

Toler leaves JoCo, reflects on Valley

By Darcy Wallace
IVN Staff Writer

Dave Toler is probably most known for his term as Josephine County Commissioner. But besides county government, he has spent more than 20 years in the Illinois Valley working with the Forest Service, the Three Rivers School Board and various community organizations.

Over Memorial Day weekend, Toler moved away from Josephine County to start a new chapter of life in Northern California, leaving the area for the first time since 1989.

"I thought it would be best to maybe take some time to get away and maybe do something else for a while," he said. "But I do hope to come back someday. Both of my kids [have lived] in the Valley. Having family there, it's not a place I'm ready to say goodbye to."

Toler moved to the Valley in 1989 when he and his family bought a home on Rockydale Road near Cave Junction and raised his two children, who both graduated from Illinois Valley High School.

His involvement in the Valley spans over many areas, from forestry to neighborhood association president to project leader.

Taking a job as a Forest Service employee with the Illinois Valley Ranger District, Toler said he became interested in getting involved with the community, starting in the early 1990s as founder of the Rockydale Neighborhood Association.

"In 1993, RNA wrote the first [Bureau of Land Management] BLM timber Sale Alternative ever written by the public in the Medford BLM District," Toler said. "The Alternative called for moderate logging and conservation."

In the Takilma community, Toler worked in administration and directed the Dome School Ranger Program, which he said was designed to prevent delinquency behavior in youth. He also said he led a project that generated more than \$200,000 in improvements to the Takilma Community Building.

According to Toler, he worked on the Three Rivers school board from 1997 to 2007 and led passage of the first school improvement bond in more than 25 years. During his school board tenure, the new Lorna Byrne Middle

School building was constructed. Later, a new IVHS football field came to fruition.

"I really enjoyed my years on the school board," Toler said. "I feel like we had a diverse board that made for a good experience working with people of a different perspective."

Toler said he's seen a lot of change in the Valley over 23 years. In the late 1980s and early 90s, division between communities still underscored the atmosphere in daily life.

But in 1996, one issue helped bring people together: according to Toler, a proposal for a new prison not far from Cave Junction incited worry from residents all over the Valley.

Toler said he founded Citizens for a Livable Illinois Valley to stop the prison from being built. It would have housed some 1,600 people, more than the population of Cave Junction itself at that time.

These days, Toler believes the divide between some Illinois Valley residents has lessened: over time, the children of residents went to the same schools while new residents have slowly continued moving in.

"I think the alternative culture of the Valley has changed," Toler said. "There was quite a divide in the 80s, but I think the divide has been bridged in a lot of ways, with new people moving in and also the generational factor of students who go to school together, some of whom grow up, get married and have kids. I think that makes things less divisive, more comfortable."

He was reelected to a third term on the school board in 2005, but soon ran for county commissioner and was inaugurated in 2007. In a change from school board politics, less scrutinized by the public, the commissioner position was far more visible.

"I've been through six elections in Josephine County," Toler said. "Whether school board or county...I always had a contender. That's the normal part of campaigning: people have different ideas and opinions."

In many ways, Toler said he enjoyed working as commissioner and felt previous experience in different volunteer positions prepared him for the new role. But with a recession and over 14 percent unemployment in the county in 2009, public confidence in government dropped sharply. The higher

exposure in the public eye came with a price.

"It does draw a certain crowd that can be very negative, very punishing," Toler said. "A very hard part of the job was having to sort of be a target of what were some very angry people."

"I worked side by side with Ellis, who has a very different political look at the world in many ways but we learned to work with each other very well," Toler continued. "[That's] something I think we're short on as a nation, the ability to put down political differences and get the job done."

In 2010, Toler ran for reelection for commissioner, initially leading in primaries but losing in November to newcomer Simon Hare. Since then, Toler moved to Wolf Creek and got back into the school system, leading the Sunny Wolf charter school.

"I looked at it all as community service," Toler said. "The commissioner office happened to be one I was paid at. I have hundreds of hours of volunteer time and I know there are many other people who have the same record. We [volunteered] because we wanted to do it. When you look back and see some accomplishment, you feel better and move on to the next thing."

Toler said the economy has always struggled while he's lived in Josephine County, though timber sales were stronger and more jobs for high school graduates were available.

"[The Valley] has been economically challenged for many decades," Toler said. "It's an inter-generational thing. I think there's some notion that the Valley in the 70s and 80s was a prosperous community. There were more



Described as an active community member, Dave Toler pictured here during his term as county commissioner.

jobs for high school graduates for sure, but because of fluctuations in the timber economy and building market, it's been economically tough for a long time."

Toler said the decision to move to California wasn't an easy one, but he doesn't plan to abandon the Valley for good.

"The natural beauty of the Valley is part of what drew us here," Toler said. "I'm looking forward to coming back some day."

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