiums, which have lower land costs.

"That is how we drive the

cost of housing down," he said, while acknowledging that such housing may be "a different pattern than people are used to."

LAW ENFORCEMENT

"I was really glad to see that the sheriff's office was reorganizing its coverage of Sisters," Chang said.

Having its own cadre of deputies, Chang believes, will enhance relationships and those are "an important part of improving law enforcement for the people of Deschutes County."

Chang does not support the nationwide call to "defund the police."

"I don't think that's a very helpful slogan or, taken at a surface level, a helpful concept," he said.

He does, however, believe that initiatives that are already underway in Deschutes County can relieve the burden of law enforcement to respond to mental-health calls. He cites the Mobile Crisis Assessment Team as a good step in that direction, where mental-health professionals can respond to some calls. He believes that can result in better outcomes.

Chang said he does not advocate cuts in law enforcement personnel, but he thinks that additional mental-health services could slow the need for more law enforcement hiring.

He also cites the opening of a Stabilization Center for those in mental-health crisis as "a huge benefit to public safety in the region."

Chang is, however, critical of the current commissioners' level of funding support for the Stabilization Center and for behavioral-health services generally. He asserts that the commissioners made advocates for the Stabilization Center "go out with their tin cup" to seek funding, which, he argues, delayed its opening, and he criticizes what he identifies as an approximately 6 percent reduction in funding for county health services, with the biggest hit to behavioral health.

"That's not the way to prioritize a critical county service," he said.

Chang believes that the

County should be providing "foundational funding" for such programs. He considers such finding critical for long-range planning, hiring for key positions. That doesn't mean he thinks the County should not be seeking grants.

"We need those external funds," he said. "There's no way that from the general fund we could replace all those federal and state funds."

However, he says, "foundational funding" is necessary to leverage those grants.

"We're starving our community of critical services that could really improve people's lives, and could save us money in the long run," he said.

WILDFIRE

Chang's background gives him a keen interest in county policy and action in the field of wildfire prevention. He believes that significant federal funding is required to treat landscapes with mowing, thinning and prescribed fire on a massive scale.

"A County Commissioner is in a unique place to advocate for that kind of funding," he said.

Other factors are important, too, he asserts.

"One of the things that the County is grappling with right now is building code changes," he said.

Stricter building code requirements could help "harden" homes against wildfire, but there is always a concern about cost and impacts on affordability. Chang believes that the County needs to take a hard look at real data on the question — especially in the wake of the catastrophic fires that destroyed whole communities west of the Cascades.

"It would be good to take another look at that information," he said. "We need to look at that with a more sober eye."

He notes that many builders are already using more fire-resistant siding and that enhancing codes might not be as burdensome as some believe. He also thinks it may

be worth considering advocating for a statewide fire code, with variations based on regional conditions, to enforce a higher standard of fire resistance.

COVID-19

Chang argues that, while the County staff has done a very good job in managing COVID-19 issues, he feels the commissioners have "not led," especially in advocating for responsible public behavior to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

"I would want to do a better job with that," he said.

The pandemic has not had the dire effect on budgets that was initially anticipated. The budgetary wildcard will be property tax collections.

"COVID has really uneven impacts," Chang noted.

Some people are doing fine, while other have lost jobs or had their income slashed, which could have a knock-on effect on ability to pay taxes. That raises questions for the general fund and on the availability of state and federal funding going forward.

But Chang anticipates that Central Oregon's growth means that the general fund budget of the county will continue to grow as well.

The pandemic has had an effect on county staff. Chang notes that the county's environmental-health specialists are not only tasked with doing restaurant inspections, they're also acting as de facto consultants, helping both restaurant owners and patrons determine how to remain safe in the face of COVID-19.

"They're maxed out," he said. "They're extremely over-extended. We don't invest in those services and we don't allow Environmental Health to charge adequate fees so they can staff up and do a better job."

LANDFILL

Chang highlighted the potential need for Deschutes County to provide a new landfill in 2029, at an estimated cost of \$14 million.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Noting that approximately 25 percent of the waste that hits the landfill is food, he believes that aggressive waste diversion efforts — encouraging composting, etc. — could delay the need for a new landfill. He doesn't think the current commission has done enough to develop waste diversion.

GO NON-PARTISAN

Chang told *The Nugget* that one of his priorities as a County Commissioner would be to convince his colleagues to send to the voters a measure to make the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners a non-partisan position.


"This is an incredibly moderate, pragmatic and centrist community," he said.

He believes that partisanship creates "barriers to entry" for candidates, as "the most partisan voters put forward candidates in primaries."

By making the position non-partisan, Chang believes, the election timeline would be compressed, making it less expensive to run for the office. Eliminating the need to court party support or raise extensive funding would widen the field, the candidate believes.

"You just need to be a good candidate," he said.

Chang believes what makes him a good candidate is a track record of working with diverse groups to get things done and a vision for investing in services, arguing that, "This is a good time to be growing services to meet the needs of a growing community."



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