

Local

Sumpter hosts sheriff, commissioner candidates forum

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On Thursday, April 21st, Sumpter hosted a Town hall Forum for County candidates.

Commissioner candidates Jeff Nelson and Kody Justus were present, as was current sheriff Travis Ash.

The event was spearheaded by Myrna Clarke, with refreshments provided by Sumpter Valley Community Volunteers and LeAnne Woolf moderating.

Woolf started the Q and A session asking about volunteerism. Nelson highlighted his involvement with the Lions club. Justus spoke about his former experiences at the prison and his current role in the Baker County Republicans. He stated if elected, he may have to step away from his position there.

Ash said he volunteers a lot in schools, especially mentoring senior projects.

He spoke of a project done by a senior in Halfway to simulate flipping a car, a DUI arrest, and a funeral. He stated not one person in the gym was dry eyed by the end, and that class all pledged not to drink that year.

He is currently working on bringing marijuana training to local schools and developing teacher training on drug recognition. Ash stated no matter how busy he is, he will make time for that.

Jeff McKinney stated that candidate Nichols is looking into combining city and county law enforcement and asked if candidates support that idea. Ash stated he would be open to looking into it, but doesn't have any facts at this point.

Justus also stated the idea is pretty fresh and that he hasn't researched it.

He said his first impression is that he wouldn't support it and that city and county are elected positions. He wouldn't support anything that would take away from that jurisdiction. Nelson said he did not see how that could ever happen and added, "Public safety is one of my highest priorities. There are other ways to reduce the budget."

Candidates were asked if they had attended any meetings about the Forest Management Plan before running for office. Nelson stated he's been attending meetings off and on for about the last two years.

He said he is against road closures and for keeping the forest open and bringing in more logging opportunities.

He pointed to his hometown of Salmon, Idaho and the economic devastation brought by logging and mining restrictions along with land use regulations.

Justus said he, too, has been attending the meetings the last couple of years and spoke of the "phenomenal" economic impact to the community from the decline of the timber industry.

Ash was asked about the effect on county law enforcement. He stated there is a lot of national forest in the county and the

sheriff's office does patrol forest ground.

He explained Oregon Revised Statutes give Forest Service law enforcement the authority to enforce state law violations that occur in their presence.

If Forest Service law enforcement needs help, the sheriff's office will respond, though they cannot enforce federal statutes and law.

John Young referenced a meeting some years ago in La Grande where the Grant County sheriff stated he would not enforce road closures.

Ash reiterated that the sheriff's office can't enforce federal regulation or law.

Young asked, if the sheriff's office was patrolling and saw someone going over the berm on an ATV, would they be arrested.

Ash stated, "I don't know how I can say this any clearer. We can't enforce federal law. We're not going to arrest you for something we can't arrest you for."

Woolf next asked the commissioner candidates what they saw the job as being and what experience prepared them for the position.

Nelson said the job is overseeing budget and personnel and governing the county. He stated his business experience will enable him to make sure the county government is run as a business. He said people living in the County have the most influence on him and, "I will make sure your voices are heard."

Justus agreed that the position is mainly budgetary and oversight of public county employees.

He said sometimes people are confused and think the commissioner oversees other elected officials in the courthouse, but that is not so.

Justus said his experience owning and operating a ranch has given him a lot of budgetary experience, all based on feasibility. "A ranch budget has to pay for itself."

He said he will be always mindful of dealing with other peoples' money and said there should be a picture of the taxpayer stuck on every dollar. He also spoke to the legislative role of County Commissioner in passing ordinances (law) and resolutions (opinion).

Ash was asked, with a year of experience, what he has learned. Ash said at the beginning of his time as sheriff, there was a death in custody.

During the summer, with the fires, he missed two birthdays at home. Christmas Eve, he was doing a welfare check on a minor. Christmas and the day following, he was out on search and rescue.

He said he has learned the importance of time management and training. He has been in law enforcement since the age of 19 and puts in a lot of hours.

He said he is a lifelong learner, and has a professional office with good deputies. He wants to make sure they have the training to know the law

and make them even better.

Ash stated he is a working sheriff, and just "re-upped" his certification as a drug recognition expert. He said the sheriff's office is spread thin across the county and has been working two deputies down, but that if something is going on, "We'll be there."

Hordes of mosquitoes had been constantly swarming the candidates and attendees, and Woolf now asked, while waving her hands around wildly, "This is a joke, but how do you feel about vector control?"

Clarke stated the County does not do anything at all about insect control locally, just the Baker City area. She said, "Sumpter is part of the county and needs to be done."

Nelson responded that hearing about and seeing the issue was the first thing and encouraged citizens to get the word out. He said it's a process, and if it takes money, "We can find a way."

Justus stated he agreed with Nelson. "If you're on the tax roll, you should have the same protection as everyone else." He said he'd heard the same complaint in Huntington the prior week. He suggested a fogger might be the best for the area.

Clarke asked candidates, "Are you working for us or your own political agenda?" She stated, "We've been there, it's been tried, and we're wide awake now."

Justus responded he is running for everybody in the county and that his personal life and business would not be enhanced at all by the position.

He said he thought he could mind his own business, raise his cows, and "feed the world." He discovered that's not true, things are not taking care of themselves, and he decided to get involved to make sure everyone's individual rights, guaranteed in state and national law, are protected.

Nelson stated he has no political agenda, and just wants to make the county better for his children and grandchildren, let them enjoy the forest, and make a living. He said when our grandchildren and children are with us, we have much better community.

Ash stated he started serving over 20 years ago, working for the citizens. As sheriff, he has an open-door policy, both for his deputies and citizens, and is not a politician.

