

# Sorenson's campaign for governor hits Lane County

The candidate conducts a grassroots effort, talking to people face to face

BY CHRIS HAGAN  
NEWS REPORTER

Pete Sorenson stands, talking to a woman, in the middle of the Lane Community College cafeteria. From his appearance, it's not obvious he is a Democratic challenger for governor of Oregon; unless, of course, one notices the body-length "Sorenson" sign he holds under his right arm.

The image says much about the Eugene resident and current Lane County commissioner. Sorenson has already traveled the length and width of the state, more than six months before the May primary. Instead of large gatherings, Sorenson focuses more on face-to-face interaction, trying to increase his name-recognition for a political race in which he is unknown outside of Lane County.

"I have to recognize that Lane County is 10 percent of the state," he said. "Part of my job is to go out and talk about these issues and educate people and get them interested and get them fired up."

Knowing he will be outspent by incumbent Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski, Sorenson has adopted a grassroots campaign focused on interacting directly with the people.

"Normal is not a word you use in conjunction with a campaign," Sorenson said. "It's just a hurricane of activity all the time."

Because Sorenson is still a Lane County commissioner, he spends most of his Tuesdays and Wednesdays in Lane County attending commissioner meetings and appointments. But on Wednesday night or Thursday morning he takes off into the state for five days to try to connect with possible voters.

"We have a team now of volunteer drivers," Sorenson said. "It's kind of like the pony express."

"On my last trip, the driver got so tired, I had to drive him the last three hours of that giant trip," Sorenson said. The campaign had its busiest week last week, first traveling to the Oregon Democratic Party Summit at the Sunriver resort in Central Oregon and then appearing in six small towns.

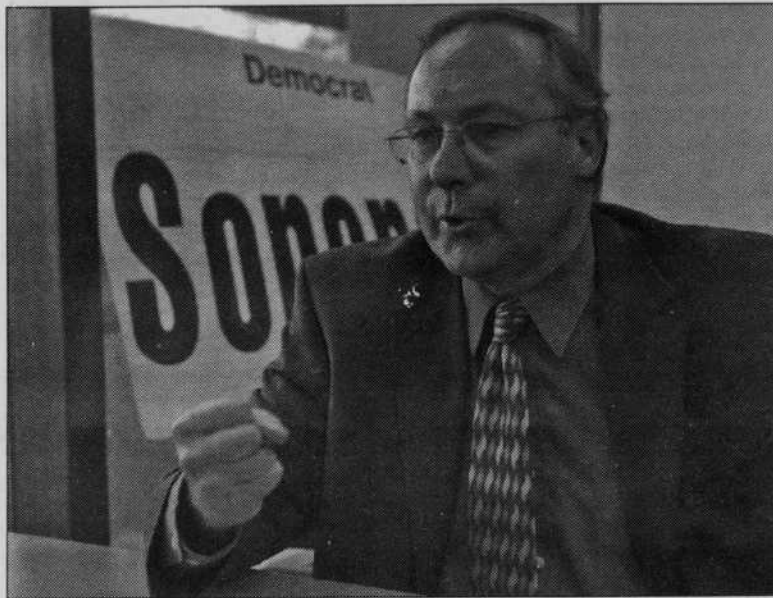
"We must have been in excess of 1,000 miles," Sorenson said.

Sorenson has been spending around 40 hours a week on the campaign — sometimes closer to 50 or 60 — with most of his nights and weekends devoted to it, said Sorenson Campaign Manager Kim Leval.

"It's like having two full-time jobs," Leval said.

Sorenson and Leval are also dating. Leval's work with the Oregon League of Conservation Voters brought her into contact with Sorenson, and the two bonded over discussions of agriculture policy.

"We had to work out what our political relationship is since we're also sweethearts," Leval said. The



ZANE RITT | PHOTOGRAPHER

Lane County Commissioner Pete Sorenson is running for state governor. As a Democrat, he will be challenging current governor Kulongoski as well as other prospective candidates.

relationship has worked though, and the couple will soon celebrate their two-year anniversary.

Sorenson hopes he will be able to continue as a commissioner, but he knows his role as a candidate could become more involved as the primary approaches.

"There may come a time when I can't do both of these jobs," Sorenson said. "But I'm bound and determined as long as I possibly can to keep up my representation of my constituents."

Sorenson said he hasn't missed a Wednesday vote as a Lane County commissioner in eight years, but campaign issues may eventually take precedence.

"If KGW puts on a debate between me and the governor on a Wednesday, I just might go to the debate," Sorenson said.

Bill Dwyer has worked with Sorenson in the state senate and as a fellow commissioner since 1999. Sorenson was even an intern in Dwyer's brother Roy's law firm in 1979. Dwyer hasn't seen any change in Sorenson's work on the board.

"If he has a meeting in another part of the state, he'll participate by phone," Dwyer said. Dwyer thinks Sorenson would be a capable governor, but isn't optimistic that he will win.

"It's difficult for someone unknown except in one part of the state to raise their profile enough," Dwyer said. "If he gets more than 4 percent I'll be surprised."

A self-proclaimed progressive Democrat, Sorenson has taken on this demanding task because he believes Kulongoski hasn't shown the leadership Oregon needs on issues like education funding, health care, tax reform and the war in Iraq.

"We need a governor who will stand up to the Bush administration and say: 'We want our national guard troops withdrawn from Iraq,'" Sorenson said. Some of the most emotional moments on the campaign have been meetings with those who have lost loved ones in the war, Sorenson said.

Sorenson has also faulted the governor for being inaccessible to regular Oregonians. He thinks that even on a scale as big as the entire state of Oregon, town hall meetings and similar policies can work.

Sorenson has begun crafting his own accessibility plan for implementation if he is elected governor, hoping to cover each of Oregon's five congressional districts four times in his first two years.

"As elected officials, we work on the problems we're aware of," Sorenson said. "So we can become aware of more problems if we open our doors, figuratively and literally."

Sorenson is also concerned with what he sees as a lack of support for public education in the state.

Public education is an important issue to Sorenson because he sees a lot of his success as a product of public investment in education. Sorenson attended public schools in Myrtle Point and North Bend, then attended Southwestern Oregon Community College and has received three degrees from the University.

"I have been incredibly blessed by the combination of my own hard work and the investment the people of Oregon made in me for public higher education," Sorenson said.

The governor's low poll ratings have also been a factor, enticing not only Sorenson to challenge Kulongoski, but Eugene Sen. Vicki Walker (D-Eug.) and possibly Sen. Rick Metzger (D-Mt. Hood) as well. There has even been an attempt to draft former two-term governor John Kitzhaber.

"In the beginning, people were concerned about why Pete was running against an incumbent Democrat," Leval said. But with the governor's low ratings, "people have become more open to Pete's run."

If he can get 180,000 votes, Sorenson sees a chance to win the May primary.

The primary for the general election on Nov. 7 will be held May 16.

Contact the city, state politics reporter at [chagan@dailyemerald.com](mailto:chagan@dailyemerald.com)

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