

'Life-changing experience'

Baker City mayor's confidence grows as campaign wears on

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Kerry McQuisten has met many thousands of Oregonians during her campaign to be the state's next governor, a blur of faces and handshakes and forums and events in each of the 36 counties in the 10th-biggest state.

But one face remains especially vivid in her memory.

And she suspects that it always will be.

McQuisten, a seventh-generation Baker County resident who is seeking the Republican nomination in the May 22 primary, was in Tygh Valley, near The Dalles, for the Wasco County Fair in late August.

An older gentleman approached.

He was wearing a cap identifying him as a military veteran. The man pulled out his wallet, reached in and extracted the only bill tucked in the folds. It was a \$5.

He handed the bill to McQuisten, insisting that she take it.

"Something has to change in Oregon," the man told her.

"I will never forget it," McQuisten said.

That moment in the wheat country of Wasco County, one of so many in seven months of campaigning, continues to inspire McQuisten.

It's not the amount of the donation, of course.

But that brief conversation, and the man's insistence that she accept his modest contribution, convinced her then, and

reminds her still, that some of her fellow Oregonians believe she can help to fix some of the problems that she — and they — believe are plaguing the state.

"My campaign is steadily gaining traction," said McQuisten, who is Baker City's mayor, elected to that position by her fellow Baker City Council members in January 2021. "I'm reaching out across the whole state."

A unique opportunity for a Republican

After so many miles and so many meetings, McQuisten, 49, said she is even more confident now than she was when she started that 2022 presents an opportunity that Republicans haven't had in Oregon for more than four decades.

No member of her party has been elected governor since November 1982, when Victor Atiyeh won the second of his four-year terms.

But McQuisten believes that voters are more dissatisfied with their state's condition under the leadership of Democratic governor Kate Brown than at any time since Atiyeh's tenure.

Brown's executive orders during the pandemic, with their effects on businesses and schools in particular, have seriously weakened the Democrats' once-in-dominant electoral foundation, McQuisten believes.

"The more Kate Brown mandates, the worst it gets for the Democrats," McQuisten said.

And although Brown can't run for reelection due to term limits, McQuisten

contends that the Democratic nominee, whoever that is, will be linked to Brown's legacy, to the benefit of the Republican on the November general election ballot.

McQuisten said she has talked with, and received emails from, many Democrats and nonaffiliated voters who are troubled by what's happening in Oregon. She was surprised to receive a \$25 donation from an Ontario Democrat who voted for, and formerly supported, Brown.

"That's when you know something is really shifting," she said.

McQuisten said a few issues have come up at virtually all of her campaign events, concerns that seem universal in the state.

Public safety is one of these.

McQuisten said she's talked with many people, including in Democrat-dominated Portland, who are incensed by violence, including the widespread rioting in Portland during the summer of 2020, and a record number of murders — 90 — in the state's largest city in 2021.

"People don't feel safe," she said. Oregonians are angry not only about the level of violence, McQuisten believes, but also by what some consider a milquetoast response by prosecutors.

And although criminal prosecution typically is handled at the county level, by district attorneys, McQuisten contends that Brown has failed to show leadership in the midst of the violence.

McQuisten points out



Kerry McQuisten stands outside Mahonia Hall, the Oregon governor's mansion in Salem. McQuisten, a Baker County native, is seeking the Republican nomination for governor in the May 22, 2022, primary.

that state law allows the state, through its Department of Justice, to prosecute cases that district attorneys decline to take on.

The problem of homeless residents camping on public property is no longer confined to larger cities, McQuisten said, citing another issue she believes Brown has not addressed forcefully enough.

"I talked to people about homeless camps in the forests around La Pine," McQuisten said, talking about the town in Deschutes County about 30 miles south of Bend. "People don't feel safe going for a walk in the woods."

Pondering the primary and general elections

McQuisten, of course, won't have a chance to try to break the Democratic Party's 40-year run of victories in the general election unless she wins the Republican nomination in the May 22 primary.

She's optimistic about her position.

In a recent straw poll from Oregon Catalyst — one McQuisten herself on her Facebook page notes has

a "huge" margin of error — she polled second with 27.9%. The frontrunner was Stan Pulliam, the mayor of Sandy, east of Portland, with 41.3%.

Pulliam has a significant advantage in fundraising, as well.

According to campaign finance reports as of Jan. 12, Pulliam's campaign had a cash balance of \$264,258, compared with McQuisten's \$60,493.

Two Republicans topped Pulliam's balance — Christine Draza, House Minority Leader who is resigning from the Oregon Legislature Jan. 31, with \$702,138, and Bridget Barton, a political consultant from West Linn, with \$345,208.

But McQuisten said she's confident that her grassroots campaign, relying on traveling across the state and meeting as many people, and voters, as possible, can overcome both her financial disadvantage and her lack of name recognition, at least compared with Draza, a longtime legislative leader.

McQuisten believes 2022, with the unprecedented effects of the pandemic, is different, and that

a Republican running her kind of campaign can beat what she calls "establishment" Republicans such as Draza.

Experience of a lifetime

McQuisten said she expected that running for governor would be a unique endeavor, and it has been.

"It's a life-changing experience," she said.

"There's also a spiritual aspect of this for me. I wonder, will God allow me to come in and be the person to change things, or will we have more of the same in Oregon."

"I don't know," she said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm driving at night on a dark road with the headlights on. I go on as far as I can see, and then go on from there."

McQuisten said she knew that running a consistent statewide campaign would be demanding, "mentally, emotionally and spiritually."

But she said she wasn't quite prepared for the purely physical challenge of spending so many hours on the road, away from home.

"Physically it does take its toll," she said. "It's taxing."

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