Clarke asked what the candidates could do for senior citizens, such as help with transportation, foot care, Meals on Wheels, or welfare checks. She pointed to the older population of Sumpter, saying some different services are needed.

Nelson stated a lot of specific services need volunteers. He suggested a priority list of what is needed and said he would do his best to help organize volunteers to meet the need.

Justus stated he agreed with Nelson, but would approach the issue differ-



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Seated around the tables: LeAnne Woolf (far left) as moderator, Kody Justus, Jeff Nelson, and Travis Ash.

ently. He said the increasing minimum wage will cause inflation to goods and services, harming those with fixed incomes more than anyone else. He stated two problems with the new minimum wage law is that it is unequal across the state and is an unfunded mandate.

He would like to pass an ordinance to not go along with it, and said if he could do something in that area, he believed it would be the most benefit to communities. He stated raising the minimum wage is also going to cause a loss of jobs and push young people out of the area.

Ash mentioned a program he had read about where the sheriff's office checked in on senior citizens regularly and said he could look into doing something like that with his volunteers.

Jeff McKinney stated that many of these things were dealt with in the past through churches or other local means. He said, "I think the tendency to turn to government is a dangerous trend."

Ash responded that it's about building partnerships. He stated he learned in Command College, "Relationships are primary; everything else is secondary."

McKinney asked the commissioner candidates if they could accomplish only one thing as commissioner, what would it be? Justus stated he would look at the road issue, as it's "what's on the table right now." He said he is alarmed that this is a trend. He stated if citizens can't find a way to keep the roads open, next it will be water rights and private property. He also expressed concerns for the health and welfare of the forests and protecting resources. He stated if that if this issue can be resolved, "We will have figured out how to interact with other agencies in a way that brings our needs to the table."

Nelson agreed, stating forest access is vital to our way of life, including access for "hunting and fishing with our kids." He said when they start closing roads, they will also start closing other things. Young spoke about the tourism industry being vital to the town of Sumpter and asked about a focus on recreational activities.

Justus stated that access to our mountains is vital for tourism and that "no one's going to come out here to see the town then turn around and go back on the highway."

He also said that when we don't take care of the forest and leave it alone, "We end up with Dooley Mountain."

Nelson said he knows the importance of tourism and that Timothy Bishop is doing a wonderful job

of promoting Sumpter. He said a little more could be done with selling some events, like Music in the Meadow. He said it takes a game plan to market and capitalize on community events.

Clarke asked who and what are Oath Keepers and if you are a member, how do you see it affecting the job you're running for?

Ash and Nelson deferred to Justus, who stated Oath Keepers is a national organization set up for retired military and law enforcement to study the constitution and what their duties were by the oath taken to support and defend the constitution.

He stated the group in Baker City doesn't fit the national mold. They are all private citizens trying to find ways to help and be involved.

Justus stated he got involved because he wants to be a "part of the whole community doing something together."

The group has a big emphasis on preparedness and discussed with Baker County Emergency Management's Jason Yencopal who agreed everyone should have at least three weeks' survival needs prepared.

Justus stated he does not know how appropriate his involvement with Oath Keepers would be if he were elected county commissioner.

He has been running meetings and said he thought Ash "appreciates my abilities and thinks 'Kody's sane.'"

Ash asked if the group doesn't want to fight the federal government on some level. Justus responded not from Oath Keepers. He also said if he wanted to fight, he would not be running for county commissioner, a position with a specific role and set parameters. He said that anyone interested in learning more could attend a meeting, held every third Tuesday.

Jeff McKinney stated he's heard a lot about "constitutional sheriffs" and the "Constitutional Sheriff's Association."

He asked Ash if he is a member of the group. Ash stated he is not, but would consider himself a constitutional sheriff. He swore an oath to uphold the constitution.

He stated that the particular group was founded by a sheriff voted out of office and is, in his opinion, a political agenda.

Julie McKinney asked about concerns over 2nd amendment rights.

Ash stated he thinks a lot of what is going around is from conspiracy theorists. He stated he carries a gun every day for work and is also a private gun owner. He said he has "zero expectation" for everyone to give up their firearms

and that people are playing on fear.

He said, "We have the 2nd amendment, and it's not going away."

He said that citizens will not see his deputies out collecting guns, though they may be seized through proper channels if a crime is committed.

During his final statement, Nelson said that with his experience of being a small business owner, he knows the importance of the local economy, visitors' dollars, and access to the forest, both as a way of life and to stop fires when they blow up.

He said his main priority would be the roads and that even if he has to go to the other side of the state to voice his opinion, he will do it. He said, "Other than the mosquitoes, this area is perfect" and that though promoting is being done very well, "We can elaborate a bit more." He invited those with concerns to call any time.

Justus stated he decided to run for office because he has the desire and energy to be an advocate for the citizens of Baker County.

He said, "I'll vote my conscience and not be scared to be the outstanding vote." He stated government should protect individual rights and liberties and all government functions should be transparent. He said he would look for ways to spend less and that "the biggest control we have is over how much we spend."

His website is justusforbakercounty.com and he also has a page on Facebook.

Ash shared a conversation he had with the deputy DA last year when he was appointed sheriff.

The deputy DA asked, "Is this your goal, your dream?" Ash stated when he began in law enforcement, it was not his ambition to advance. He jumped into training and work, learning and applying skills and stepping up to do the job that had to be done. He said, "Now, it's slapping me in the face, this is where I've been headed my whole life."

He is working on cross-training with deputies, including training corrections officers on conducting arrests and civil processes in jail.

The department received around \$30,000 after budget from BLM for patrolling rangeland. Ash stated building relationships is how things get accomplished.

He said he sets the bar high for himself and those he works with and, "We work for the people and are going to be out there."

He mentioned again his open door policy and said he keeps one clean table in his office so there is always space to talk.